

# 1 | From composition to performance: epigrams in context

In the winter of 1293–94, the celebrated scholar and monk Maximos Planoudes sent a letter to a friend, the monk Melchisedek, son of the statesman and historian George Akropolites.<sup>1</sup> The letter opens with a complaint. Writing from Constantinople, Planoudes confesses how much he longs to visit the addressee, who was in Asia Minor at the time, but winter with its harsh weather does not allow him to set sail. Despite the fact that he praised this season abundantly in his writing, it is ungrateful and responds with threats; truly, he points out with regret, winter is deserving of invective rather than encomium. Spring, on the other hand, is benevolent and sweet. Although he judged it inferior to winter, it bears no malice.<sup>2</sup> It will bring fair weather, calm sea, and winds favorable to navigation. After this epistolary *jeu d'esprit*, Planoudes turns to the main subject of the letter. He had been commissioned by Melchisedek to compose verse inscriptions for an icon of the Last Judgment, most likely a panel intended for the addressee's private devotions, as well as to write some sort of commentary on them. Planoudes now presents the products of his verbal artistry and informs Melchisedek that he has failed to respond to the second task.

Ἄς γε μὴν κελεύετε τῆς εἰκόνος ἐπιγραφάς, πεπτόμαμεν ἤδη ποιήσαντες·  
αὐται δ' ἔπη λέγονιτ' ἄν, εἴτ' οὖν ἠρώα τε καὶ ἐξάμετρα, οἴκτου μεστὰ τὰ  
πλείω· τούτων γὰρ ὑμῖν ὡς πρὸς τὴν μέλλουσαν κρίσιν (ἦς δῆτα καὶ ἡ εἰκὼν  
δεῖ) γράφειν τι καὶ τῶν πεμφθέντων ἕνεκεν, ὃ καὶ ἀπαιτούμενον ἦν, ἠβουλό-  
μην· συνιδῶν δὲ κινδυνεύοντα τὸν λόγον ἐξενεχθῆναι πρὸς τὸ ψυχρότερον  
ἐμαυτὸν αὔθις ἐπέσχον.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Planoudes, *Letters*, no. 73. For the date, see Beyer 1993, 118. On the letter, see Wendel 1940, 431–32; the commentary in Pascale 2007, 30–34; Taxides 2012, 45–46. On Planoudes, see C. Wendel in *RE*, s.v. 'Planudes, Maximos', 20.2: cols. 2202–53; *PLP*, no. 23308; C. Constantinides 1982, 66–89; Wilson 1996, 230–41; Fryde 2000, 226–67; Taxides 2012, esp. 17–29. On the monk Melchisedek, see *PLP*, no. 523; Pascale 2007, 6–9; Taxides 2012, 43–58.

<sup>2</sup> The allusion here is to Planoudes, *Comparison between Winter and Spring*, a playful rhetorical exercise in which the author lays out a series of arguments in favor of the superiority of winter over spring.

<sup>3</sup> Planoudes, *Letters*, 111.21–112.2.

I have composed the inscriptions for the icon, which you indeed requested, and now I am sending <them to you>. These may be called epic verses, that is, heroic hexameters; for the most part they are full of <requests for> compassion. For this reason and with regard to what has been sent, as was your demand, I wished to write to you something <about these verses> in anticipation of the future judgment <of them> (which, certainly, the icon is in need of as well!). However, noticing that my discourse was at risk of becoming too insipid, I restrained myself immediately.

Enclosed with the letter were three epigrams in hexameters composed to accompany different parts of the icon, which – in iconographic terms at least – must have resembled a roughly contemporary icon of the Last Judgment at Sinai (Figure 1.1).<sup>4</sup> The first epigram is devoted to the portrayal of Christ in glory, surrounded by the apostles and angels and the interceding Virgin and John the Baptist. The verses confront the viewer with the terrifying vision of the eschatological tribunal and, in a series of rhetorical questions, urge him to repent.

Ἦ κρίσις, ὦ στάσις, ὦ φοβερώτατον αὖ τὸ θέατρον,  
 ἔνθα θεὸς προκάθηται, ὃς ἔργματα πάντα δικάζει.  
 οὐ φρίξεις ὀρώων; οὐ δάκρυα θερμὰ κατὰξεις;  
 οὐ ῥυθμιεῖς, ἄνθρωπε, τεὸν βίον; ὧδε γὰρ ἦξει.

Judgment! Assembly! This formidable spectacle! Here presides God who judges every deed. Will you not tremble while gazing <at him>? Will you not shed warm tears? Man, will you not set your life straight? For this is how it will happen.

In the second epigram on the depiction of the damned in Hell, the viewer, now overcome with fear, asks Christ:

Οἷας μοι κολάσεις ἐπταικότι, σῶτερ, ἀπειλεῖς;  
 αἱ με καταπλήττουσι καὶ ἐν πινάκεσσι γραφεῖσαι·  
 ὧν πείραν τρομέω γάρ, τῶνδε δέδοικα καὶ ὄψιν.

With what kind of punishments, O Savior, do you threaten me, the sinner? Even the ones painted on panels terrify me. I tremble at the prospect of experiencing them; the very sight of them frightens me.

<sup>4</sup> The text of the epigrams reproduced below incorporates the emendations proposed by Pascale 2006, 516–17. For the Sinai icon, see Parpulov 2010a, 389 (no. XIII.69), fig. 118. On the iconography of the Last Judgment in Byzantine art, see Brenk 1966; Angheben 2002; Patterson Ševčenko 2009, 251–68.



**Figure 1.1** Icon of the Last Judgment, c. 1260–80, Saint Catherine’s monastery, Mount Sinai (photo: Kharbine-Tapabor / The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY)

The final epigram concerns the representation of the righteous. Turning to the choirs of saints and to the scene of Paradise, which, as in the Sinai icon, featured the enthroned Virgin, Abraham with the souls of the righteous, and the Good Thief, the viewer exclaims:

Μή ποτε μή τι γένοιτο, τὸ δὴ με δυνήσεται οἰκτρῶς,  
 λήξιος ὑμετέρης, ἀγίων ἀγέλη, διορίσσαι.  
 χαίροις, ὦ βασίλεια, καὶ σύ, πάτερ Ἀβραάμ, αὐτῶς·  
 καὶ τὸν μειλίχιον ληστὴν λέγω, εἰ θέμις ἐστί·

5 Δέξασθ' ἑννάετην με παρ' ἐσχατιαῖς παραδείσου.

May nothing ever happen to separate me lamentably from your lot,  
 O flock of saints! Rejoice, O Queen [i.e., Virgin], and you, father  
 Abraham, and I also address the penitent thief: if it is right, allow me to  
 inhabit the farthest quarters of Paradise.

Elegant, interactive, suffused with dramatic pathos and appropriately admonitory in intent, Planoudes' hexameters offered themselves as an apt poetic accompaniment to a personal devotional image of the Last Judgment. Nonetheless, they were to be scrutinized and evaluated by the addressee and, presumably, by his circle of friends – those to whom, in keeping with the protocols of Byzantine epistolary culture, Melchisedek would read the letter at a small literary gathering, the so-called *theatron*.<sup>5</sup> In a playful allusion to the icon's subject, the writer anticipates the future judgment of his verses and also recommends the icon itself for critical appraisal.

Planoudes' letter affords us a precious glimpse into the social and intellectual context in which epigrams were commissioned, written, read, circulated, and commented upon in Later Byzantium, the context in which art and poetry, devotion and aesthetic appreciation converged. The present chapter sets out to illuminate this context. In what follows, I shall first offer some brief remarks on the notion of epigram as *logos*, introduce the meters used in Byzantine epigrammatic poetry, and highlight some of the challenges one encounters when dealing with epigrams preserved only in manuscripts. Then, turning to the issues of artistic and literary patronage and production, I shall locate the process of creating objects inscribed with poetic texts within a broader social arena and examine the roles played by the patron, the poet, and the artist – the key figures in this process. The final section of the chapter shifts focus to the questions of reception and considers different modalities of engagement with the inscribed verse, with an emphasis upon the oral performance of epigrams.

## Why verse? Epigrams and the power of *logos*

Melchisedek's decision to commission Planoudes to compose verses for the icon of the Last Judgment followed what Paul Magdalino has aptly termed

<sup>5</sup> See Hunger 1978, 1: 210–11. On Byzantine literary *theatra*, see pp. 65–66.

(a)



(b)



**Figure 1.2a–b** Ring, fourteenth century, National Archaeological Museum, Athens (photo: Hellenic Ministry of Culture, Education and Religious Affairs – National Archaeological Museum, Athens)

the “epigrammatic habit.”<sup>6</sup> Many elite Byzantines had their personal icons and other devotional artifacts inscribed with poetic texts. This was by no means a routine element of artistic patronage. In fact, the vast majority of Byzantine artifacts that have come down to us have no inscriptions attached to them, apart from the ones required by the iconographic tradition – identifying labels, for instance. Besides, the commissioner of an object could choose to have it inscribed with a much more pedestrian kind of text. A mid-fourteenth-century icon of the Last Judgment in the Kanellopoulos collection at Athens features a short run-of-the-mill dedicatory note, which reads Δ[έη]σις τοῦ [δούλου τ]οῦ Θεοῦ Ἰωάννου καὶ τῆς σ[υμ]βίου α[ὐ]τοῦ Μαρίας (“Prayer of the servant of God John and of his wife Maria”), strategically displayed next to the image of the *Hetoimasia* with the praying figures of Adam and Eve at its foot.<sup>7</sup> Despite the ubiquity of the epigrammatic habit, verse inscriptions always represented but a fraction of the entire epigraphic production in Byzantium, with prose being by far the more common, if less elevated, medium of written display.

For the Byzantines, however, the choice of poetic form carried a distinct charge. To attach a set of verses to an object was not simply to inscribe it with a text, but to furnish it with a piece of *logos*. Χρυσὸς κοσμεῖ δάκτυλον καὶ ψυχὴν λόγος (“Gold adorns the finger and *logos* <adorns> the soul”). Thus reads a poetic motto carved in relief around the hoop on a fourteenth-century gold ring with a crowned eagle on its bezel, now in the National Archaeological Museum at Athens (Figure 1.2a–b).<sup>8</sup> If a piece

<sup>6</sup> Magdalino 2012, 32.

<sup>7</sup> Skampabias and Chatzedake 2007, 120–22 (no. 105) (K. Skampabias).

<sup>8</sup> Picard and Sodini 1971, 92; Spier 2013, 36 (no. 18); *BEIÜ* III, 824, no. AddIII7.

of jewelry enhances the body, what ornaments the soul – so the motto self-referentially proclaims – is *logos*, that is, the epigram displayed upon it. Elegantly and rather playfully, this monostich encapsulates a view on the rapport between the physical artifact and inscribed verse that was common in Byzantium. To be sure, the opposition that the motto sets up between *chrysos* (“gold”) and *logos* – note that the two words are placed at a remove from each other, occupying the extremities of the verse – has an unmistakably moralizing undertone. The care for the external appearance is here opposed to the care for the inner self. But implicit in this juxtaposition of the outer and the inner is the idea that the gold ring and the verse inscribed upon it are bound together and, not unlike body and soul, locked in a symbiotic existence. Their cohabitation, however, is organized on a hierarchical principle, structured along the lines that separate the material from the spiritual and the sensible from the intelligible. Both the ring and the monostich are identified as valuable possessions, articles of personal adornment. Yet, whereas the precious metal signals sensual beauty and material affluence, the string of words carved around the ring’s hoop points to the wearer’s intellectual refinement and his dedication to what the Byzantines referred to as *logoi*, a term that probably comes closest to the modern notion of literature.<sup>9</sup>

The choice of poetic form for an inscription should not be reduced to a declaration of literary interests, however. It bears emphasizing that in Byzantine culture *logos* was a pregnant concept invested with a profound spiritual and even mystical significance. The term covered a vast semantic field. It could be translated as “word,” “speech,” “discourse,” “reason,” “commandment,” and “law,” among other things, but it could also signify Christ as the Divine *Logos*, the Word made flesh.<sup>10</sup> The understanding of epigram as an instantiation of *logos* partook of the term’s rich polysemy and its many religious and intellectual connotations. The notion of epigram-as-*logos* endowed the act of placing a poetic text upon an object with solemnity, force, and spiritual luster, and rendered it a potent gesture.

In epigrams, *logos* manifests itself in poetic form and is structured according to the principle of *metron*, or meter. Planoudes’ choice of hexameter for the inscriptions on Melchisedek’s icon is notable because

<sup>9</sup> For the Byzantine concept of *logoi*, see especially Papaioannou 2013, 20–21; Bernard 2014, 38–43, 49–52. Cf. also Lauxtermann 2003, 69: “The word *λόγος* denotes any text that appears to be structured according to the rules of rhetoric and that appears to have a certain literary quality. And hence it does not matter whether a *λόγος* is in prose or in verse, as long as it is worth reading.”

<sup>10</sup> LSJ, s.v.; Lampe, s.v.

this meter is rarely used in Byzantine epigrams. The elegiac distich, the usual meter of ancient epigrams, is equally rare, while the fifteen-syllable “political” verse is encountered only exceptionally, despite its great popularity in Byzantine poetry from the eleventh century onward.<sup>11</sup> The vast majority of Byzantine epigrams make use of the dodecasyllable, the medieval Greek equivalent of the ancient iambic trimeter.<sup>12</sup> Reflecting the disappearance of the distinction between long and short syllables in Greek that had happened well before the advent of the Byzantine millennium, unlike the iambic trimeter, the dodecasyllable is essentially an accentual rather than prosodic meter. Its characteristics include the prescribed line-length of twelve syllables, a strong caesura – the so-called *Binnenschluss* – after the fifth or the seventh syllable, and an obligatory stress on the penult. To these characteristics should be added a general avoidance of enjambment, which accounts for the fact that most poetic pieces in the dodecasyllable consist of a succession of short phrases, with each line forming a logical and syntactical unit. The dominant use of paratactic syntax, coupled with the increasing emphasis on rhythm, made this kind of poetry easy to comprehend and absorb. The Byzantines appreciated the dynamic structure, rhythm, and rapid movement of dodecasyllables, which they simply called ἰαμβοί (“iamb”). Michael Psellos, for example, declared that the verses of George Pisides, one of the supreme models of iambic poetry in Byzantium, “leap forth as if shot from a sling.”<sup>13</sup> The thirteenth-century treatise *On the Four Parts of the Perfect Speech* singles out “rhythmical harmony” (εὐρυθμία) as the foremost quality of the dodecasyllable. This quality, as the anonymous author explains, is achieved by the compact intertwining of words and the absence of hiatus, as well as by stress regulation.<sup>14</sup>

Hexameters lacked the vividness and acoustic immediacy of accentual dodecasyllables, because their prosodic patterns could not be comprehended aurally. Their appeal, however, lay elsewhere. Poetry composed in this “heroic” meter possessed a distinctly antique flavor, bringing to

<sup>11</sup> Lauxtermann 2003, 31; *BEÜ* I, 62–64. It must be stressed, however, that the *politikos stichos* – a medieval invention without an ancient pedigree, most akin to rhythmical prose – was not considered a proper meter by the Byzantines. See Hörandner 1995, 280–85; Bernard 2014, 243–45, with further bibliography.

<sup>12</sup> On the dodecasyllable, see Maas 1903; Lampsides 1972; Hörandner 1995, 285–89; Lauxtermann 1998; Rhoby 2011d. See also Sarriu 2006; Valiavitcharska 2013, esp. 76–89.

<sup>13</sup> Psellos, *Who Versified Better, Euripides or Pisides?*, 50.131.

<sup>14</sup> Anonymous, *On the Four Parts of the Perfect Speech*, 106.124–107.131. On this treatise, see also Conley 2006. The section on “iambic verses” in the treatise is reproduced verbatim in Joseph Rhakendytes’ *Synopsis of Rhetoric*, 559–62.

mind the great Homeric epics. Besides, the mastery and correct application of the rules of hexameter required considerable linguistic expertise.<sup>15</sup> The very fact that Planoudes chose this difficult ancient *metron* for the epigrams sent to Melchisedek must have enhanced their literary value in the eyes of an informed reader. Regardless of their content, the verses of the learned monk shone with an antiquarian luster that would have appealed in particular to those initiated in the more subtle mysteries of *logos*.

### Verses on the page: epigrams in the manuscript record

Melchisedek's icon of the Last Judgment has not survived, and we have no way of knowing whether Planoudes' verses were actually inscribed upon it. The three poems have come down to us in the manuscript record, as part of the learned monk's epistolary corpus. Countless Byzantine epigrams had a similar fate. Divorced from their original setting and the circumstances that prompted their creation, they have been preserved for posterity on account of their literary merit as autonomous, self-contained poetic compositions. Instead of the surfaces of artifacts and buildings, they came to inhabit manuscript pages, typically embedded either in single-author collections or in anthologies of epigrams written by different authors at different times, often combined with texts of other genres. Since this study makes copious use of epigrams transmitted in manuscripts, a few words about some difficulties inherent in dealing with the manuscript record are in order.

Very few Byzantine epigrams preserved in manuscripts can be also found as verse inscriptions *in situ*.<sup>16</sup> The rest are available to us solely as poetic pieces committed to paper or parchment. In the absence of direct evidence, we can never be sure whether an epigram found only on a manuscript page once existed as an actual inscription, or whether it was a literary composition never intended to be inscribed. Internal indicators such as the use of verbs of perception and deictic adverbs and pronouns, the inclusion of specific references to the iconographic, material, or technical aspects of an object, or the naming of the commissioner may imply that the epigram in question was indeed originally inscribed.<sup>17</sup> The titles

<sup>15</sup> For Byzantine hexameters, see *ODB*, s.v. 'hexameter'; Hunger 1978, 2:91; Lauxtermann 1999b, esp. 69–74; van Opstall 2008a, esp. 67–69. On the use of hexameter in the Palaiologan era, see also Turyn 1972, 1: 88–89.

<sup>16</sup> Lauxtermann 2003, 31–32; *BEIÜ* I, 53–55. See also Paul 2007.

<sup>17</sup> For these and other indicators, see van Opstall 2008b. Cf. also Bernard 2014, 112–15.

added to epigrams in manuscripts are usually of little help in this regard.<sup>18</sup> They often consist of nothing more than the rather ambiguous preposition εἰς (“on”) followed by the subject of the epigram, as in Εἰς τὴν σταυρώσιν, which can mean either “<Verses written> on <the subject of> the Crucifixion” or “<Verses inscribed> on <an image of> the Crucifixion.” Occasionally, a title can be more informative and can even provide details that are otherwise missing from the poem itself. A case in point is an epigram copied in the *Anthologia Marciana* with the following title:<sup>19</sup>

Εἰς τὴν εἰκόνα τοῦ ἁγίου Γεωργίου, γραφέντος ἄνωθεν τοῦ πυλῶνος τῆς τοῦ ποιήσαντος τοὺς παρόντας στίχους οἰκίας· ὅτε ἐμπρησμοῦ γεγονότος καὶ καυθέντων πάντων τῶν ἐταιρικῶν οἰκημάτων τῶν πλησιαζόντων τῷ ναῶ τοῦ ῥηθέντος ἁγίου τῷ συνηνωμένῳ τῇ τοιαύτῃ κατοικίᾳ, διεφυλάχθη αὕτη παντελῶς ἀβλαβῆς.

On the image of Saint George depicted above the entrance to the house of the one who wrote the present verses; <the image was set up> when the house remained completely untouched by a fire that broke out and burnt all the brothels near the church of the said saint, which is adjoining this house.

Attributing, expectedly enough, the fire’s outbreak to the saint’s miraculous intervention, the epigram recounts the incident in somewhat vague terms, without providing any information on the location of the image. The concluding lines voicing the plea of the owner of the spared house, who also happens to be the author of the epigram, simply state:

ὡς γοῦν τὸ θαῦμα μὴ μακρῶ λάθῃ χρόνῳ,  
Γεώργιον σε τὸν πυροσβέστην γράφω,  
20 αἰτῶν σε καὶ πῦρ τῆς γεέννης μοι σβέσαι.

Thus, so that this miracle may not be forgotten due to the passage of time, I depict you, George the firefighter, asking you to put out the fire of Hell for me too.

It is probable that the verses were inscribed above the entrance to the house, next to the image of the saintly “firefighter,” but again, we cannot be certain.

The problem of determining whether an epigram copied in a manuscript was ever attached to an object is further complicated if we consider the

<sup>18</sup> Talbot 1999, 76; Lauxtermann 2003, 151–52; Bernard 2014, 119–20; Spingou 2012, esp. 131, 173–74.

<sup>19</sup> *Anthologia Marciana*, no. 47 (B9). See also Spingou 2012, 125.

epigraphic record. Many of the epigrams found *in situ* do not “look like” inscriptions at all; had they been transmitted in manuscripts, we would have hardly classified them as potential inscriptions. Similarly, poems that had been written with no inscriptional use in mind could end up as inscriptions. A good example is Psellos’ allegorical interpretation of the enigmatic parable of the leaven in Matthew 13:33 and Luke 13:21.<sup>20</sup> There is nothing about this poem that makes it particularly suitable for an inscription; yet it turns up, in abridged form (vv. 1–5, 10–11), in the apse of the late thirteenth-century cave church of Saint Andrew the Hermit near the village of Chalkiopoulos in Acarnania.<sup>21</sup> This example alone suffices to alert us that we should not be too reluctant to accept the possibility that an epigram with no overt inscriptional features could have been inscribed once.

A separate problem when dealing with the manuscript record concerns the length of certain epigrams. The *Anthologia Marciana* contains a poem on a precious belt, which Maria of Antioch, the second wife of Manuel I Komnenos, presented to the emperor, probably on the occasion of their wedding in 1161.<sup>22</sup>

- Ἐκ μαργαριτῶν, ἐκ λίθων, ἐκ χρυσοῦ  
 σοὶ τήνδε συμπλέξασα τὴν ζώνην νέμω,  
 αὐτοκράτορ μου, τῆς ζωῆς πλουτισμέ μου,  
 συναυτάνασσα ῥηγόβλαστος Μαρία.
- 5 ἔνδειγμα φίλτρου καθαροῦ τὸ χρυσοῖον,  
 συννεύσεως δὲ τῆς πρὸς ἔν, σὲ καὶ μόνον,  
 τὸ σφαιροειδὲς τῶν φεραυγῶν μαργάρων,  
 τὸ δ’ ἄρραγὲς κράζουσιν οἱ στερροὶ λίθοι.  
 εἶη Θεός δε δύναμιν σου ζωννύων
- 10 κράτει δὲ τῷ σῶ γῆς περιγράφων γύρον.

I, co-empress and royal offspring Maria, offer you this belt, which I have fashioned with pearls, precious stones, and gold, my emperor, treasure of my life. The gold is a token of my pure love; the <perfect> spherical form of the luminous pearls <symbolizes> my union with one person, with you and only you; and the solid precious stones proclaim the unbreakable <nature of this union>. May God gird up your strength and surround the earth with your power.

<sup>20</sup> Psellos, *Poems*, no. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Katsaros 1992, 521 (no. III); *BEIÜ* I, no. 62. On the cave church of Saint Andrew the Hermit, see especially Kissas 1992.

<sup>22</sup> *Anthologia Marciana*, no. 336 (C22), with emendations by Spingou (forthcoming). On this poem, see also Rhoby 2010c, 183–85, where the verses are attributed to George Skylitzes; Spingou 2012, 160.

Portraying the costly materials used for manufacturing the belt as expressions of Maria's affection and unreserved loyalty to her imperial husband, the verses were perfectly suited to accompany a conjugal gift. But was the epigram actually inscribed on the belt? Byzantine belts were typically made of leather or cloth and supplied with a range of metal fittings.<sup>23</sup> Judging by portraits of aristocrats and officials from the Palaiologan era, they could be quite long (see, e.g., Figure 3.19). But could the buckle of the emperor's belt, a logical place for an inscription, accommodate ten lines in the dodecasyllable? Or should we perhaps imagine the text being divided into smaller units, each placed on a separate ornamental attachment? However, if the epigram was not inscribed, then what was its function? Was it perhaps recited at the formal presentation of the gift? This is certainly a possibility. In her study of the *Anthologia Marciana*, Foteini Spingou has suggested that a sizable portion of the epigrams included in this collection – as much as twenty percent of *Syllogae* B and C, in her estimation – consists of poems that were designed specifically to be orally delivered, rather than to be inscribed.<sup>24</sup> The length of the epigram relative to the available space on the object is only one of several indicators of this original function. The omission of the patron's name, the emphasis on a specific occasion and a specific moment in time, strengthened by the use of such telltale words as *νῦν* ("now"), and the nature of the occasion itself (e.g., gift-giving), may equally point to the epigram's performative function. Spingou has identified several possible contexts in which the recitation of such *performative epigrams*, as she calls them, could take place, including the ceremonial presentation of a gift by the donor or his or her representative; the reception of a gift along with a letter containing a set of verses composed to accompany the gift; and the reading and discussion of literary works, epigrams among them, in a *theatron*. We shall revisit some of Spingou's propositions below in this chapter, where the performative character of epigrams in general – both poems ostensibly intended for oral delivery and inscriptions displayed on objects – will be addressed. For now, it suffices to stress that, as her analysis indicates, it is possible that quite a few among the epigrams transmitted in manuscripts were written primarily for vocal recitation.

The manuscript record thus presents us with a rich and complex textual landscape that is very difficult to chart. Actual verse inscriptions

<sup>23</sup> ODB, s.v. 'belt' and 'belt fittings'. See also Koukoules 1948–57, 2.2:50–55; Kovačević 1953, 174–79; Maneva 1992, 28–34; Schulze-Dörrlamm 2002–9; Parani 2015, 420–22.

<sup>24</sup> Spingou 2012, esp. 124–25, 159–77.

here mingle with probable performative epigrams and purely literary compositions with many gray areas between them. While in a number of instances the original function of a poem can be established with a greater or lesser degree of certainty, in many others we cannot do much else than guess.

## Patrons, poets, artists

Maximos Planoudes' letter to Melchisedek Akropolites documents one moment in the long history of interactions between art patrons and men of letters that made possible the creation of artifacts, spaces, and monuments furnished with verse inscriptions.<sup>25</sup> To be sure, not every epigram was the result of a commission issued by a patron. In the former monastic church of the Virgin *Peribleptos* at Ohrid, the archangel Gabriel is depicted in the narthex, next to the north entrance, with a pen and an inscribed scroll in his hands (Figure 1.3). The poetic message on the scroll, spoken in Gabriel's voice, informs the visitor of the formidable task with which the archangel has been entrusted.<sup>26</sup>

Ὁξυγράφου κάλαμον τῆ χειρὶ φέρων  
τῶν εἰσιόντων συνταγὰς ἀπογράφω·  
φρουρῶ στέργοντας, [εἰ] δὲ μὴ, φθεῖ[ρ]ω τάχει.

Holding the fast writer's pen in my hand, I write down the promises of those entering. I protect the ones who keep them, but those who do not I swiftly destroy.

The possibility that the *mezas hetaireiarchēs* Progonos Sgouros and his wife Eudokia Komnene, the founders of the *Peribleptos* monastery, commissioned these verses from a poet should be excluded. A more likely scenario is that Eutybios and Michael Astrapas, the two painters from Thessalonike who decorated the church with frescoes in 1294/95, lifted the verses from a painter's guide or a model book.<sup>27</sup> Not only do the verses reappear some fifteen years later in a church at Spelies on the island of

<sup>25</sup> For the questions of patronage and agency in the production of inscribed objects, see the important remarks in Spingou 2014, 148–52.

<sup>26</sup> *BEIÜ* I, no. 17; Marković 2011, 132 n. 250.

<sup>27</sup> On the church of the Virgin *Peribleptos*, now dedicated to Saint Clement, see Miljković-Pepok 1967, esp. 43–51; Korunovski and Dimitrova 2006, 100–6, 150–61; Marković 2011. On the founders on the church, see also *PLP*, nos. 25060 and 91889; Zarov 2007. On the painters Eutybios and Michael Astrapas, see Miljković-Pepok 1967; Todić 2001; Marković 2010; Drpić 2013.



Figure 1.3 Archangel Gabriel, 1294/95, church of the Virgin *Peribleptos*, Ohrid (photo: author)

Euboea, again as a message uttered by Gabriel,<sup>28</sup> but the same text is recommended for the scroll of the archangel, when he is portrayed as a guardian next to a church entrance, in two post-Byzantine painter's manuals.<sup>29</sup> As a matter of fact, most of the poetic inscriptions on scrolls held by holy figures in the Ohrid church are attested elsewhere.<sup>30</sup>

The poetic motto displayed on the ring in Athens (Figure 1.2a–b) presents a similar case. This dodecasyllable monostich turns up on three other gold rings dated to the Palaiologan period.<sup>31</sup> It has been argued that the four pieces come from the same workshop based in Constantinople, which produced jewelry for an elite clientele with ties to the imperial court. The monostich was likely part of the workshop's catalog of ready-made verse inscriptions, from which a prospective commissioner with a literary bent could choose one to have engraved on his or her ring.<sup>32</sup>

On occasion, the patron and the poet may be the same person. This was the case with the above-mentioned anonymous writer who, following a miraculous fire that razed brothels in his neighborhood, set up an image of Saint George above the entrance to his house and wrote an epigram to accompany it. Planoudes, to give another example, penned a quatrain that was probably inscribed on his personal *enkolpion*.<sup>33</sup> In the majority of instances, however, the creation of an object inscribed with an epigram necessitated a degree of collaboration between the object's commissioner, its maker, and the poet employed to compose the epigram.

The Byzantine poet, as Floris Bernard has pointed out, is a problematic notion.<sup>34</sup> Poetry hardly existed as a separate intellectual activity, let alone a profession, in Byzantium. Instead, the writing of verse was subsumed within the larger domain of *logoi*. Educated men – and, exceptionally, women too – engaged in composing texts in metrical form, epigrams included, in addition to their other intellectual activities. Planoudes, for example, was primarily a scholar, teacher, translator, and scribe.<sup>35</sup> His epigrammatic opus is relatively small, and his principal engagement with this genre of poetry was in his capacity as a compiler and editor rather than

<sup>28</sup> Emmanuel 1990, 461–62; *BEIÜ* I, no. 73.

<sup>29</sup> Papadopoulos-Kerameus 1909, 219, 283; Medić 2002, 334; Medić 2005, 534.

<sup>30</sup> For these inscriptions, see *BEIÜ* I, nos. 15–17; *BEIÜ* III, nos. AddI3–AddI11.

<sup>31</sup> *Byzance* 1992, 446 (no. 341) (J. Durand); Spier 2013, 34 (no. 9), 35–37 (nos. 17 and 22); *BEIÜ* III, no. AddI4.

<sup>32</sup> On this workshop and other epigrams found on the rings manufactured in it, see Spier 2013, 33–52.

<sup>33</sup> Gallavotti 1985–86, 206. <sup>34</sup> Bernard 2014, 31–57.

<sup>35</sup> For the bibliography on Planoudes, see above n. 1.

author. To him we owe the monumental edition of about 2,400 ancient and Byzantine epigrams known today as the *Anthologia Planudea*.<sup>36</sup> Manuel Philes, a younger contemporary of Planoudes, was an intellectual of a different kind. Philes comes much closer to being a poet in the modern sense, as versifying was clearly his area of expertise and the basis of his reputation and livelihood. Since his epigrams will be of major concern to us, we must take a closer look at this intriguing figure.<sup>37</sup>

Few Byzantine poets were as prolific, versatile, and sought after as Philes. Catering to an elite audience, his indefatigable pen produced a plethora of occasional verse, ranging from panegyrics and funeral laments to poems for feast days and ceremonial gatherings, accounts of historical events, and *ekphraseis*, in addition to over five hundred epigrams, a few of which can still be seen inscribed on objects.<sup>38</sup> Despite the

<sup>36</sup> Cameron 1993, esp. 75–77, 351–62; Fryde 2000, 244–46.

<sup>37</sup> On Philes, see *PLP*, no. 29817; Krumbacher 1897, 774–80; Stickler 1992. See also Loparev 1891; Papadogiannakis 1984; Talbot 1994; Anagnostakes 1995, 117–38, 220–36; Antonopoulou 2004; Lauxtermann 2004, 336–39; Braounou-Pietsch 2010; Bazzani 2011. It must be stressed that, without a full critical edition of his works, any assessment of Philes remains provisional.

<sup>38</sup> Philes, *Carmina* I, 117–18 (no. CCXXIII) is carved on the cornice running along the west and south façades of the south *parekklēsiōn* of the church of the Virgin *Pammakaristos* in Constantinople: van Millingen 1912, 157–60; *BEIÜ* III, no. TR76. *Carmina* II, 58 (no. XVII) is inscribed on two rings from the so-called Chalcis treasure in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, as well as on the ring of one Theodore Silibritzianos, now in a private collection: Spier 2013, 34 (no. 12), 35 (no. 13), 36 (no. 19), 39; *BEIÜ* III, no. AddIII2. *Carmina* I, 354–55 (no. CLXXXIV) appears on a sixteenth-century icon of the *Aspasmōs* of Saints Peter and Paul in the Great Lavra on Mount Athos: Vassilaki 1990, 419. *Carmina* I, 354 (nos. CLXXVIII and CLXXXII) turn up combined into one poem in the narthex of the church of the Virgin *Pantanassa* at Mistra, in the part of the decoration that seems to date from the early eighteenth century: Zesios 1909, 441 (no. 149); Rhoby 2010a, 102–3. A variant of *Carmina* II, 85–86 (no. XLV) was inscribed on the now-lost *staurōthēkē* from Nevers: Frolov 1941, 239–42; *BEIÜ* II, no. Me18. A number of epigrams preserved *in situ* have been attributed to Philes. These include two verse inscriptions in the interior of the *parekklēsiōn* of the Virgin *Pammakaristos*, one painted in gold on two cornices in the nave and the other lettered in mosaic around the figure of Christ in the apse (*BEIÜ* I, nos. 215 and M15); the epitaph engraved on the tomb of Michael Tornikes and his wife in the *Chōra* monastery in Constantinople (Ševčenko 1975, 21 n. 14; *BEIÜ* III, no. TR68); the couplet gracing the arcosolium that likely belonged to the despot Demetrios Palaiologos, also in the *Chōra* monastery (*BEIÜ* I, no. M8); the epitaph on the funerary stele of a nun Maria Palaiologina, possibly from the monastery *tou Libos* in Constantinople (Buckler 1924, 525; *BEIÜ* III, no. TR62); the epigram from the basilica of Saint Demetrios in Thessalonike commemorating the renovation of its roof by Michael VIII Palaiologos (Laskaris 1953–54, 8–10; *BEIÜ* I, no. 111; Phoskolou 2013 with arguments against the identification, prevalent in earlier scholarship, of the instigator of the project with Michael IX); the dedicatory inscription in the *parekklēsiōn* of Saint Euthymios attached to the basilica of Saint Demetrios as well as the verses on the scroll of Saint Stephen the Younger in the same *parekklēsiōn* (*BEIÜ* I, nos. 112 and 113); the epitaph on the cover of the sarcophagus of George Kapandrites in the monastery *tōn Blatadōn* in Thessalonike (Xyngopoulos 1935, 347–49; Th.

fact that members of the imperial family of the Palaiologoi, including the emperors Andronikos II, Michael IX, and Andronikos III, were among the commissioners or recipients of his verses, Philes was never a court poet *stricto sensu*. And even though he is known to have participated in several diplomatic missions to the Golden Horde, Crimea, the Turkish-ruled Anatolia, and possibly elsewhere, he never held a salaried office in the imperial administration. Essentially, his livelihood depended on the generosity of his patrons. A host of aristocrats, military commanders, and civil and ecclesiastical dignitaries patronized Philes at various moments over his long career that lasted more than forty years, including the *megas domestikos* John Kantakouzenos (future emperor John VI),<sup>39</sup> the *prōtostratōr* Michael Doukas Glabas Tarchaneiotes and his wife Maria,<sup>40</sup> the *sebastos* Theodore Patrikiotes,<sup>41</sup> the *prōtobestiarios* Andronikos Palaiologos,<sup>42</sup> the *megas stratopedarchēs* Senachereim Angelos,<sup>43</sup> the *domestikos* of the Eastern themes Michael Atzymes,<sup>44</sup> the *pinkernēs* Syrgiannes,<sup>45</sup> and many others. A sizable portion of Philes' oeuvre consists of petitions addressed to these illustrious individuals, in which the poet complains about his dire poverty. Fairly typical in this regard are the following verses sent to Senachereim Angelos.<sup>46</sup>

Ὅρων με γυμνὸν ὁ χρυσοῦς εὐεργέτης  
οὐκ ἀπομετρεῖς τὰς λαβὰς τῶν ἀμφίων;  
καὶ τίς τὸ ῥίγοῦν θερμανεῖ μοι σαρκίον,  
ὦ ζῶν ἀτεχνῶς ζωτικῆς φῶς αἰθρίας;

Pazaras 1988, 35 [no. 36], 148; cf. *BEIÜ* III, no. GR127); the epigram on the silver-gilt revetment affixed to an icon of the Virgin *Hodēgētria* in the Vatopedi monastery on Mount Athos (Rhoby and Hörandner 2007, 157–62); the epigram on the silver-gilt revetment of an icon of the Virgin *Elpis tōn Apelpismenōn*, also in the Vatopedi monastery (*BEIÜ* II, no. 1k26); the dedicatory verses in the Gospel book of the princess Maria-Melane Palaiologina, now in Sofia (Ivan Dujčev Center for Slavo-Byzantine Studies, Ms. 177, fols. 246r–v) (Ševčenko 1975, 37 n. 141); the dedicatory verses in the *Mēnologion* of the despot Demetrios Palaiologos in Oxford (Bodleian Library, Ms. gr. th. f. 1, fols. 55v–56r) (Hutter 2007, 214). To this list may be added a group of verse inscriptions from Berroia, which show affinities with Philes' poetry: *BEIÜ* III, nos. GR40, GR45–GR48. Finally, it has been argued that three dedicatory epigrams, once displayed at the *Pammakaristos* church in Constantinople and now preserved in a sixteenth-century manuscript in Cambridge (Trinity College, Ms. O.2.36, fols. 160v–161r), may have also been penned by the poet: *BEIÜ* III, nos. TR73–TR75. For attributions to Philes, see also Paul 2007, 257–61; *BEIÜ* II, 37; *BEIÜ* III, 96–97.

<sup>39</sup> *PLP*, no. 10973.

<sup>40</sup> *PLP*, nos. 27504 and 27511 (= 4202); Leontiades 1998, nos. 32 and 38. On Philes' relationship with this couple, see especially Belting et al. 1978, 11–19. See also Chapter 4.

<sup>41</sup> *PLP*, no. 22077. <sup>42</sup> *PLP*, no. 21435. <sup>43</sup> *PLP*, no. 25146. <sup>44</sup> *PLP*, no. 1633.

<sup>45</sup> *PLP*, no. 27167. <sup>46</sup> Philes, *Carmina* I, 99 (no. CCII).

Although you see me naked, my golden benefactor, you do not spread  
out the folds of your garments? But who shall warm my shivering body,  
O you who are truly the living light of life-giving serenity?

The poet's obsequious appeals to his patrons often concerned food. Here is one addressed to a Palaiologan prince.<sup>47</sup>

Κύων ἐγὼ σός, καὶ γλυκὺς σὺ δεσπότης·  
οὐκοῦν ὕλακτῶ, καὶ φαγεῖν ζητῶ κρέα.  
λεοντόθυμε σκύμνε, τὸν κύνα τρέφε.  
(vv. 1–3)

I am your dog, and you are my sweet master.<sup>48</sup> I bark, therefore, and beg  
to eat meat. O lion-hearted cub, feed your dog.

These and other similar requests for barley, fish, cheese, wine, and clothing leave the impression that the poet was a penniless savant reduced to destitution. As a matter of fact, Philes was no pauper. Born into a known aristocratic family,<sup>49</sup> he owned a landed estate, had a “Scythian” servant,<sup>50</sup> and was extravagant enough to request a male buffalo from the *prōtostratōr* Glabas to match the female one he already possessed.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the kinds of rewards he received from his patrons – a silver-sheathed sword,<sup>52</sup> a gold-woven robe,<sup>53</sup> a goose-egg filled with silver coins,<sup>54</sup> horses<sup>55</sup> – evidently point to a lifestyle befitting a wealthy man, not a famished wretch. If, despite this, Philes never tired of moaning about his indigence, it was because he deliberately cultivated the persona of a begging poet following the example of the twelfth-century literati.<sup>56</sup>

The begging poet is a phenomenon of later Byzantine literary culture. As several scholars have argued, the emergence of this figure in the twelfth century reflects the anxiety of Byzantine men of letters regarding their ambiguous position in a shifting social landscape.<sup>57</sup> With the accession of the Komnenoi to the imperial throne, a new political regime was

<sup>47</sup> Philes, *Carmina* I, 124 (no. CCXXXVI).

<sup>48</sup> Note the pun here. The addressee, Constantine Palaiologos (*PLP*, no. 21499), second son of Andronikos II and Anna of Hungary, held the title of despot.

<sup>49</sup> Ševčenko 1974, 75. <sup>50</sup> Philes, *Carmina* I, 296–97 (no. CIX).

<sup>51</sup> Philes, *Carmina* I, 93–94 (no. CXCI); Philes, *Carmina inedita*, no. 59.

<sup>52</sup> Philes, *Carmina* I, 313 (no. CXXII). <sup>53</sup> Philes, *Carmina* II, 83–84 (no. XLIV).

<sup>54</sup> Philes, *Carmina inedita*, no. 80. <sup>55</sup> Philes, *Carmina* I, 298 (no. CX), 312–13 (no. CXXII).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Rosenthal-Kamarinea 1975.

<sup>57</sup> Kazhdan 1984, 105–14; Kazhdan and Wharton Epstein 1985, 130–33; Alexiou 1986; Beaton 1987; Dyck 1990; Magdalino 1993, esp. 320–22, 339–52; Lauxtermann 2003, 34–45. Cf. also Kyriakis 1974. For the Homeric overtones in the twelfth-century “rhetoric of poverty,” see Cullhed 2014. On the Byzantine *Betteldichtung*, see in addition Kulhánková 2008; Kulhánková

ushered in: a handful of aristocratic clans related to each other by blood and marriage effectively monopolized access to the sources of power and wealth. In the absence of an impersonal mechanism of promotion and demotion within the state apparatus and ecclesiastical hierarchy, the distribution of offices, titles, grants, and privileges came to depend increasingly upon a system of personal patronage. For many educated men of relatively modest origins, who were neither office-holders, nor clerics, entering the service of a powerful patron was the only route to social advancement. The status of these professional literati was, naturally, precarious. They did not belong to the ranks of the Komnenian elite; yet they shared its ideals of urbanity and learning, a cultural baggage that set them apart from merchants and artisans, practitioners of lesser trades whom the Byzantine upper classes traditionally held in disdain. In the twelfth century, however, a despised tradesman could fare better economically than a man of letters constantly in search of patronage. Education may have been one of the more potent instruments of social distinction in Byzantium, but it was also a “career investment”<sup>58</sup> fraught with risk. The tenuous social position of professional literati and their dependence on the patronage of the court and the aristocracy prompted them, in a sense, to cultivate a tone of exaggerated self-abasement. Thus, when Theodore Prodromos, one of the foremost literary figures of the Komnenian era, acknowledges his total reliance on the generosity of the emperor John II by saying, “If he gives me to eat, I live again, but if he does not, I am undone, I descend into Hades,”<sup>59</sup> the bluntness of his language is intentional. (Incidentally, we know that, like Philes, Prodromos enjoyed a fairly comfortable existence.)<sup>60</sup> What looms behind such crass declarations of poverty and complete submission is, in fact, an enhanced sense of personal merit and professional self-confidence. For, by giving vent to their plight, Prodromos and other “begging” poets implicitly advertised the value of their literary craft. As Roderick Beaton has aptly noted, “it is precisely because the poet is so indispensable as a singer of praises, or entertainer, or both, that his abject personal circumstances cry out to be remedied by a grateful benefactor.”<sup>61</sup> In short, self-abasement was a form of self-assertiveness.

2010. For the new system of literary patronage and the heightened profile of the professional author in the twelfth century, see also Lauxtermann 2004, 305–306; Magdalino 2012, 22–23.

<sup>58</sup> The phrase is borrowed from Magdalino 1993, 340.

<sup>59</sup> Prodromos, *Carmina historica*, no. LXXI, vv. 90–91. <sup>60</sup> Kazhdan 1984, 105.

<sup>61</sup> Beaton 1987, 3.

In the social world inhabited by the Empire's elite, occasions and venues that called for literary celebration were numerous. The poet's skill was needed to enhance the glamour of court ceremonial, add verbal luster to religious festivals, immortalize military exploits, celebrate public inaugurations, and commemorate more private moments such as births, weddings, and funerals. It was also required to furnish buildings and artifacts commissioned by the notables with appropriate inscriptions in verse. The limited evidence at our disposal makes it very difficult to ascertain the nature of the patron's involvement in the composition of an epigram. How often did this involvement go beyond rewarding the poet for his service? Was it common for the patron to give specific instructions to the poet or to suggest some general ideas, sentiments, or themes, which the poet would then develop and dress in verse form? A letter by the Late Palaiologan scholar John Chortasmenos shows that some patrons felt the need to be quite directly involved. The letter is addressed to a patriarchal official, Michael Balsamon, who mocked the verses Chortasmenos had composed for the newly built palace of the senator Theodore Palaiologos Kantakouzenos in Constantinople.<sup>62</sup>

Concerning the words I wrote for the entrance <to the palace> of the most noble Kantakouzenos, which you find uncouth, he is to be blamed, not me. For this man is not easily persuaded to accept anything that appears to contradict whatever he may have said; rather, he believes that he is entirely capable of understanding the nature of everything in and of itself by using his innate intelligence, without the help of technical expertise [καὶ μὴ παρουσίας τῆς τέχνης]. Should someone perchance try to discuss the matter at hand with him based on the principles of technical knowledge [κατὰ νόμους τεχνικούς], he acquiesces, albeit unwillingly, out of respect for the manifest truth, but nonetheless, does not give up his initial resolution. Hence, even to engage in an intense debate with him does not seem to help much.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Chortasmenos, *Works*, 165–66 (Letter 15). On Michael Balsamon, see *PLP*, no. 2121. On Theodore Palaiologos Kantakouzenos, see *PLP*, no. 10966. Peschlow (1995; 2001) has attempted to identify the palace with the so-called Mermer-Kule, or Marble Tower, a structure at the southwestern extremity of the walls along the Sea of Marmara, close to the Golden Gate. For a critique of this identification, see Asutay 2002; Asutay-Effenberger 2007, 110–17. On the palace of Theodore Palaiologos Kantakouzenos, see in addition Kioussopoulou 2014.

<sup>63</sup> Chortasmenos, *Works*, 165.2–11: Τῆς περὶ τὰ ἔπη σοι δοκούσης ιδιωτείας, ἅπερ ἡμῖν ἐν προθύροις τοῦ εὐγενεστάτου Καντακουζηνοῦ καταγέγραπται, οὐκ ἐμοὶ μᾶλλον ἢ ἐκεῖνῳ τὴν αἰτίαν λογιστέον. ὁ γὰρ ἀνὴρ οὕτος οὐκ ἐθέλει, περὶ ὧν ἂν εἰρηκῶς τύχοι, ἑτέρῳ τάναντία δοκοῦντι λέγειν εὐχερῶς πείθεσθαι, ἀλλὰ φύσεως ὀξύτητι κεχρημένος ἐν ἅπασιν οἴεται πάντα δύνασθαι τὴν φύσιν καθ' ἑαυτὴν ἐξευρίσκειν καὶ μὴ παρουσίας τῆς τέχνης, κἂν τις αὐτῷ πολλακίς ἐπιχειρήσειε κατὰ νόμους τεχνικούς διαλέγεσθαι περὶ τῶν προκειμένων, συγχωρεῖ μὲν καὶ ἄκων τὴν ἐνάργεια τῆς ἀληθείας αἰδούμενος, οὐ μὴν τῆς γε ἐξαρχῆς ἐνστάσεως ὑφίησιν, ὥστε ὁ πρὸς ἐκεῖνον πέρα τοῦ μέτρου φιλονεικία χρώμενος οὐδὲν τι πλεον ἀνύτεν δοκεῖ.

Kantakouzenos' hands-on approach was not limited to the poetic embellishment of his palace. As Chortasmenos hastens to add, "That this man supervises every work that is being done at his residence is confirmed by the builders of the residence. They took extreme care of the construction just to obey his orders; for, without his opinion, they were not allowed even to plaster a wall on their own."<sup>64</sup> Kantakouzenos' lack of *technē* did not prevent him from interfering with the work of his skilled employees, whether their expertise lay in the art of poetry or in the art of building. It was only appropriate, therefore, that Chortasmenos should ascribe the beauty of the palace to its owner in an epigram in which the palace itself sets out to applaud Kantakouzenos.<sup>65</sup>

Τῶ μὲν δοκεῖν χεῖρες με τεκτόνων ἴσως  
οὕτως ἐτεχνούργησαν, ὡς ὄρᾳς, ξένε,  
τρυφήν ἀτεχνῶς ὀμμάτων ἀνθρωπίνων·  
ὅστις δὲ γνῶναι τὴν ἀλήθειαν θέλει,  
5 ἐκεῖνον αὐτὸν αἰτιάσθω τοῦ κάλλους,  
ὄν εὐτυχῶς νῦν δεσπότην πεπλοῦτήκα.

It may appear, perhaps, that the masons' hands constructed me so skillfully that, as you can see, O stranger, I am truly a delight for human eyes. Yet, if anyone wants to learn the truth, let it be known that the one responsible for my beauty is that man himself, whom I am now fortunate to have as a master.

The strained syntax of these unwieldy lines may well have provoked ridicule.<sup>66</sup> It is not known, however, whether the poem was actually inscribed at the palace entrance. In addition to these verses, Chortasmenos composed four longer epigrams on Kantakouzenos' residence, two in the dodecasyllable and two in hexameter, which could equally serve as inscriptions.<sup>67</sup>

In fact, it was quite common for a poet to present his patron with a series of epigrams on the same subject, from which the latter could choose

<sup>64</sup> Chortasmenos, *Works*, 166.22–25: ὅτι δὲ πᾶσιν οὗτος τοῖς κατὰ τὴν οἰκίαν αὐτῶ δημιουργουμένοις ἐπιστατεῖ, μαρτυροῦσι σαφῶς οἱ δημιουργοὶ τῆς οἰκίας, οἷς τοσοῦτον ἐμέλησε τῆς οἰκοδομίας, ὅσον ὑπουργεῖν ἐκεῖνῳ προστάττοντι, ἐπεὶ οὐδὲ κονιάσια τὸν τοῖχον καθ' ἑαυτοῦς [ἄνευ τῆς ἐκείνου γνώμης] συγκεχώρηται.

<sup>65</sup> Chortasmenos, *Works*, 191–92 (Poem d).

<sup>66</sup> For a comparable example, see John Mauropous' poem entitled Πρὸς τὸν ἐπιλαβόμενον τοῦ ἰάμβου τοῦ «ἀνθ' οὐ πραθεῖς» ὡς τῆς προθέσεως οὐ καλῶς προσκειμένης ("Against the man who criticized the verse ἀνθ' οὐ πραθεῖς, because the preposition is not rightly construed") (*Poems and Other Works*, 18–19 [no. 33]), a riposte to a hairsplitter who criticized the poet's epigram on a golden image of the Crucifixion (*Poems and Other Works*, 17–18 [no. 32]) on grammatical grounds. See also Anastasi 1971; Bernard 2009, 153–54; Bernard 2014, 87–90, 269–72.

<sup>67</sup> Chortasmenos, *Works*, 190–92 (Poems b and e), 194–95 (Poems g and g1).

the most fitting to be inscribed.<sup>68</sup> Philes' oeuvre provides ample evidence for this practice. To give but one example, in response to a commission from the statesman Michael Senachereim Monomachos to pen some verses on a gold ring, the poet produced six iambic couplets.<sup>69</sup>

Ὁ χοῦς φέρει χοῦν (καὶ τίς ἐντεῦθεν τύφος  
τῷ Σεναχηρεῖμ Μιχαήλ Μονομάχῳ).

Dust bears dust – what source of pride could this be for Michael Senachereim Monomachos?

Ὁ Σεναχηρεῖμ Μιχαήλ τὴν σφενδόνην,  
ἢ σφενδόνη κοσμεῖ δὲ τὸν Μονομάχον.

Michael Senachereim <adorns> the ring, and the ring adorns Monomachos.

Ὁ Μονομάχος οὐκ ἐπαιῶν τὸν Γύγην  
ἄτυφός ἐστι τῇ στροφῇ τῆς σφενδόνης.

Having no praise for Gyges, Monomachos does not take pride in the turn of the ring.

Χρυσῆ κόνις θέλγουσα τοὺς ἀπλουστέρους  
τῷ Σεναχηρεῖμ σωφρονίζει τὸν βίον.

Gold dust, which enchants the simple-minded, teaches Senachereim to live in moderation.

Σός εἰμι καὶ πρὸς ἄλλον αὐτίκα ῥέω·  
καὶ γὰρ ὅλως μόνιμον οὐδὲν ἐν βίῳ.

I am yours, but in a moment I will become somebody else's; for nothing is entirely stable in life.

Ὅρῶντι νεκρὸν τὸν χρυσὸν τῆς σφενδόνης  
πρὸ τῆς τελευτῆς ὠχρίαν ἔπεισέ μοι.

To turn pale <even> before death is what threatens me, for I see that this ring's gold is dead.

<sup>68</sup> Maguire 1996b, 8–9; Lauxtermann 2003, 42–44.

<sup>69</sup> In E. Miller's edition of Philes (*Carmina* II, 141–42 [no. LXXXIII]), the couplets are published as a single poem with the title *Εἰς δακτύλιον* ("On a ring"). On the commissioner, see *PLP*, no. 19306.

With a sententiousness reminiscent of gnomic poetry, Philes' verses dwell upon the familiar themes of the brevity and uncertainty of human life and the transience of material riches, while simultaneously offering praise to his patron's moral rectitude. Each couplet, however, is distinct. In allusion to Genesis 2:7, the first pithily reminds Monomachos that both he and the gold ring on his finger are nothing but dust. The second implicitly extols the patron's excellence and virtue by claiming that he is an ornament to the ring as much as the ring is an ornament to him. In the third couplet, Philes introduces a learned reference to the story of Gyges, king of Lydia, and his magical ring which, when turned, made its wearer invisible.<sup>70</sup> Unlike this ancient villain, who succumbed to the temptation to abuse the power of his precious possession, Monomachos in his detachment from earthly concerns remains wholly impervious to the charms of the shiny trinket placed on his finger. The patron's self-mastery is further celebrated in the fourth couplet, which draws attention to the perishable nature of gold. In the fifth, the ring itself is imagined speaking, reminding the wearer of the impermanence of human affairs. In the sixth and final couplet, the speaking voice is that of the wearer who cannot help but think of the morally corrupting sway of gold while looking at the ring.

Given that Philes' couplets are admittedly generic in their themes and imagery, it does not seem necessary to postulate that the poet had an actual ring before him when he was composing these verses or that he was required to consult with the goldsmith in Monomachos' employ. In all likelihood, he was simply asked to write a few lines suitable to be engraved on a ring made of gold. Presumably, when Philes presented Monomachos with a series of six poetic vignettes, the latter picked one and had it sent to the goldsmith. This appears to have been quite a common scenario. That the process of manufacturing an inscribed object did not necessarily involve a close and extended collaboration between the poet and the artist is indicated by curious mistakes encountered at times in the epigraphic record. A pectoral cross-reliquary of a ninth- or tenth-century date at Sinai provides a telling example (Figures 1.4 and 1.5a–d).<sup>71</sup> Made of copper alloy and

<sup>70</sup> The story is famously recorded in Plato's *Republic* II, 359c–360b. Cf. Geometres, *Iambic Poems*, 228 (no. 272).

<sup>71</sup> Galavaris 1999; Pitarakis 2006, 63–65, 113–14, 251 (no. 206); Hörandner 2007a, 123–25; *BEÜ* II, nos. Me1–Me2.



**Figure 1.4** Pectoral cross-reliquary, ninth or tenth century, Saint Catherine's monastery, Mount Sinai (photo: Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai)

adorned with scenes from the life of Christ and figures of saints rendered in niello and inlaid silver, this object consists of two crosses hinged together, which, thus combined, formed a receptacle for one or perhaps several now-lost fragments of the True Cross. A pair of poetic



Figure 1.5a–d Details of the epigram on the pectoral cross-reliquary, ninth or tenth century, Saint Catherine’s monastery, Mount Sinai (photo: Michigan–Princeton–Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai)

inscriptions runs in parallel along the narrow sides of the two crosses. The inscription on the front cross reads:

Ἐν τῇ δυνάμει τῶν σ[ε]βασμίων ξύλων  
 φύλαττε, Χριστέ, Θωμᾶν τὸν σὸν οἰκέτην.

In the power of the venerable wood, protect, Christ, your servant  
 Thomas.

The second inscription on the back cross contains a very similar petition followed by an odd phrase in prose:

Κύριε, ἄναξ, δημ[ι]ουργέ τῶν ὄλων,  
 φρούρει, φύλαττε Θωμά<ν> τὸν σὸ[ν οἰκ]έτη<ν>.  
 καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ ἐν τῇ γραφῇ αὐτοῦ.

Lord, Ruler, Creator of all, guard, protect your servant Thomas. And the rest in his drawing.

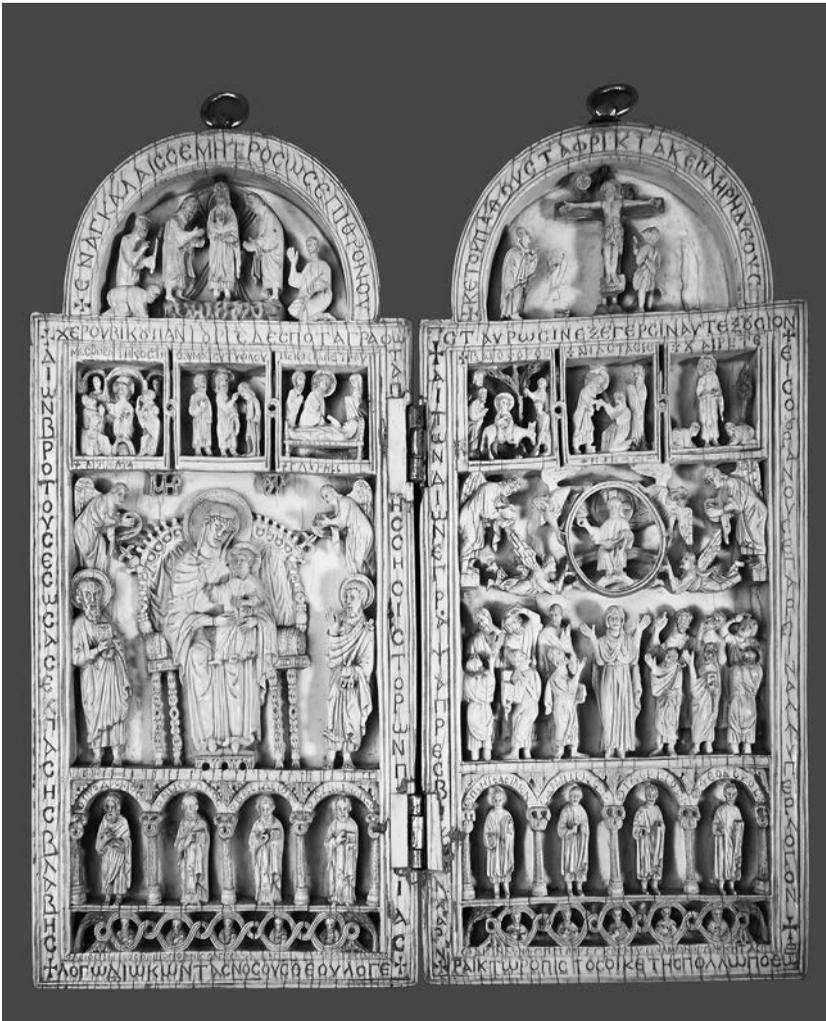
As Wolfram Hörandner has rightly pointed out, the puzzling phrase tucked onto the second inscription must have been a technical instruction to the artist, which he mistakenly engraved on the reliquary.<sup>72</sup> According to Hörandner's hypothetical reconstruction of the sequence of events that led to the creation of this precious pendant, Thomas, the reliquary's owner and presumably commissioner, made some sort of sketch detailing the images and identifying labels he wished to have placed on the pendant's two faces. He then engaged a poet to compose a set of dedicatory verses to be inscribed on the object's narrow sides. The poet produced two couplets and wrote them down on a piece of paper along with the note καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ ἐν τῇ γραφῇ αὐτοῦ ("and the rest in his [i.e., Thomas'] drawing"), an instruction for the artist to decorate the object according to the patron's design. Assuming that the note was part of the poetic text, the artist engraved it. This may not have been the only mistake on his part. The fact that the two couplets share an identical hemistich – Θωμάν τὸν σὸν οἰκέτην ("your servant Thomas") – suggests that they were composed as two alternative versions, only one of which was meant to be inscribed. Be that as it may, it is clear that the Sinai cross-reliquary did not receive its poetic embellishment under the poet's watchful eye.<sup>73</sup>

Sometimes, however, inscribed artifacts present such a neat interlocking of text, image, and design that one must assume that the artist and the poet collaborated quite closely. This is the case with the ivory diptych in the treasury of the cathedral at Chambéry (Plate 2, Figure 1.6).<sup>74</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Hörandner 2007a, 124–25.

<sup>73</sup> The reliquary of Saint Marina in the Museo Correr in Venice presents a comparable example. As misspellings in the dedicatory epigram on the reliquary indicate, the artist had trouble interpreting abbreviation signs in the text he had been asked to engrave. See Ševčenko 1998, 251; D'Aiuto 2007, 437–38; *BEIŪ* II, no. Me81.

<sup>74</sup> Goldschmidt and Weitzmann 1930–34, 78–79 (no. 222a–d); *Byzance* 1992, 266–67 (no. 174) (J. Durand); Kiourtzian 2005; Jolivet-Lévy 2007; Cutler 2008; Kiourtzian 2009–10. For the epigram on the diptych, see also *BEIŪ* II, no. El20.



**Figure 1.6** Ivory diptych, tenth/eleventh or thirteenth century, cathedral treasury, Chambéry (photo: Damien Lachas / Direction régionale des affaires culturelles Rhône-Alpes, Conservation régionale des monuments historiques). For the colour version, please refer to the plate section.

Variouly attributed to tenth- or eleventh-century Constantinople or to the thirteenth-century Latin Levant in recent scholarship, the diptych is a remarkable object, not least because of its sheer size. A large elephant tusk was needed to yield its two leaves that measure 28.1 x 12.7 cm and have a thickness of no less than 1.5 cm. This fact alone clearly attests to the considerable financial resources available to the object's commissioner. The diptych features a dense visual program, with figures and

architectural and other details rendered in high relief or completely detached from the ground, the resulting effect being one of rich chiaroscuro. The centerpiece of the left leaf is an enthroned Mother of God with the Infant Jesus flanked by the princes of the apostles, Peter and Paul, and two attendant angels. The selection of narrative scenes above focuses upon the miracles and ministry of Christ: the Transfiguration is in the semicircular field at the top, while Christ teaching in the Temple, the Healing of the Blind Man, and the Healing of Peter's Mother-in-Law occupy the horizontal zone below it. By contrast, the narrative scenes on the right leaf foreground the Passion and Resurrection of Christ: the badly damaged Crucifixion is at the top; the Entry into Jerusalem, the *Anastasis*, and Christ's appearance to the holy women in the garden – the so-called *Chairete* – are arranged in the zone below; and a large and busy scene of the Ascension occupies the center of the leaf. Assembled in the lowest section of the diptych, on both leaves, is a file of saints. Eight of them – John the Baptist, Nicholas, Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, Panteleimon, Demetrios, George, and Theodore – are depicted as standing figures underneath an arcade. The remaining saints are portrayed *en buste* in a series of intertwined medallions at the very bottom. In addition to the four evangelists, they include Akindynos, Patapios, Cosmas, Damian, and Niketas. All scenes and figures on the diptych are neatly labeled. Contributing to this profusion of texts is a dedicatory epigram incised around the two leaves.

- Ἐν ἀγκάλαις σε μητρός ὡς ἐπὶ θρόνου  
 χερουβικοῦ, παντουργὲ Δέσποτα, γράφω  
 τὰ πάντα τῆς σῆς ἱστορῶν παρουσίας  
 δι' ὧν βροτοὺς ἔσωσας ἐκ πάσης βλάβης  
 5 λόγῳ διώκων τὰς νόσους, Θεοῦ Λόγε,  
 καὶ τοῦ πάθους τὰ φρικτὰ καὶ πλήρη δέους  
 σταύρωσιν, ἐξέγερσιν αὐτεξούσιον,  
 εἰς οὐρανοὺς ἔπαρσιν ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ λόγον  
 αἰτῶν δι' ὧν ἔγραψα πρεσβεύειν χάρι<ι>ν  
 10 ῥαίκτηρ ὁ πιστὸς οἰκέτης πολλῶ πόθῳ.

I depict you, O Lord, Creator of all things, in the arms of your Mother, as if upon the throne of the cherubim, representing all the events of your coming <on earth>, through which you saved mortals from every harm, driving the ailments away, O Word of God, with your word, and the terrors of the Passion and the Crucifixion full of dread, the self-effected Resurrection, the Ascension into heaven that is beyond comprehension. I, *rhaiktōr*, your faithful servant, beseech <you>

through <the mediation of> those whom I have depicted for the sake of intercession with much desire.<sup>75</sup>

The epigram represents a prayer addressed to Christ by the commissioner of the diptychs, who is identified only by the office of *rhaiktōr* he held. Depending on the date assigned to the diptych, this information can be interpreted in two different ways. If a tenth- or eleventh-century date is accepted, the commissioner must have been a high-ranking courtier in Constantinople. Should we subscribe to the view that the diptych dates from the thirteenth century, the commissioner was most likely a Westerner living in Outremer, either an ecclesiastical official in charge of a Latin religious or charitable house or a civil administrator in the service of the Venetian Republic.<sup>76</sup> For the purpose at hand, the questions of chronology and the patron's identity are less relevant than the fact that the length, content, and physical layout of the epigram perfectly match the shape and iconography of the diptych. Each of the poem's ten lines occupies the length of one clearly defined section of the frame. The epigram begins on the left leaf, with the first line running along the semicircular border of the arched top. The verses continue around the leaf's rectangular frame, with each side of the frame accommodating exactly one line, in a sequence that was typical for Byzantine inscriptions displayed around rectangular fields: top–right–left–bottom.<sup>77</sup> The same arrangement is then repeated on the right leaf. In terms of their content, not only do the verses make direct reference to the imagery of the diptych, but they do so in a way that neatly corresponds to the distribution of individual scenes and figures on the object. Incised on the left leaf, the first half of the epigram points to the images carved on this leaf: the Virgin and Child (vv. 1–2) and the scenes of Christ's miracles and ministry (vv. 3–5). Similarly, the second part of the epigram (vv. 6–8) on the right leaf highlights the themes of Christ's Passion and Resurrection depicted there. The epigram ends with a reference to the saints assembled in the lowest section of the diptych (v. 9), whom the patron has introduced as his personal intercessors before Christ. It seems that, in

<sup>75</sup> It should be noted that my translation of line 9 significantly differs from the translations found in the scholarly works cited in the previous note. I take this line to refer specifically to the saints in the lowest section of the diptych (see p. 46).

<sup>76</sup> For the earlier date, see Cutler 2008; *BEIŪ* II, no. E120. For the later date, see Kiourtzian 2005; Jolivet-Lévy 2007; Kiourtzian 2009–10. On the Byzantine office of *rhaiktōr*, which seems to have disappeared after the eleventh century, see *ODB*, s.v. 'rhaiktōr' with further bibliography.

<sup>77</sup> On this sequence, see Follieri 1964; Papamastorakis 2007, 59–60; Bernard 2014, 83.

laying out the verses on the frames of the two leaves, considerable care has been taken to physically juxtapose, wherever possible, specific words and phrases and the images to which they refer. Note how the words σταύρωσιν (“Crucifixion”), ἐξέγερσιν (“Resurrection”), and εἰς οὐρανοῦς ἔπαρσιν (“Ascension into heaven”) are placed right next to the relevant scenes, or how the phrase δι’ ὧν ἔγραψα πρεσβεύειν χάρις (“through <the mediation of> those whom I have depicted for the sake of intercession”) on the left border of the right leaf descends toward the solemn file of these very intercessors. Overall, the synergy of text and image in the Chambéry diptych is such that the poet and the ivory carver employed by the anonymous *rhaiktōr* must have worked quite closely on this object. As it would appear, the composition of the verses and the design of the diptych went hand in hand.

We know too little about the processes and mechanisms of artistic patronage in Byzantium to reconstruct in any detail the exact nature of interactions and negotiations that took place within the triangle patron–poet–artist. Was the patron always the engine behind the creation of an inscribed object? Or could the poet play a more fundamental role in this enterprise, beyond providing appropriate verses for the object or even collaborating with the artist on its design? Our sources are silent on this account, but it is possible that, in some instances, the poet could act as a liaison between the object’s commissioner and its maker. Byzantine artists and intellectuals often moved in the same circles. The fourteenth-century scholar and bureaucrat Michael Gabras, for instance, wrote letters to a monk-painter by the name of Gabriel.<sup>78</sup> Gabras’ younger contemporary, the writer Manuel Raoul, seems to have shared a decades-long acquaintance, if not friendship, with Gastreas, a painter active in the Byzantine Peloponnese. Raoul commissioned an icon of the Dormition of the Virgin from the painter in a letter tentatively dated to *c.* 1360, in which he recalled how diligently Gastreas had studied and copied ancient icons, including those showing the Dormition, twenty-six years before.<sup>79</sup>

Particularly revealing in regard to the intermediary role that intellectuals could play in the field of artistic patronage and production is the correspondence of Maximos Planoudes. Several among Planoudes’ letters

<sup>78</sup> Gabras, *Letters*, nos. 263, 264, and 277.

<sup>79</sup> Raoul, *Letters*, no. 12. For an English translation of the letter and its date, see Mango 1972, 249–50.

allow us to trace the contours of an intriguing network that connected artists and men of letters with powerful aristocratic patrons through personal ties of friendship and service. A key figure in this network was Melchisedek Akropolites' relative by marriage, the *pinkernēs* Alexios Doukas Philanthropenos.<sup>80</sup> In 1293, this dashing young general was sent by Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos to Western Asia Minor to fight the Turks. His meteoric success on the battlefield accorded him a heroic status among the local Greek populace, oppressed by the enemy, and eventually led him to stage an abortive coup that ended with his arrest and blinding on Christmas in 1295. The exigencies of warfare with the Turks did not prevent Philanthropenos from commissioning artworks in Constantinople. With the assistance of Planoudes, who resided in the capital, the *pinkernēs* employed a certain goldsmith to manufacture precious-metal revetments for some icons. As Planoudes reported in a letter, this proved to be a bad choice.<sup>81</sup> After receiving one-third of the promised reward – which, unfortunately, went unspecified in the letter – the goldsmith had mysteriously disappeared without a trace; his whereabouts were unknown even to his wife. Planoudes was, therefore, forced to ship the unadorned icons off to Philanthropenos. “Should it be God’s will,” he wrote, “when we see each other, you yourself will show me <these icons> furnished with adornment [κόσμον] as a sign of your reverence for the divine.”<sup>82</sup> It is tempting to speculate whether the icons in question were works of the monk-painter Isaiah, another member of the network emerging from Planoudes’ correspondence.<sup>83</sup> An acquaintance of Melchisedek and the *pinkernēs* Alexios, Isaiah was a man of some eminence, as can be deduced from the fact that the title *kyr*, meaning “lord” or “master,” was accorded to him.<sup>84</sup> He appears to have been an amicable person, willing to pull strings on behalf of his fellow artists. One of Planoudes’ letters to Philanthropenos is essentially a recommendation letter for a friend of Isaiah’s.<sup>85</sup>

I write in regard to a monk-painter, a man excellent in art, irreproachable in character, moderate in spirit, someone who knows how to spread the word about a benefaction <received>. Although I had formerly been acquainted with this man, Lord Isaiah, who knows how to show affection

<sup>80</sup> On this figure, see *PLP*, no. 29752; Radić 1998; Taxides 2012, 97–116.

<sup>81</sup> Planoudes, *Letters*, no. 103. <sup>82</sup> Planoudes, *Letters*, 164.21–23.

<sup>83</sup> On Isaiah, see *PLP*, no. 6730; Pallas 1952. <sup>84</sup> Kontogiannopoulou 2012.

<sup>85</sup> Planoudes, *Letters*, no. 101.

to a fellow artist [φιλεῖν εἰδῶς τὸν ὁμότεχνον], introduced him <to me> and urged me to write to you on his behalf.<sup>86</sup>

Planoudes then proceeds to explain the matter at hand. Some of the relatives of the unnamed monk-painter were forced to leave their home in the otherwise unidentified area of Tempsis (περὶ τὴν Τέμψιν) and settle in the Maeander valley, which, in the wake of his spectacular victories, Philanthropenos set out to repopulate with Greeks. Planoudes asks that these people be allowed to return to their home. Whether the monk-painter was given an opportunity to demonstrate his artistic prowess to the general is not known.

Thanks to their proximity to members of the Empire's elite, Byzantine men of letters could and, as Planoudes' correspondence demonstrates, did act as intermediaries between artists and high-placed patrons. Hence it is not inconceivable that, at times, they could also take care of artistic commissions on behalf of their powerful protectors and friends. In the above-mentioned triangle of actors that took part in the process of creating inscribed artifacts, the poet may occasionally have been the man in charge.

## Epigrams and the viewer/reader

So far we have been concerned with the patronage and production of epigrams. Now we must turn to the questions of reception. Indeed, what kind of audiences did verses displayed on artifacts, monuments, and buildings address? How were such inscriptions read? Were there any specific occasions that called for the reading of epigrams? Were verse inscriptions necessarily read or could they engage their audiences in other ways?

On the most basic level, the readership of an epigram was determined by its setting. The verses displayed on the walls of great public churches could have been scrutinized by many, while those found, for instance, on a personal devotional object such as the Chambéry diptych or the cross-reliquary at Sinai spoke only to the chosen few who had the privilege of handling it. Written in an archaizing language, a form of Greek fairly

<sup>86</sup> Planoudes, *Letters*, 162.14–19: γράφω περὶ ζωγράφου τινὸς μοναχοῦ, ἀνδρὸς τὴν τέχνην ἀρίστου, τὸν τρόπον οὐ φαύλου, μετρίου τὸ φρόνημα, κηρύττειν εἰδότος εὐεργεσίαν. τοῦτον ἦγοντα καὶ πρότερον εἰς γνῶσιν ἔμοι ἔτι μᾶλλον καὶ ὁ κυρὸς Ἡσαίας συνέστησε φιλεῖν εἰδῶς τὸν ὁμότεχνον καὶ σοὶ με ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ γράφειν προὔτρεψατο. I have adopted the emendation τὸν ὁμότεχνον (l. 18) proposed by Wendel 1940, 432.

removed from the spoken idiom, and often embroidered with scriptural quotations, references to classical and patristic authors, and borrowings from hymnography, Byzantine epigrams were addressed primarily to an educated audience. Their reach, however, was much broader, as the communicative potential of epigrams was not limited to the linguistic register.

To begin with, not all verse inscriptions were meant to be actually read. The famous porphyry column of Constantine still bears an elegant dodecasyllable couplet commemorating its restoration at the behest of Manuel I Komnenos.<sup>87</sup>

[Τὸ θ]εῖον ἔργον ἐνθάδε φθαρὲν χρόνῳ  
καινοῖ Μανουήλ, [ε]ὐσεβῆς αὐτοκράτω[ρ].

Manuel, the pious emperor, restored this divine work, which time had defaced.

Inscribed on the column's capital, at a height of over 30 m above the street level, the couplet is illegible from the ground (Figures 1.7 and 1.8). Even though inlaid lead originally enhanced the visibility of the inscription, an inquisitive passerby would hardly have been able to decipher the letters. If this is the case, then, what was the purpose of the inscription? Was this pithy proclamation of imperial munificence designed for divine rather than human eyes?<sup>88</sup> Or did the inscription have a prophylactic function, ensuring the stability of the restored column?<sup>89</sup>

Confronted with such inscrutable inscriptions, one should bear in mind that in Byzantium publicly displayed texts had a powerful visual presence. Their significance and impact extended beyond basic linguistic communication. Several factors contributed to this. As a religion of the Incarnate Word of God propagated through a set of sacred texts, Christianity ensured that the Byzantines assigned a special place to the written word in their culture. Writing was associated with the sacred and perceived as a vehicle of truth and knowledge.<sup>90</sup> Besides, since the Empire of the New Rome was to a large extent a bureaucratic state, the proper functioning of which was predicated upon the production and circulation

<sup>87</sup> *BEIÜ* III, no. TR55. See also Mango 1951, 62; Janin 1964, 77–80; Müller-Wiener 1977, 255–57; Ousterhout 2014, esp. 314–17.

<sup>88</sup> On God as the ideal reader, see Lassus 1947, 260; James 2007b, 199.

<sup>89</sup> As suggested by Rhoby 2012a, 747. For different perspectives on inaccessible or concealed inscriptions, see Frese, Keil, and Krüger 2014.

<sup>90</sup> See, e.g., Cavallo 1994, esp. 54–62; Kessler 2006; Rapp 2007. Cf. also Wenzel 2000. For the role of books in Byzantine society and the related *mentalità libresca*, see also Cavallo 2007, esp. 176–83.



**Figure 1.7** Porphyry column of Constantine, Constantinople/Istanbul (photo: Pascal Sébah, c. 1870 / Suna and İnan Kıraç Foundation Photograph Collection)

of large quantities of written documents, writing was a quintessential index of power and authority in the Byzantine *mentalité*.<sup>91</sup> But the prestige enjoyed by the written word had another, no less significant facet. Writing was also connected with magic. Byzantine magical amulets commonly feature texts of different kind, including spells, invocations,

<sup>91</sup> The classic study remains Hunger 1984. See also Déroche 2006a.



**Figure 1.8** Detail of the porphyry column of Constantine with the dedicatory epigram of Manuel I Komnenos, Constantinople/Istanbul (photo: Robert Ousterhout)

and divine names, but also mysterious inscriptions in the form of clusters of unintelligible figures and letter-like signs known as *charaktēres*.<sup>92</sup> Such texts were considered inherently potent, capable of exerting a tangible impact in one's life by driving away demons, effecting cures, or securing protection from sorcery and other harms. Monumental epigraphy, too, harbored supernatural forces. In the so-called *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*, a compilation of stories, datable to the eighth century, about the monuments of Constantinople, ancient inscriptions figure not so much as epigraphic traces of the past, but as conveyors of cryptic and potentially dangerous messages.<sup>93</sup>

The deeply ingrained belief in the symbolic and mystical significance of the letters of the Greek alphabet further contributed the status and power of the written word. Bringing together several strands of pagan, Jewish, and Early Christian thought, this belief held that the letters were not simple conventional signs, but symbols pregnant with religious, cosmological, and other meanings, which may be uncovered by analyzing their visual form,

<sup>92</sup> The bibliography is extensive, but see Bonner 1950; Greenfield 1988, esp. 268–85; Spier 1993; Frankfurter 1994; Kotansky 1994; Foskolou 2014. On magic and the written word, see also Franklin 2002, 255–74.

<sup>93</sup> *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*, 84–86 (chap. 24), 88–90 (chap. 28), 140–46 (chaps. 64 and 65). See also Dagron 1984, 150–56; James 2007b, 198.

their place in the alphabet, and their numerical value.<sup>94</sup> Thus, according to the anonymous sixth-century treatise *On the Mystery of the Letters*, the letter Δ, for example, stands for the totality of the created world.<sup>95</sup> The hierarchy of the universe is encoded in the closed triangular form of this letter; its broad horizontal base represents the lower parts of the world – the earth and the waters above and below it – while its tent-like top points to the heavenly realm. The letter's triangular form moreover evokes the Holy Trinity, and its numerical value – four – signifies the four elements, the four cardinal points, the four winds, the four seasons, the four great rivers, the four humors of the body, as well as the four evangelists.

Verse inscriptions displayed on Byzantine artifacts and buildings partook of the multifaceted power of the written word. For an illiterate or semi-literate audience, incapable of grasping the message of an epigram, the extralinguistic connotations of writing would provide a basic frame of reference for accessing the inscribed text.<sup>96</sup> In a sense, to fathom the message of an epigram, the viewer did not necessarily have to read it. Byzantine verse inscriptions possessed what Brigitte Bedos-Rezak has called in a different context “non-literate legibility.”<sup>97</sup> Their communicative potential resided not only in their verbal message, but also in their letterforms, graphic structure and material fabric, the placement and spatial arrangement of the text, as well as in the interplay between the text and its physical context. We shall explore these aspects in greater detail in Chapter 4. For the moment, one example should suffice to illustrate the crucial role played by the visual presentation of epigrams in the construal of their meaning.

The church of Saint Nicholas near the village of Platsa in the Mani in the Peloponnese preserves a long dedicatory inscription in verse (Figures 1.9 and 1.10; see also Figures 4.15 and 4.16).<sup>98</sup> The inscription informs us that this unassuming three-aisled basilica with a dome was restored and decorated with frescoes in 1337/38 by the *tzaousios* Constantine Spanes, the military governor of the highland region around Mount Taygetos, at

<sup>94</sup> Drucker 1995, 49–92; Ierodiakonou 2006; Bandt 2007; Maayan-Fanar 2011, 113–25; Kalvesmaki 2013; Lauritzen 2013.

<sup>95</sup> Bandt 2007, 116–24.

<sup>96</sup> See Lauxtermann 2003, 271–84. On literacy in Byzantium, see Browning 1978; Mullett 1990; Oikonomides 1995a; Cavallo 2007; and the studies collected in Holmes and Waring 2002 and Mondrain 2006.

<sup>97</sup> Bedos-Rezak 2011, 22.

<sup>98</sup> On the church of Saint Nicholas, see Mouriki 1975. For the inscription, see Feissel and Philippidis-Braat 1985, no. 70; *BEÜ* I, no. 135, with further bibliography. We shall revisit this inscription in Chapter 4.



**Figure 1.9** Sanctuary apse with the *Deësis* and a section of the dedicatory epigram of the *tzaousios* Constantine Spanes, 1337/38, church of Saint Nicholas, Platsa in the Mani (photo: Michalis Kappas)



**Figure 1.10** Detail of the dedicatory epigram of the *tzaousios* Constantine Spanes, 1337/38, church of Saint Nicholas, Platsa in the Mani (photo: Michalis Kappas)

that time inhabited by a Hellenized Slavic tribe known as the Melingoi.<sup>99</sup> Painted in black in accented capital letters, the inscription runs in a horizontal band around the nave. It starts on the north wall, at a height of about 2.60 m above the ground, continues into the sanctuary, and ends on the south wall. In all likelihood, few of the worshippers flocking to this remote provincial shrine would have been able to read the verses, which in an elevated and rather tortuous language celebrate Spanes' renovation of the church. But to an illiterate audience, the inscription's visual dimension effectively compensated for the lack of legibility. The expressiveness of the lettering, with its concatenation of strong vertical strokes, does not fail to impress the eye. Besides, the very manner in which the verses are displayed on the walls would have allowed the viewer to set them apart from countless prose dedications encountered in other churches of the Mani and elsewhere, which are typically located either above the main entrance or in the sanctuary apse.<sup>100</sup> What is more, the verses are not simply arranged in a linear fashion. The horizontal band they occupy represents a painted imitation of a cornice carved in stone. The slightly darker strip in the band's upper part is meant to create the illusion that the letters of the inscription are inserted, if not carved, between two protruding horizontal moldings, so that the one above them casts a shadow. Carved marble cornices of this kind, bearing poetic inscriptions, were a feature of great Constantinopolitan churches such as those of Saint Polyuktos and Saints Sergios and Bakchos (Figure 1.11).<sup>101</sup> In the provincial Peloponnese, the painted rendition of such a cornice must have been something of a curiosity evoking associations with the splendor of metropolitan monuments. Thus the communicative power of the dedicatory epigram in the church of Saint Nicholas was not limited to its verbal content, but also embraced the visual presentation of the text. A visitor to Spanes' foundation did not have to actually read the verses encircling the church interior in order to grasp their message. The *tzaousios* – it was evident – was a man of means, ambition, and refined taste.

If a literate viewer examining an edifice or artifact was curious enough to read the verses inscribed upon it, he or she would most likely do it aloud. As has been convincingly argued, silent reading was not a standard practice

<sup>99</sup> On Constantine Spanes, see *PLP*, no. 26449; Avramea 1974, 296–300. On the Melingoi, see also Kougeas 1950.

<sup>100</sup> See, e.g., Kalopissi-Verti 1992, esp. 24.

<sup>101</sup> For Saint Polyuktos, see Harrison 1989; Connor 1999 with further bibliography. For Saints Sergios and Bakchos, see Croke 2006 with further bibliography.



**Figure 1.11** Detail of the dedicatory epigram of Justinian I and Theodora, mid-520s, church of Saints Sergios and Bakchos, Constantinople/Istanbul (photo: author)

in Byzantium. From monumental epigraphy to books and letters, the written word was often, if not normally, read *viva voce*.<sup>102</sup> In the case of verse inscriptions, oral delivery is virtually a function of their poetic form. To comprehend and fully appreciate the rhythmical structure of an accentual meter such as the dodecasyllable, one has to hear it. Thus it is no accident that, in a poem addressed to a patron, Manuel Philes should call attention to his poetic skill in the following manner:<sup>103</sup>

ἐγὼ δέ σοι πρέποντας ἀθροίσας μίτους  
 χλαμύδα λαμπρὰν τεχνικῶν πλέξω κρότων,  
 ἦν οὐδ' ὅ πᾶς δῆπουθεν ἐκτρίψει χρόνος.  
 (vv. 6–8)

Having strung together threads fitting for you, I shall skillfully knit a splendid cloak of beats/rhythms, which not even all of time could destroy.

<sup>102</sup> Hunger 1989, esp. 125–29; Papalexandrou 2001; Lauxtermann 2003, 55–57; Cavallo 2007, esp. 61–72; Papalexandrou 2007; Reinsch 2008; Agosti 2010b; Cavallo 2012, 12–16. For an illuminating account of the socio-cultural embeddedness of reading practices in the ancient world that moves beyond the long-standing debate over silent vs. audible reading, see Johnson 2010.

<sup>103</sup> Philes, *Carmina* I, 195 (no. XV).

Based on the trope of text as textile, Philes' comparison of his verses to a garment fashioned from *krotai*, meaning "beats" or "rhythms," undoubtedly alludes to their vocal recitation.<sup>104</sup> In Byzantium, poetry was typically written with a view to oral delivery and experienced as performed speech. The same holds true for metrical inscriptions. Seemingly mute in their material fixity, inscribed verses would have been, quite literally, given a voice each time an inquisitive viewer took the trouble to recite them. Hence, numerous references to the ear, mouth, lips, and hearing in Byzantine epigrams should not be understood as merely figurative. They are indicators of the actual reading practice.<sup>105</sup>

At times, epigrams make explicit reference to oral performance. A case in point is an epitaph composed by Philes to accompany a funerary portrait of a certain *prōtoierakaria* Melane.<sup>106</sup> Following a device common in funerary inscriptions, the poet presents the dead woman directly addressing the viewer.

ἴνα δὲ πᾶς ἄνθρωπος ἐντεῦθεν μάθῃ  
 σκιὰν θεωρῶν μὴ πτοεῖσθαι τὸν βίον,  
 10 τὰ κατ' ἑμαυτὴν ζωγραφῶ δὴ σοι, ξένε.  
 δανείσομαι γὰρ ἀπὸ τῶν ζώντων λόγον,  
 μικροῦ πνοῆς δύναμιν ἐγγέαντά μοι.

So that, by beholding a shadow [i.e., Melane's portrait], everyone may learn from this not to be desirous of the <earthly> life, I paint for you, O stranger, a portrait of myself; for I shall borrow <the faculty of> speech from the living, which nearly endows me with the power of breathing.

In an extended *memento mori*, Melane then proceeds to recount the facts of her bygone life to the viewer standing at her tomb. Her monologue constitutes a verbal self-portrait. It is notable that, in the quoted excerpt, Philes uses the verb *ζωγραφέω* – literally meaning "to paint from life" – in reference to Melane's depiction of herself. This discursive painting "from life" is implicitly contrasted with the pictorial portrait of the

<sup>104</sup> For the trope of text as textile in the Greek tradition, see Bergren 1983; Assaël 2002; Wagner-Hasel 2006. On this trope in Philes, see Caramico 2013. For the use of the word *krotos* in the sense of "rhythm" in Byzantine rhetoric, see Lauxtermann 1998, 24–25.

<sup>105</sup> See, e.g., Kallikles, *Poems*, no. 26, v. 8; Philes, *Carmina* I, 317 (no. CXXV, v. 17); Philes, *Carmina* II, 239 (no. CCXXXIV, vv. 7–8); Xanthopoulos, *Poems*, no. 8, vv. 6–7; *BEIŪ* II, no. Te9, v. 1; *BEIŪ* III, no. GR20, vv. 2–3.

<sup>106</sup> Philes, *Carmina* I, 87–88 (no. CLXXX).

deceased, which the poet disparages as a mere shadow. What breathes life into Melane's verbal self-portrait is the voice borrowed from the viewer. By reading aloud Melane's monologue, he or she would literally lend voice to the dead woman and, by implication, animate the speechless image displayed at her tomb.<sup>107</sup>

The oral delivery of epigrams could take place at any given moment, essentially whenever a literate viewer approaching an artifact or a monument was sufficiently intrigued to read the verses inscribed upon it. Certain occasions and venues, however, seem to have been particularly well suited for the recital of epigrams. To reconstruct such performative situations is no easy task, as the available evidence is sparse and for the most part circumstantial. Nonetheless, some general propositions can be advanced.

To identify the moments when an epigram was likely to have been read aloud, one must, of course, consider its function and physical setting. In the case of epitaphs, for instance, it is reasonable to assume that their vocal performance was tied to the ritual commemoration of the dead.<sup>108</sup> Byzantine custom dictated that, following the burial of a person and the forty-day postmortem period during which, according to tradition, the soul would gradually separate from the body, relatives and friends of the deceased would regularly assemble at his or her tomb in remembrance, most notably on the anniversary of the person's death.<sup>109</sup> These commemorative gatherings furnished an ideal context for the recitation of the verses displayed at the tomb. Assuming that Philes' epitaph on Melane was inscribed next to her funerary portrait, which is by no means certain, the performative animation of this mute image by the voice borrowed from the viewer is likely to have coincided with and was an aspect of the commemoration of the departed *prōtoierakaria*.

The solemn performance of epigrams appears to have taken place in conjunction with annual commemorative rites in other contexts too. The manuscript record preserves an anonymous poem, 145 dodecasyllable lines in length, on the monastery of Christ *Pantokratōr* in Constantinople founded by the emperor John II Komnenos and his wife Irene-Piroska.<sup>110</sup> Dwelling upon the physical structure and organization of this imperial

<sup>107</sup> For the epitaph as λαλιά ("speech") and *logos* of the portrayed grave-dweller, cf. Kallikles, *Poems*, no. 19, vv. 6–8.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Rhoby 2012a, 741.

<sup>109</sup> Koukoulos 1948–57, 4:208–11; Velkovska 2001, 39–42; Brooks 2002, 182–243.

<sup>110</sup> Moravcsik 1923, 43–47; Vassis 2013, 203–20. See also Hörandner 2006.

establishment, the poem describes in considerable detail its splendidly appointed churches, the monks' quarters, its lush garden and circuit of walls, its hospital and old-age home. The verses lavish praise upon the imperial couple, highlighting in particular the role of the empress – already dead at the time – in founding the monastery. The poem's title indicates that this lengthy text was recited annually on August 4, the day when the official inauguration of the *Pantokratōr* was commemorated.<sup>111</sup> Thanks to a sixteenth-century source, we know that at least the beginning of the poem, and most likely all of its 145 verses, once adorned a wall in the monastic complex.<sup>112</sup> This inscription must have served as a focal point in the course of the festivities marking the monastery's inauguration day. We may assume that every year, on August 4, a group of monks and visitors would congregate in front of the inscribed verses to listen to their recitation. Similar ceremonial readings of dedicatory epigrams could have taken place in other monastic houses and ecclesiastical institutions in commemoration of their founders and benefactors.<sup>113</sup>

Different contexts could generate different performative situations. Turning to epigrams inscribed on objects intended for liturgical or paraliturgical use, one may reasonably ask whether their oral delivery was occasionally integrated into the ritual. Consider, for instance, the now-lost steatite *panagiarion* of Alexios Komnenos Angelos from the Panteleimon monastery on Mount Athos (Figure 1.12).<sup>114</sup> This intricately carved dish was used for the so-called Elevation of the *Panagia*, a paraliturgical rite in honor of the Virgin, which involved the sanctification of a piece of bread known as *παναγία* (“all-holy”) after one of the more common Marian appellations in Greek.<sup>115</sup> The core elements of the rite were quite simple. To sanctify the bread, the celebrant invoked the name of the Holy Trinity and appealed to the help and intercession of the Mother of God while lifting – and hence, “elevating” – the bread on his fingertips. Believed

<sup>111</sup> The title reads: Τῇ αὐτῇ ἡμέρᾳ τελοῦνται τὰ ἐγκαίνια τοῦ περικαλλοῦς καὶ θεοῦ ναοῦ τῆς βασιλικῆς καὶ παντοκρατορικῆς μονῆς τοῦ Παντοκράτορος Σωτῆρος Χριστοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἡμῶν (“On the same day [i.e., August 4] is celebrated the feast of the consecration of the very beautiful and divine church of the imperial and almighty monastery of the *Pantokratōr*, Christ the Savior, our God”).

<sup>112</sup> Rhoby 2003b; *BEIÜ* I, no. 214.

<sup>113</sup> The subject of commemoration and the reading of dedicatory epigrams will receive a more sustained treatment in Chapter 5.

<sup>114</sup> Kondakov 1902, 222–25; Kalavrezou-Maxeiner 1985, 83–85, 87, 206–8 (no. 132); Piatnitsky 2000; *BEIÜ* II, nos. St2–St3.

<sup>115</sup> On this rite and the vessels used for its celebration, see von der Goltz 1905, 57–65; Yiannias 1972; Ryndina 1994; Sterligova 2008b; Drpić 2011.



**Figure 1.12** Steatite *panagiaron* of Alexios Komnenos Angelos, fourteenth century, formerly in the Panteleimon monastery, Mount Athos (photo: after Kondakov 1902, pl. XXXI)

to secure the Virgin's protection, the sanctified *panagia* was consumed just like the Eucharist. Indeed, partaking of the *panagia* could even serve as a substitute for the Holy Communion. Significantly, the rite of the Elevation was not a prerogative of the clergy, as even the laity could perform it. During the Palaiologan era in particular, special containers, or *panagiaria*, used for the celebration of the rite appear to have become quite popular as personal devotional instruments among members of the lay elite. The steatite dish from the Panteleimon monastery is one of the more exquisite representatives of this category of objects.

The *panagiaron* features a medallion with the Virgin and Child in the center surrounded by a row of prophets, each with an unfurled scroll in his hands, in an arrangement that curiously recalls the decoration of a church dome. Complementing the figural imagery of the dish are two metrical

inscriptions, both meticulously and painstakingly carved rather than incised – a feature that in and of itself contributes to the object's preciousness. The epigram encircling the central medallion voices a plea on behalf of one Alexios Komnenos Angelos, the original owner or possibly donor of the *panagiarion*.

Ἄνανδρε μήτερ, παρθένε βρεφοτρόφε  
Κομνηνὸν Ἀλέξιον Ἄγγελον σκέποις.

O Mother without a husband, O Virgin nourishing an infant, may you protect Alexios Komnenos Angelos.

The second epigram running along the lobed border evokes the imagery, materiality, and ritual function of the object.

Λειμῶν φυτὰ τε καὶ τρισάκτινος σέλας·  
λειμῶν ὁ λίθος, φυτὰ κηρύκων φάλαγξ,  
τρία τρισαυγῆ Χριστός, ἄρτος, παρθένος·  
κόρη δανείζει σάρκα τῷ Θεοῦ λόγῳ,  
5 ἄρτῳ δ' ὁ Χριστὸς προσνέμει σωτηρίαν  
Κομνηναγγέλῳ καὶ ῥῶσιν Ἀλεξίῳ.

A meadow and plants and light with three rays. The stone is the meadow, the phalanx of prophets are the plants, the three beams are Christ, the bread, and the Virgin. The Maiden lends flesh to the *Logos* of God, and Christ by means of bread distributes salvation and strength to Alexios Komnenos Angelos.

Prompted by the green color of steatite, the anonymous poet has transformed the *panagiarion* into a vision of a verdant meadow bathed in a mysterious light. Presenting the carved dish as a visual enigma, the verses encourage the viewer to approach it with feelings of wonder and awe. What is significant for our purpose is that this encounter with the object is explicitly envisioned as taking place within the ritual context. The verses assume that the viewer sees a piece of bread, the *panagia*, inside the dish. This indicates that the optimal moment for the reading of the epigram was during or immediately after a performance of the Elevation. Of course, it could be argued that the reference to bread in the text is a generic one, intended simply to highlight the object's function. But the insistence on the presence of the *panagia* inside the dish could also be taken to signal that the two inscriptions were integrated into the ritual. The recitation of these verses would not only enhance the solemnity of the Elevation; it would also personalize the rite by adding to it poetic pronouncements on behalf of

Alexios Komnenos Angelos. If this individual was the first user of the *panagiarion*, as seems reasonable to assume, then the message of the inscriptions would have been sounded in his own voice.

Inscribed devotional artifacts designed for personal use seem to have invited such privately staged performances. It is easy to imagine, for instance, the anonymous owner of the Chambéry diptych addressing his prayer to Christ in the words of the epigram incised on the frames of the diptych's ivory leaves (Plate 2, Figure 1.6). But what about artifacts – icons, reliquaries, textile hangings, and the like – donated to religious houses? Did any particular occasion call for the reading of metrical texts placed upon them? One obvious possibility is the moment of the presentation of the gift. Although no such presentation is described in the sources, it stands to reason that this event could have been staged as a small ceremony in which the donor or his or her representative would read the inscription before an audience. Alternatively, the presentation of the gift could have been a more private affair, conducted in front of an icon of the holy figure to whom the gift was offered. Since dedicatory epigrams often take the form of a personal prayer addressed to Christ, the Virgin Mary, or a saint, their recitation may well have been staged for the eyes and ears of the gift's sacred recipient, who would attend the ceremony through the medium of his or her image.

As Foteini Spingou has argued, performative epigrams in the narrow sense – that is, epigrams that appear to have been composed to be recited rather than inscribed – were likely delivered following the same or similar scenarios.<sup>116</sup> If they accompanied gifts, be they religious or secular, they could have been performed at the moment of the formal presentation of the gift. In cases when the donor was unable to present the gift in person, the performative epigram escorting the gift could be sent in a letter and recited upon its receipt. Spingou tentatively suggests that, in some instances, the recited text may even have been copied on a piece of paper and placed next to or inside the donated object. Thereby, the text's link with the object would acquire a more permanent, material form.

An important parallel for the ceremonial performances of epigrams – both inscriptional and performative in the narrow sense – postulated here is provided by the genre of recited metrical prologues to homilies. This genre of Byzantine poetry encompasses poems composed to introduce the

<sup>116</sup> Spingou 2012, esp. 124–25, 159–77.

public reading of homilies and occasionally hagiographical texts, too, in the course of religious services and feast-day celebrations in churches and monasteries.<sup>117</sup> The performative function of these poems is clearly indicated by characteristic apostrophes to the officiating priest – σὺ δ' ἐπευλόγει, θύτα (“And you, priest, give blessing!”) is a common formula – with which many of them end. Following the delivery of such a poetic introduction, the priest would give his blessing, and the recitation of the main text could begin. Metrical prologues are strikingly similar to performative epigrams, as defined by Spingou. Not only were these two categories of texts written specifically for oral presentation, but they also functioned as poetic *parerga*. Rather than being autonomous literary pieces, they accompanied other entities – physical objects in the case of performative epigrams, texts in the case of metrical prologues.

The manuscript record yields considerable evidence that, on certain occasions, the composition and performance of epigrams coincided. Philes’ poetic corpus contains a poem devoted to a ring that voices the same kind of sternly moralizing view of gold jewelry as the couplets the poet penned for the ring of Michael Senachereim Monomachos.<sup>118</sup> What is unusual about this poem is that each of its twenty-five dodecasyllable verses represents a complete, self-contained poetic statement which could readily serve as a one-line metrical inscription on a ring; in only one instance are two consecutive verses combined to form a couplet (vv. 7–8). This oddly disjunctive concatenation of what are essentially independent epigrams did not originate as an extensive set of trial pieces, written to order and subsequently strung together, but rather as a demonstration of the poet’s virtuosity. This is indicated by the title attached to the poem, which reads: Εἰς δακτύλιον αὐθωρόν, literally meaning “<Verses> on a ring <composed> on the spot” or “instantaneously.” The poem, in other words, was improvised.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>117</sup> Komines 1966, 42–44; Antonopoulou 2010.

<sup>118</sup> Philes, *Carmina* II, 191–92 (no. CLXVIII).

<sup>119</sup> For the use of the term αὐθωρόν to signal literary improvisation, cf. the title of a poem by John Tzetzes published by Pétridēs 1903, 569: Στίχοι αὐθωροὶ καὶ πάντα ἀμελέτητοι γεγονότες κατὰ τε τοῦ Σκυλίτζη καὶ Γρηγορίου τοῦ βασιλικοῦ γραμματικοῦ ἐκείνου, εἰπόντων ἐκείνων μὴ δύνασθαι τὸν Τζέτζην στιχίζειν τι γενναῖον καὶ ἀξίεπαινον· οὐς ἅμα τῷ ἀκοῦσαι τῆ ὀρθοπνοίᾳ καίτοι συνεχόμενος ἔσχεδίασε, γράψαντος τούτους τοῦ καὶ τὸ μήνυμα εἰπόντος τοῦ ψόγου (“Verses composed on the spot and completely without preparation against Skylitzes and the late imperial secretary Gregory, when they said that Tzetzes was unable to produce anything noble and praiseworthy in verse. As soon as he heard this, he improvised them even while continuing to breathe normally, while the messenger who had spoken the insult wrote them down” [trans. Magdalino 2012, 31, with minor modifications]). Cf. also the title of a poem improvised by a contemporary writer, Leo Megistos, cited below n. 123.

The ability to produce elevated discourse extemporaneously, either in verse or in prose, was a skill highly valued by the Byzantines.<sup>120</sup> Judging by the number of his poems that are described in the appended titles as having been delivered *authōron*, Philes was a master of improvisation. Most of these literary works were recited in religious and ceremonial contexts and include metrical prologues to sermons and commentaries on scriptural passages as well as solemn addresses to the emperor on the occasion of feast-day celebrations.<sup>121</sup> Whether they were truly improvised on the spot or drafted beforehand, in anticipation of their public delivery, and to what extent their present form is the result of the subsequent reworking of the original offhand compositions is ultimately less important than the fact that Philes was given to parading his dazzling literary skill in impromptu performances. It is significant that the poet's improvisations occasionally concerned works of art. One was, for instance, inspired by an image of a lion depicted ἐν τῇ γῆ, that is, "on the ground," most likely a late antique floor mosaic, perhaps similar to the mosaic of the Striding Lion from Antioch (Figure 1.13).<sup>122</sup>

Ψυχὴν σταθερὰν εὐτυχῶν ὁ ζωγράφος  
 ἔγραψε καὶ λέοντα μὴ δειλιάσας·  
 καινὸν μὲν οὖν καὶ τοῦτο, πλὴν τό γε πλέον,  
 ὅτι πνοὴν τίθησι μικροῦ τῷ τύπῳ  
 5 τὸν θῆρα κινῶν τῇ γραφῇ πεπηγμένον.

Being fortunate to have a steadfast spirit, the painter has depicted a lion without fear. This is, indeed, strange; but what is even stranger is that he almost endows the image with life [literally, 'breath'], stirring up the beast held fast by means of painting.

<sup>120</sup> Literary improvisation in Byzantium has yet to receive the attention it warrants. See Hunger 1989, 127; Cavallo 2007, 78; Magdalino 2012, 31, 34–35; Pizzone 2014b, 10–12.

<sup>121</sup> Philes, *Carmina* I, 118–19 (no. CCXXIV), 379–80 (no. CCX); *Carmina* II, 27–34 (no. XIII), 71–72 (no. XXIX), 136 (no. LXXI), 154 (no. CXI), 158 (no. CXVII), 195–96 (no. CLXXXIV), 204–205 (no. CXCIII), 209–10 (no. CXCVIII), 212–16 (no. CCIII), 235 (no. CCXXII), 235–36 (no. CCXXIV), 236 (no. CCXXV), 236 (no. CCXXVI), 349–51 (no. VII.43). *Carmina* II, 210–11 (no. CXCIX) is a satirical poem on the Georgian military leader Chatzikes (*PLP*, no. 30721), improvised in the presence of the emperor Andronikos II.

<sup>122</sup> Braounou-Pietsch 2010, 107–108 (no. 48). The indication that the poem was improvised by Philes occurs in a fourteenth-century codex from the library of the *Metochion* of the Holy Sepulcher in Athens (Ms. 351, fol. 178v), now in the National Library of Greece; here the title attached to the poem reads: Εἰς λέοντα ἐζωγραφημένον αὐθωρόν ("<Verses> on the depiction of a lion <composed> on the spot"). The same title is found in a seventeenth-century manuscript from Bucharest (Biblioteca Academiei Române, Ms. 410, fol. 18r). See Karathanases 1980, 390. Another poem by Philes on the same subject (Braounou-Pietsch 2010, 121–22 [no. 59]) was also improvised. For the mosaic of the Striding Lion, see Levi 1947, 1: 321–23, 2: pl. LXXIV a; Campbell 1988, 29 (no. IV A 11), pls. 84–85.



Figure 1.13 Mosaic of the Striding Lion, fifth century, The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore (photo: Mitro Hood / The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore)

This playful poetic variation on the theme of the lifelikeness of art could easily pass as a verse inscription attached to a naturalistic representation of a lion as much as the individual lines of the *authōron*-composed poem on a ring could be imagined displayed on actual pieces of jewelry; in both instances, Philes was improvising epigrams. But what was the context for such epigrammatic exercises? Did they, perhaps, take place in the presence of a prospective patron as a vivid proof of the poet's mastery of the genre? This is certainly a possibility. When an aspiring writer by the name of Leo Megistos made obeisance to the *megas hetaireiarchēs* George Palaiologos with a view to entering this magnate's service, he was subjected to a test: to demonstrate his credentials, Leo was ordered to improvise a poem on a stone relief with a depiction of the Muses, presumably a piece of ancient

sculpture in Palaiologos' possession.<sup>123</sup> The epigrams improvised by Philes may well have served a similar purpose as a kind of examination essays. It is equally possible, however, that the poet's extemporaneous versifying took place before a small audience of discerning patrons, fellow-writers, or friends. It is not difficult to imagine a group of art lovers, gathered to admire a tessellated pavement in an aristocratic residence or, perhaps, in the imperial palace, which the poet would regale by reciting a few off-the-cuff verses on the mosaic image of a ferocious lion displayed under their feet.

Such an impromptu performance would have resembled those literary recitals to which Byzantine authors refer as *theatra*.<sup>124</sup> This rather flexible term designates a range of performative events and venues, from solemn declamations held at court or delivered in a church to more private literary gatherings in the houses of the aristocracy, presided over by a sophisticated patron of letters, to informal reading circles of intellectuals and school-mates. As a social institution, *theatron* played a key role in the production and reception of highbrow literature in medieval Byzantium. While, in essence, the recitation and discussion of literary texts was their primary purpose, Byzantine rhetorical *theatra* were not reading clubs in the modern sense. Rather, they were quite vivacious, colorful assemblies with a great deal of shouting and booing, clapping of hands and stamping of feet, sometimes accompanied by songs and music. With an affectation befitting the cultural exclusivity of these gatherings, some authors even compared them to Bacchic orgies and Corybantic mysteries.<sup>125</sup> Rhetorical "theater" was a natural setting for the performance of improvised discourse. We know, for example, that Michael Italikos made a show of his

<sup>123</sup> Lampsidis 1997. The circumstances that led to the composition of the poem are spelled out in the title: Στίχοι τοῦ αὐτοῦ Λέοντος γεγονότες αὐθωροὶ κατὰ πρόσταξιν τοῦ πανσεβάστου ἐκείνου λόγῳ δοκιμῆς, ὅτε προσεκύνησεν ἐκείνον ἐπὶ τῷ δουλεύειν, ἐν λίθῳ φερουσίῃ τῆν τῶν μουσῶν στήλωσιν λαξευτικῶς καὶ τὴν τῆς Καλλιόπης γύμνωσιν, θαυμαστὴν οὖσαν τῆ τοῦ τεχνίτου λαξεύσει ("Verses of the same Leo composed on the spot at the command of the late *pansebastos* as a test, when Leo made obeisance to that man in the hope of entering his service, in front of a stone relief with a depiction of the Muses and the denudement of Calliope, a marvelous work on account of the artist's carving"). Leo evidently passed the test, since we know that he later served as secretary to George Palaiologos. As Magdalino 1993, 355–56, has noted, Leo's aristocratic employer is probably to be identified with the art lover and patron of letters from the Palaiologos family whose house was frequented by Constantine Manasses and several other literati. On Leo Megistos and George Palaiologos, see also Lampsidis 1999.

<sup>124</sup> On *theatra* or *sylogoi*, as they are also called, in Byzantium, see Hunger 1978, 1: 210–11; Mullett 1984; Magdalino 1993, 335–56; Medvedev 1993; Cavallo 2007, 73–86; Marciniak 2007; Toth 2007; Stone 2010; Gaul 2011, esp. 17–53.

<sup>125</sup> Medvedev 1993, 233.

eloquence by extemporaneously delivering a speech in honor of his patroness, Irene Doukaina, widow of Alexios I Komnenos, in a *theatron* held by the empress.<sup>126</sup> The improvisation of epigrams would be perfectly at home at such a venue. Indeed, one could go a step further and argue that the recitation of epigrams in general, not just improvised verses, may occasionally have been staged in a *theatron*. Spingou has already made this suggestion with regard to specifically performative pieces.<sup>127</sup> Granted, no Byzantine source that I am aware of mentions the recitation of epigrams in a *theatron*. But this scenario seems plausible. As we have seen, Maximos Planoudes in his letter to Melchisedek Akropolites makes an allusion to the future critical assessment of his hexameters on the icon of the Last Judgment, which may well have been pronounced in a *theatron* frequented by the addressee. It is perhaps not accidental that in the opening line of the first epigram on the icon, the one devoted to the vision of the heavenly tribunal presided over by Christ, Planoudes uses the word *theatron*: ὦ κρίσις, ὦ στάσις, ὦ φοβερώτατον αὖ τὸ θέατρον (“Judgment! Assembly! Formidable spectacle [literally, ‘theater’]!”). By the choice of this word, Planoudes quite possibly implies in a playful fashion that, just as every human soul will be judged at the eschatological *theatron*, so will his hexameters on the icon receive critical appraisal at a no less terrifying tribunal consisting of Melchisedek’s learned friends.

The evidence regarding the specific performative situations in which epigrams were or could have been recited is admittedly too sparse to allow for much certainty. The foregoing discussion has accordingly yielded hypotheses rather than firm conclusions. What seems certain, however, is that the act of reading an epigram was often a performative event, sometimes communal in nature, in which a text inscribed on an object or written on a page would come alive as speech, a dynamic flow of sounded rhythmical lines. Whether written in ink or carved, hammered, embroidered, or painted, epigrammatic verse was experienced both visually and aurally. It appealed to the eye and the ear alike.

<sup>126</sup> Italikos, *Orations*, no. 15.      <sup>127</sup> Spingou 2012, 170–73.