

The architecture of ekphrasis: construction and context of Paul the Silentiary's poem on Hagia Sophia*

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The written or spoken word can contribute to the appreciation of a work of art in three distinct, though by no means mutually exclusive, ways. First, it can comment directly on the artefact. Second, it can fulfil a parallel function, by conveying a similar message or using broadly comparable techniques. Third, words can physically accompany the artist's work, either in the form of an inscription, or in the form of a recitation. We are so used to taking, and dealing with, the first of these approaches, that of commentary, that we have been slow to develop proper criteria for evaluating the other two. This has led, in the past, to some imaginative theorising about Byzantine aesthetics¹ and, in reaction, some deflationary statements about the quality of Byzantine aesthetic criticism.² There is now, however, a growing, if still implicit, recognition that the relationship of the verbal and the visual in Byzantine society was not *primarily* one of commentary, but one of parallel function and physical accompaniment.³ Byzantine literary responses to art pointed in the same direction as art; they did not confront it, or cut into it in order to lay bare its anatomy.

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1. G. Mathew, *Byzantine Aesthetics* (London 1963).

2. C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1972) xiv-xv.

3. The recognition is implicit, above all, in the approaches of three recent studies: H. Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium* (Princeton 1981); S. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley 1981); R. Cormack, *Writing in Gold, Byzantine Society and its Icons* (London 1985) esp. chap. 2.

In the light of this recognition, it is time to take a fresh look at the Byzantine literary genre which did deal explicitly with works of art, among other things. Was ekphrasis, or rhetorical description, an effective medium for the literary appreciation of art?⁴ Was it programmed simply to obey its own rules, or was it ultimately responsible to the object it described? Henry Maguire has provided part of the answer to this question, by studying the interaction between truth and convention in ekphrasis of painting.⁵ In this paper, we propose to look at two other aspects of artistic ekphrasis which have never been systematically examined, although they are equally fundamental to its understanding. One is the way in which ekphrasises were constructed. The other is the context in which they were constructed. We shall concentrate mainly on descriptions of churches, and on one description in particular: Paul the Silentiary's ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia.⁶ Such concentration is recommended by both the complexity and the intrinsic importance of the subject matter.

If the structure of ekphrasis was imposed by the rules of the genre, we might expect to find some indication of this in the ancient manuals of *Progymnasmata*, or preliminary rhetorical exercises.⁷ Yet these manuals do not prescribe a straitjacket of convention: on the contrary, they insist that ekphrasis must be flexible, varied, and circumstantial; that its virtues are clarity (*saphêneia*) and vividness (*enargeia*), and that it should "genuinely imitate the things being described". Certain prescriptions were, it is true, capable of being turned into standardised topoi. One is the order of description recommended by Nikolaos Rhetor and Aphthonios — one must take first things first and last things last, describing people or representations of persons from the head down, and objects in the following sequence: what is before them,

4. On the genre in general, see P. Friedländer, *Johannes von Gaza und Paulus Silentiarius* (Leipzig/Berlin 1912) 1-103, esp. 83ff; G. Downey in *RAC* IV (1959) 921ff; A. Hohlweg, in *Reallexicon der byzantinischen Kunst* II (Stuttgart 1971) 33ff; H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner* I (Munich 1978) 170-8.

5. H. Maguire, 'Truth and Convention in Byzantine Descriptions of Works of Art', *DOP* 28 (1974) 111-40.

6. Ed. Friedländer, *op.cit.*, 225ff; reprinted with German translation in Prokop, *Werke V: Die Bauten*, ed. O. Veh (Munich 1977) 306ff.

7. In general, see Hunger, *Literatur*, I 75ff, 92ff.

what is in them, and what proceeds from them.⁸ Another recipe for topos is the suggestion that when describing statues or pictures, it is a good idea to add human interest by ascribing particular thoughts and feelings to the artist or sculptor.⁹ The influence of the first of these prescriptions can perhaps be discerned in Byzantine texts, although when applied to architecture the maxim ‘first things first’ could, as we shall see, be variously interpreted. The second device — that of reading into the artist’s mind — was certainly well employed by Byzantine ekphrasts, to the eternal frustration of the positivist art historian.¹⁰

In general, however, rhetorical theory left the writer of ekphrasis very much to his own devices, and established a convention only insofar as writers paid lip-service to the principle that description should be true to its subject-matter. Thus Chorikios of Gaza justifies his description of the church of S. Sergios by saying that “it will inform those who have not had sight of the place . . . more clearly than people who simply report on it casually”.¹¹ Agathias recommended that people who had not seen Hagia Sophia should read Paul the Silentiary’s description, for this would enable them to visualise the church “no less than those who can walk around in it and inspect its every detail”.¹² We are distinctly reminded of Nikolaos’ definition of ekphrasis as a genre of writing that “tries to turn listeners into spectators”.¹³

A moment’s reflection, however, will show that this definition is inadequate, since both the ekphraseis just mentioned were

8. Hermogenes, ed. H. Rabe, *Hermogenis opera* (Leipzig 1913) 23; Aphthonius, *Progymnasmata*, ed. H. Rabe (Leipzig 1926) 37-8; Nikolaos, *Progymnasmata*, ed. J. Felten (Leipzig 1913) 70.

9. *Ibid.* 69; Aphthonius, 38.

10. Nikolaos, 69.

11. See, e.g., the debate about the date and style of the mosaics in the church of the Holy Apostles described by Nicholas Mesarites (cf. Maguire, ‘Truth and Convention’ 121ff; A.W. Epstein, ‘The Rebuilding and Redecoration of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople: A Reconsideration’, *GRBS* 23 [1982] 79-92), and the problem of the icon of the Virgin described by Photios in his 17th homily (discussed most recently by Cormack, *Writing in Gold*, 154-6, and N. Oikonomides, ‘Some Remarks on the Apse Mosaic of St. Sophia’, *DOP* 39 [1985] 111-115).

12. Edd. R. Foerster — E. Richsteig, *Choricii Gazaevi opera* (Leipzig 1929) 6-7.

13. Agathias, *Historiarum libri v*, ed. R. Keydell (CFHB 2, Berlin 1967) 175.

delivered, in the first instance, very close to the buildings described, to audiences who knew these buildings well. The same goes for most other Byzantine ekphraseis. One famous text containing a fair amount of ekphrasis was actually inscribed in the church it described.¹⁴ The problem lies partly in treating description as a separate literary genre, which some ancient theorists indeed hesitated to do. As Hermogenes put it: “Note that some of the more pedantic do not classify ekphrasis as a distinct exercise since it is already included under narration, common place, and encomium”.¹⁵ But the root of the problem lies in defining ekphrasis as description, when the function of most ekphraseis we possess was clearly to *celebrate* what they were describing. In this respect, the programme for Late Antique and Byzantine ekphrasis is to be found not so much in the *progymnasmata* as in the specifications for various types of epideictic oration which are transmitted under the name of Menander Rhetor.¹⁶ In ‘Menander’, the evocation of buildings is an integral part of the panegyric celebration of cities, their governors, and their festivals. In the sixth-century ekphraseis by Chorikios and Paul the Silentiary, church buildings are set firmly in a context of civic pride, personal encomium, and festive occasion. The same elements recur, though less consistently, in architectural descriptions from later periods.¹⁷

The strongest indication that Byzantine architectural ekphrasis conformed to the conventions of an ancient literary tradition is in fact to be found not in any rhetorical handbook but in a comparison of the texts themselves. From Homer onwards, Greek descriptions of buildings, however summary, rarely fail to mention the use of splendid and precious materials, especially gold, silver, and distinctive coloured marble.¹⁸ They also show a pronounced interest in figural decoration, often at the expense of architecture, and they never give exact measurements or propor-

14. *Anthologia graeca* I, 10; cf. R.M. Harrison, *Excavations at Sarachane in Istanbul* I (Princeton 1986) 5ff.

15. Ed. Rabe, 23.

16. Edd. D.A. Russell and N.G. Wilson, *Menander Rhetor* (Oxford 1981).

17. See below 78ff.

18. Cf., e.g., *Odyssey* VII 81ff; Eusebios, *Vita Constantini* IV, 34-40.

tions — in contrast to medieval western descriptions of churches, beginning with Gregory of Tours.¹⁹ There are also certain recurrent topoi: words and/or the author are unequal to the task; the spectator does not know where to look first; the vault imitates the heavens.

Of course, none of this necessarily means that authors of ekphrasis took their descriptions, or their descriptive methods, or even their inspiration, direct from other authors. Indeed, one is ultimately impressed by the lack of any rigid conventions for describing a building — even one as dogmatic as a Christian church. Descriptions of churches could begin at the east end, at the west end, with the dome, or with the ground plan; they could follow a linear progression or jump around; they could take the form of a narrative ('he built . . .'), or of a guided tour ('as you go . . . you will see'), or of an impersonal exposé, or, quite commonly, they could combine all three approaches. There is no reason at all to doubt that such descriptions were based on observation, and that when they waxed lyrical on the opulence of the building materials, they were recording a real and desired effect.²⁰

But it is precisely here, perhaps, that the modern reader senses an inherent deficiency in the Byzantine descriptive tradition. In its rather *ad hoc* approach to architectural space, and in emphasising the sensual effects of the marble and the gold, the fountain and the cool breezes in the atrium, the ekphrasis fails on two counts: it is insufficiently sensitive to points of technical and stylistic detail; it also fails to link the appearance of the church with its religious purpose. It is all somehow too relaxed and superficial. It is not as if the Byzantines lacked means, or precedents, for evoking a church in terms of its spiritual function. The Jewish Tabernacle had long been the subject of symbolic interpretation, especially in the Alexandrian tradition of biblical exegesis.²¹

19. *Historia Francorum* II, 14, 16, excerpted by Caecilia Davis-Weyer, *Early Medieval Art, 300-1150* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1971) 57-9; cf. also 125, 128, 135, 147 for later examples.

20. Cf. P. Brown, 'Art and Society in Late Antiquity', *The Age of Spirituality, A Symposium*, ed. K. Weitzmann (New York 1980), *passim* but esp. 24-5.

21. Philo, *Vit. Mos.* II, 15, 71-27, 140; Clement, *Stromateis* V.6, 32-40; Origen, *Homilies on Exodus* IX, 3-4; Gregory of Nyssa, *Vit. Mos.* 170ff.

Eusebios of Caesarea, a product of Alexandrian scholarship, wrote a panegyric description of the church at Tyre, which could have served as the model for a new genre of Christian ekphrasis, just as his works in praise of Constantine created a model for celebration of the Christian ruler.²² In this panegyric, the building is celebrated as the architectural manifestation of the 'living temple' (*empsychos naos*) of the triumphant Church. The central description closely echoes those of the Temple in Ezekiel and Josephus. It is framed by a prologue evoking the Church's triumph in a series of scriptural quotations, and a conclusion interpreting the different parts of the church in terms of the different tasks assigned to the faithful. It would be interesting to know whether Eusebios developed this approach in his oration celebrating the Anastasis church in Jerusalem — the summary description in the *Life of Constantine* suggests that he did not.²³ What does seem certain, however, is that the lead taken by the bishop of Caesarea was not followed by the rhetorical schools of his local Palestine, such as that which produced Chorikios of Gaza in the early sixth century.²⁴ Chorikios' ekphrasēis clearly belong to a secular tradition of celebrating civic monuments, like the mechanical clock and the mythological murals described by his teacher Prokopios,²⁵ or the allegorical *tabula mundi* in the vault of a bath house described by his colleague John.²⁶ For systematic religious symbolism of church architecture in the sixth century we have to look not at Greek rhetoric but at Syriac hymnography.²⁷ To judge from the surviving evidence, it was not

22. *Ecclesiastical History* X, 4; see J. Wilkinson, 'Paulinus' Temple at Tyre', *JÖB* 32/4 (1982) 553-61. Cf. N.H. Baynes, 'Eusebius and the Christian Empire', *Byzantine Studies and other Essays* (London 1960) 168-72; H.A. Drake, *In Praise of Constantine, A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius' Tricennial Orations*, University of California Publications: Classical Studies, 15 (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1975).

23. See above, n. 18; Drake, *op.cit.*, 40-45.

24. Cf. F.K. Listas, 'Choricus of Gaza and his Descriptions of Festivals at Gaza', *JÖB* 32/3 (1982) 427-36.

25. H. Diels, *Über die von Prokop beschriebene Kunstuhr von Gaza*, *Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Kl.* (1917), no. 7; P. Friedländer, *Spätantiker Gemäldezyklus in Gaza*, *Studi e Testi* 89 (Vatican City 1939).

26. Ed. Friedländer, 135-64 cf. C. Cupane, 'Il kosmos pinax di Giovanni di Gaza, una proposta di ricostruzione' *JÖB* 28 (1979) 195-209.

27. G.K. McVey, 'The Domed Church as Microcosm: Literary Roots of an Architec-

until much later that the two traditions came together and ekphrasis incorporated architectural *theoria*. The best example, Michael the Rhetor's ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia, dates from the twelfth century, and deals with what was by then an ancient monument.²⁸

What interests us here is the function of ekphrasis with regard to *contemporary* buildings. Specifically, what did Paul the Silentiary's *Ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia* do for the select official audience before whom he recited it a few days after the second dedication of the church in 562? A remark by Chorikios seems to hint at this function: "it is not right that those who make a living by the mechanical arts should adorn the church, each to the best of his ability . . . while the man who struggles to shape words passes by, delighted by the works of others yet not hastening to make the most of his own speciality"²⁹ It could be inferred from these words that ekphrasis was essentially a display of literary virtuosity which used a work of art as a means to satisfy the snobbery of educated men — to confirm them in their superiority over rude mechanical craftsmen. The language, metre, and style of Paul the Silentiary's ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia would seem to bear this out. The language and metre are those of secular epic, and the style is what Friedländer called the 'baroque style' of Nonnos of Panopolis and his imitators.³⁰ Friedländer thought very highly of the work — but then he was judging it as a literary tour de force and comparing it with the Nonnian ekphrasis by John of Gaza. Scholars concerned with the text as a source for the archaeology of Hagia Sophia have deplored the "poetic bombast"³¹ and "turgid archaisms",³² which, it is implied, merely get in the way of reading the otherwise "remarkably accurate"

tural Symbol', *DOP* 37 (1983) 91-121; A. Palmer, *The Inauguration Anthem of Hagia Sophia in Edessa: a new edition and translation with historical and architectural notes and a comparison with a contemporary Constantinopolitan kontakion*, in this volume.

28. Edd. C. Mango, J. Parker, 'A Twelfth-Century Description of St. Sophia', *DOP* 14 (1960) 235ff.

29. Edd. Foerster — Richsteig 6.

30. Friedländer 124.

31. Mango, *Art* 56.

32. G. Majeska, 'Notes on the Archaeology of St. Sophia at Constantinople: the Green Marble Bands on the Floor', *DOP* 32 (1978) 299.

description.³³ In short, what we seem to see is a basic incongruity between form and content, between literary pretension and aesthetic observation. Or do we? As Mary Whitby has recently shown, Friedländer was on the right track.³⁴ Now that she has restored, and enhanced, respect for the poem as an elegant and relevant piece of writing, the way is open for a thorough reappraisal of its relationship to the building which it celebrates.

The *Ekphrasis* has a complex structure which largely, though not entirely, reflects the ceremonial circumstances of its delivery. From a metrical point of view, it consists of three sections of hexameter, each preceded by an iambic prologue. Thematically, the first two hexameter sections and their prologues, which are all concerned with the church as a whole, stand apart from the remaining portions which form a separately entitled *Ekphrasis of the Ambo*. These divisions will be considered later in relation to the occasional context. For the moment, however, we shall be concerned with the rather different structure exhibited by the hexameter sections of the main ekphrasis when these are divested of their iambic prologues and considered as a single unit. Thus considered, the ekphrasis takes on the form of a triptych in which the description of the church is flanked by two sections (ll. 135-353, 921-1029) devoted to panegyric of the emperor and patriarch. So clear, apparently, is the division between the three parts that they can easily be detached from each other. Thus those interested in the building have discarded the side panels, while the recent studies of the panegyric and occasional aspects of the composition have concentrated exclusively on those sections.³⁵ Yet this tendency to dismantle the poem has distracted attention from its structural unity. The three sections obviously complement each other. The side panels provide the requisite civic and panegyric setting, by celebrating the city (Constantinople, personified as Roma), the patrons (Justinian and the patriarch Eutychios), and

33. Mango, *loc. cit.*

34. Mary Whitby, 'The Occasion of Paul the Silentiary's *Ekphrasis of St. Sophia*', and 'Paul the Silentiary and Claudian', *Classical Quarterly* 35 (1985) 215-28, 507-16; 'Eutychios, Patriarch of Constantinople: An Epic Holy Man', *Homo Viator. Classical Essays for John Bramble*, edd. Michael Whitby, Philip Hardie, Mary Whitby (Bristol 1987) 297-308.

35. See previous note.

the festival of the church's rededication on 24 December 562. They also serve to anchor in time and place what is otherwise a timeless unhistorical description that could easily have been written a generation earlier for the original dedication of the building. The thematic cohesion of the three sections goes further than this. The break in the recital at line 410 occurs *after* the poet has already begun the description of the building, and has done so, moreover, while continuing to evoke the dedication ceremony on Christmas Eve. Recreating for his audience the dawn procession to Hagia Sophia from the church of St. Plato, he leads them to the door, then calls upon the patriarch and clergy (who were seated in the audience) to receive him in words obviously reminiscent of the verse of Psalm 23 which had been sung at the ceremonial opening:³⁶

Draw back the bolt for me, god-fearing initiates; open, I say, open up the divine palace to our verses, and offer a prayer for their words, for as we touch the starting-rope, our eyes must be fixed on you (ll.350-3).

There follows a description of the east end of the church. This was not only the part of the building that the assembled encaeniasts would have seen first as the doors were thrown open; it was also the area reserved for the very priests on whom the poet is fixing his attention, and whom he shortly mentions again, in his description of the *synthronon* (ll.362-8), and in his image of the three semidomes at the east end reaching out to embrace the *polyhymnos laos* (ll.374-5).³⁷ The allusion to the clergy seated on the *synthronon* of the main apse also freshens up the topos of the poet at the starting rope, for it implicitly compares his audience to the spectators seated in the Sphendone of the

36. John Malalas, *Chronicle*, XVIII, 143 (ed. L. Dindorf, CSHB) 495; cf. Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor (Leipzig 1883) I, 283. For these and all subsequent references to Malalas/Theophanes, see also the new collated translation by E. Jeffreys, M. Jeffreys, R. Scott et al., *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, Byzantina Australiensia 4 (Melbourne 1986); the text contains references to the pages of the Dindorf edition.

37. Mango, *Art* 81, translates this as 'the band of singers', evidently taking it to refer to the choir. However, since Paul elsewhere uses the word *polyhymnos* of the patriarch (l.345), the Virgin Mary (l.434), and the emperor (l.527), it has to mean 'much-hymned', and therefore in this instance can only refer to the group of people currently being praised, i.e. the clergy.

Hippodrome.³⁸ Thus by superimposing reminiscences of the encaenia ceremony on the formalities of the recital which he is giving, Paul effects a smooth transition from the panegyric setting to the descriptive core of his discourse. At the same time, he makes novel and efficient use of certain standard conventions. Here it is instructive to compare him with Chorikios. Instead of describing the festive occasion under a separate heading, Paul makes it the vehicle for the imaginary guided tour by which the orator leads the audience to the entrance. In Chorikios, this takes the form of a casual, everyday stroll, but in Paul the Silentiary it takes on direct liturgical relevance.

At the close of the description, the transition back to panegyric is not quite so ingeniously handled, but there is nevertheless a strong thread of thematic continuity. The description concludes with an extended celebration of the lighting of the church, which serves as a lighthouse superior even to the Pharos of Alexandria, because, Paul says, it guides not only by artificial beams but also by the bounteous favours of the living God. He then addresses the emperor: ‘Remain, O sceptre-bearer, unto cycles of many years, to be an evening and morning light, for on you, much-hymned one, both east and west know they can rest their cares’, for Justinian has lined the shores of the sea with harbours of calm water, and spanned raging torrents — witness the new stone bridge over the Sangarios (ll.921-33).³⁹ Description and panegyric are linked by Justinian as provider of light who overcomes the watery element for the benefit of his subjects. Once again, Paul satisfies panegyric requirements in a natural way that is entirely appropriate to the description of the church. Among other things, the comparison between Hagia Sophia and the Pharos works in a *synkrisis* of Justinian not only with the builder of the latter, but also with Anastasios, whose prosperous reign was undoubtedly an embarrassing memory in Justinian’s later years.⁴⁰

38. The twelfth-century ekphrasis of the church actually characterises the *synthronon* as a *sphendonē*: edd. Mango — Parker 239.

39. Cf. Michael Whitby, ‘Justinian’s Bridge over the Sangarius and the Date of Procopius’ *De Aedificiis*’, *JHS* 105 (1985) 129-48.

40. For Anastasios’ repairs to the breakwater of the Pharos, see Prokopios of Gaza, *Panegyric*, §20: *PG* 87/3, cols. 2817-20; on the emperor’s building policy in general,

The interpenetration of panegyric and description is completed, finally, by the introduction of panegyric elements into the description itself. These consist mostly of passing references to the wisdom, generosity, and piety of Justinian and Theodora. But there is one passage where the panegyric is sustained for twenty lines (ll.512-32), and it occurs, appropriately, just after the description of the building's crowning architectural feature, the dome:

I am amazed when I consider with what wisdom our ruler covered the wide church; how in their constructive toil, the men who minister to this beautiful shrine raised the surfaces of the vaults and the roofs of this wide-stretching house by binding them with baked brick. For it is a man of many wiles, dedicated to the art of knowledge, who has constructed a woodless roof for a wide-roofed temple. For neither on the Phoenician hills above Lebanon, nor in the wooded thickets of the Alpine ranges, has the Assyrian or the Celtic woodcutter, raising axe in tall-tree forests, ever known fir or pine capable of spanning [such a] building. Nor have the groves of Daphne by the Orontes and the wooded crag of Patara brought forth a cypress which could cover the roof of the boundless church. And our celebrated emperor thus roofed with circles of stones what Nature could find no way of spanning. Thus, on four arches, is raised the fine-crested, deep-bosomed dome. You might say that the wandering eye reaches up to the great circle of heaven itself.

The passage clearly anticipates the later celebration of the church as a triumph over nature, and a substitute for the stars. It also refers back to a passage in the panegyric introduction where Paul compares the church to the cosmos and concludes that while the observer of nature soon gets bored with looking at the heavens and wants a change of scene, the visitor to the church never tires of twisting his neck this way and that in order to take it all in (ll.286-99). Again, *topoi* of panegyric ekphrasis — comparison with the cosmos, the variety of the spectacle — are made to justify their presence by contributing to the description, rather than — as in Chorikios — being ritually stated and then forgotten.

Having emphasised the overall unity of the work, it is now important to look at the description in its own terms, for these are

cf. L. Di Segni — Y. Hirschfeld, 'Four Greek Inscriptions from Hammat Gader from the reign of Anastasius', *Israel Exploration Journal* 36 (1986) 263ff.

not dictated solely by the panegyric framework. After the dramatic lead-in, the perspective of the liturgical procession-cum-guided tour is abandoned in favour of a more impersonal presentation, in which the audience and the builder or craftsman are frequently, but not systematically, involved, by expressions like 'he built' or 'you will see'. Having described the east end of the interior, Paul goes on to describe the west end, then leaves the nave to deal with the narthex, but returns to the nave to describe the rest of the architecture in the following sequence: piers, arches, pendentives, dome, north and south tympana and colonnades, north and south aisles and galleries. He then leaves the church completely to describe the atrium, returning once more to describe the decoration (marble revetment, basket-work sculpture, marble inlay, mosaic) and liturgical furnishings (chancel screen, ciborium, altar, altar cloth, and lamps). It is clear that he is not describing things in the order in which they are seen. What order is he following? Procopius' *Buildings* may provide a clue, for this describes the architecture in much the same order, beginning with the east end, which Procopius calls "the face of the temple (for surely that must be the part towards the rising sun, where they sacrifice the mysteries to God)".⁴¹ We are reminded of the progymnasmata and their precept of 'first things first'. Both Procopius and Paul the Silentiary, it would seem, are applying this precept to a personified notion of the church (or to the mystical equation church = man = cosmos) in which the sanctuary is the head.⁴² But Paul may also be applying the precept in a different sense. The fact that he describes first the architecture, then the surface decoration, then the fixed furnishings, then the movable furnishings, suggests that the description follows the main phases of the building's execution. Whether the description of the architecture — east end, west end, narthex, dome supports, dome, north and south tympana, supports and adjuncts — actually reproduces the stages of construction must be for architectural historians to decide.⁴³ But there is nothing

41. *De aed.* I,1, 23ff.

42. Cf. St. Maximos the Confessor, *Mystagogia* 4; PG 91, 672 A-C.

43. On the architecture of the church, see now R.J. Mainstone, *Hagia Sophia. Architecture, structure and liturgy of Justinian's Great Church* (London 1987).

wildly implausible in such an interpretation. The main argument against it would seem to be the fact that the dome is described *before* the north and south walls, aisles, and galleries. None of these elements, however, play an important part in carrying the dome. The thrust on the north and south sides is carried by the piers and their outward extensions, generally characterised as buttresses. There are two indications in Paul the Silentiary that each pier and its flanking buttress originally formed a single mass of masonry. One is the word, *toichos*, which he uses of the piers (ll.450). The other is his characterisation of the tunnel-vaulted passages between the piers and the buttresses as ‘piercings’ (ll.469-71: *erga . . . trêta*), which suggests that they were indeed tunnels rather than structural divisions, and that the aisles and galleries were indeed secondary to the central load-bearing structure.

If this interpretation is correct, it shows that Paul the Silentiary was being true to the object of his description in a way that even his most admiring critics have failed to recognise: he was recreating for his audience the process by which Hagia Sophia had come into being, and, as always, his technique was all the most effective for being unobtrusive — in this case, for not being an explicit narrative of the building’s construction. But even if the description will not bear the construction we have put on it, it is still far from being an aimless catalogue of details and images, nor is its artistry concerned solely with conveying a physical impression of the building.⁴⁴ We should not be deceived by its apparent superficiality or by the poet’s ritual exclamation (ll.444, 755) that he is losing control of his discourse. Above all, we should not miss the double progression that occurs in the course of the description. There is, firstly, an overall progression through the four cosmic elements, from the ‘earth’ of the building materials, by way of the water in the fountain of the atrium (ll.595ff), to the air in which the lamps are suspended (ll.814, 819, 837), and the fire which these contain. Secondly, there is a progression from morning to evening. The description begins at dawn, with the sunlight streaming in through the east windows.

44. As implied by Friedländer 125-32; Mathew, *Byzantine Aesthetics*, 92-3.

It continues by way of noon, evoked not only by the forty windows of the dome and the cross at its meridian (ll.489ff, 509-11), but also by the gold mosaic of the ceiling, looking at which, says Paul, is like looking at the noonday sun in springtime (ll.671-2). The climax comes at night, when the church no longer depends on natural daylight, but is itself a source of God-given illumination.

Thus in its own discreet way, the description has a profoundly spiritual structure that is both cyclical and anagogical: cyclical in that it begins with contemplation of the church's holy of holies — the sanctuary where the priesthood celebrate the 'dayspring from on high' (*anatolê ex hypsous*; Luke 1, 78) of Christ's Incarnation, and returns to a contemplation of the Church's evangelising mission on earth; anagogical, in that it leads through the contemplation of the created world to that of the Creator, from the first coming of Christ to the passing of the natural order when he comes again. Either way, the classicism and exuberant sensuality of the poem's language and imagery — its delight in light, colour, texture, and organic form⁴⁵ — serve not only as a cover, but also as a vehicle for a theological message that is in essence very unclassical and abstract. Perceived through the physical imagery of one church building is a vision of the eternal fulfilment of the universal Church, and it is surely significant that when Paul invites his audience to 'see', he generally uses the ambiguous word *noein*, denoting both physical and intellectual perception.

This brings us back to a point which we have so far mentioned only in passing: the timeless, unhistorical quality of the central descriptive section, which contains nothing that could not have been written a generation earlier. Not only does it fail to specify recent repairs and modifications; it twice refers to 'the emperors' as if Theodora were still alive (ll.681, 810). It may be that Paul incorporated material from earlier ekphraseis of the church, but there can also be no doubt that the suggestion of timelessness was deliberate. This is clear from the introduction, where he

45. *Ibid.*, 87, 88ff.; P. Dronke, 'Tradition and Innovation in Medieval Western Colour Imagery', *The Medieval Poet and his World* (Rome 1984) 57-60.

characterises the rebuilding of the church as a victory over the forces of Phthonos (Envy).

At the same time, it is clear that his very concern to show the permanence of Justinian's achievement sprang from a sharp awareness of how vulnerable that achievement had become. Paul could not and did not ignore that he was celebrating a rebuilding after a disastrous earthquake, and that only a month previously, the emperor had nearly fallen victim to an attempt on his life. Of course, the panegyrist had to put the best possible interpretation on these events, but to mention them at all was a concession to the power of Phthonos. Historical circumstances as well as rhetorical convention dictated that he should put his timeless description in a context of time and place — a context that both frames and informs the ekphrasis as such.

It would be no exaggeration to claim that of all the Byzantine ekphrasises of buildings or works of art which have survived, Paul the Silentiary's tells us most about the circumstances in which it was written and delivered, its historical and occasional contexts. Paul is most explicit about *where* and *how* he recited his ekphrasis and these are aspects of the work which have received recent extensive treatment.⁴⁶ However, the question of the date of the poem's recitation has not been raised since the beginning of the century, nor has the broader historical context been discussed in detail.

Ceremonial is the element which binds together and connects all aspects of the occasion. A sense of movement, the rhythm of starting, pausing, and continuing is imparted in two ways: by the actual ceremony which accompanied the poem's recitation for which Paul gives clear indications in his text,⁴⁷ and by Paul's recreation of the procession which had taken place on the day of the encaenia of Hagia Sophia, 24 December. Here it is not merely a question of description of a past ceremony but reliving that ceremony by simulating the movement of the procession on that occasion.⁴⁸ Past procession and present occasion are made

46. Mary Whitby, *The Occasion* (as in n.34) 215-228.

47. Ed. Friedländer, ll.66-67, 81-88, 411-416; Ekphrasis of the Ambo, ll.1-14. See the analysis by Whitby, *The Occasion* 216-218.

48. Paul achieves this by opening his description of the dawn procession (ll.315-349)

to coincide.⁴⁹ In addition to these two means by which motion is created and conveyed Paul shows us something of the emperor's daily ceremonial life in the city with his subjects in his description of Roma's audience with Justinian (ll.219-254)⁵⁰ and in the flashback account of the emperor's visit to the site of Hagia Sophia after the earthquake of 557 which caused part of the dome to collapse (ll.256-278).⁵¹

The occasion of the recitation of the poem was therefore far from static. There was not only a procession from the palace, where Paul began his delivery before the emperor and members of his court, to the patriarchate, where the patriarch Eutychios and assembled clergy were addressed,⁵² but also at least two intermissions or pauses in Paul's presentation. Paul gives clear indications in the poem for these movements and breaks, although the length of the intermissions cannot be determined.⁵³

The ceremony accompanying the recitation but also the contents of the poem join together emperor and patriarch, palace

with an appeal to his audience to enter the church (ll.311-313) and by ending it with words reminiscent of the verse from Psalm 23 (see above, p.55) which had been sung at the moment when the doors of the church were opened to the procession (l.350-351).

49. For this recreation, in homilies and imperial ceremonial, of past events and the elimination of the intervening lapse of time through their celebration in the present, see the discussion by S. MacCormack, 'Christ and Empire, Time and Ceremonial in Sixth-Century Byzantium and Beyond', *B* 52 (1982) 287-309, esp. 298-304.

50. Roma attempts to kiss Justinian's feet (ll.243-244), a modification to the act of proskynesis of an emperor introduced by Justinian and Theodora: Procopius, *Secret History*, 15,15. Justinian extends his right hand to 'his familiar' Roma, to raise her up (l.244-245). On this passage see Mary Whitby, *Paul the Silentiary and Claudian* (as in n.34), 507-516, esp. 511 and n.28.

51. ll.255-261 describe the attendants who usually ('as was the custom') accompanied the emperor. On this passage see Mary Whitby, 'On the omission of a ceremony in mid-sixth century Constantinople', *Historia* 36 (1987) 462-488.

52. Whitby, *The Occasion*, 217-218.

53. The first break, indicated at ll.411-416, was not far into the recitation and therefore probably represents only a brief intermission. See Friedländer, p.110 and n.3, who makes a comparison with a mid-day break indicated in John of Gaza's Ekphrasis of the *Tabula Mundi* (ed. Friedländer, ll.1-4 (p.150)). The second interruption in the recitation at the end of the ekphrasis of the church and before that of the ambo (Ekphrasis of the Ambo, ll.1-14) is more problematic. Inferring from the opening lines (ll.1-2) that the ambo was not completed when Paul recited the main ekphrasis, Friedländer suggested that the ekphrasis of the ambo was recited on a separate occasion (see the lemma also) but probably not long after the main ekphrasis: 'for I have summoned you three times now' (l.11).

and patriarchate in the celebration of Hagia Sophia. In addition to the separate iambic verses addressed to the emperor and patriarch in the two prologues (11.1-80;81-134) to the main hexameter text of the poem, the concluding 109 verses of the ekphrasis contain lines devoted to panegyric of Justinian and Eutychios (11.921-966;967-1029). But it is clear from internal evidence as well as the lemma that the greater part of the poem was recited in the patriarchate.⁵⁴ This emphasis on the patriarchate in the organisation of the ceremonial and the granting to the patriarch of equal 'time' in the panegyric has been described as the placing of a 'religious veneer on a traditional expression of pagan classical culture'.⁵⁵ We would suggest rather that the large role of the priesthood in the occasion and in the content of the poem is related to the date of recitation and to the wider historical context.

The iambic prologue addressed to the emperor contains two possible indications of the date of the poem's delivery. In the opening verses Paul asks, 'Could there be a day greater than the present one in which both God and emperor are honoured?' (11.1-2) The day in question would seem to fall within the extended period of festivities connected with the encaenia of the church on 24 December 562.⁵⁶ Paul refers to this period in the closing verses of the address to the emperor, saying that the people of the city had requested of Justinian that he prolong the holiday. The emperor had agreed at least twice. 'By doing this many times', Paul tells the emperor, 'you extended the festival richly' (11.79-80). These two passages, then, would seem to suggest a feast day of the church after Christmas. The best known and most important day which fits this description is Epiphany, on 6 January, the Feast of the Lights, when the Baptism of Christ in

54. Whitby, *The Occasion*, 217-218.

55. *Ibid.*, 219. Averil Cameron, on the other hand, sees the poem in much more Christian terms: 'Images of Authority: Elites and Icons in late Sixth-Century Byzantium', *Past and Present* 84 (1979) 9 (reprinted in the author's *Continuity and Change in Sixth-Century Byzantium* [London 1981]) and *Procopius and the Sixth Century* [London 1985] 10, 255.

56. Paul's Ekphrasis is itself a source for the 24 December date: II.326-330; also Theophanes, ed. de Boor, 238; Chronicon Paschale, ed. B.G. Niebuhr (Bonn 1832) I, 687.

the Jordan is commemorated. 6 January 563 was indeed proposed by Friedländer as the date of Paul's recitation, although he did not draw any conclusions from the date, nor see any implications for the panegyric or description of the church in this,⁵⁷ as has also been the case for those who have adopted his dating.⁵⁸

Certainly, by the sixth century, Epiphany was well-established as a day on which both God and emperor were honoured, with acclamations for the emperor⁵⁹ and a liturgical celebration in which he took part.⁶⁰ Epiphany marked the end of the twelve days of Christmas⁶¹ and, therefore, an ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia recited on this day would have provided a fitting conclusion to the festivities which began on Christmas Eve. The ninth-century anonymous *Diegesis of Hagia Sophia* in fact states that the celebrations in connection with the encaenia lasted until Epiphany, with banquets, distribution of money, and thanksgiving to God.⁶² Then, too, the theme of light found in hymns and homilies for the feast⁶³ could be seen to have had an effect on the panegyric in the poem and on the description of the church. Light in Hagia Sophia, both in the daytime (ll.398ff) and at night (ll.806ff), is given special attention by Paul, and the emperor himself is hailed as a light for east and west (ll.921-922).

57. Friedländer, 110 and n.2.

58. T. Viljamaa, *Studies in Greek Encomiastic Poetry of the Early Byzantine Period* (Helsinki 1968) 61; H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, II (Munich 1978) 111; Averil Cameron, *Procopius*, 11; M. Whitby, *The Occasion*, 216 and n.8: 'perhaps on the Feast of Epiphany'.

59. Constantine Prophyrogenitus, *De ceremoniis*, ed. J. Reiske I (Bonn 1829) 369-370.

60. The 'Selection from the Ecclesiastical History' (ed. Cramer 1839) provides confirmation in a 'negative way' when it states that Justinian processed to church without his diadem on Christmas and Epiphany 557, after the devastating earthquake of December: *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, translation (as in n.36) 296 and note.

61. For the twelve days of Christmas see Philotheos, ed. N. Oikonomides, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IXe et Xe siècles* (Paris 1972) 165-191. Some of the variants of Malalas' chronicle seem to indicate that the twelve-day holiday period existed in Justinian's reign, although these may be later glosses; see the apparatus in the translation of Malalas (as in n.36) 296.

62. *Scriptores Originum Constantinopolitanarum*, ed. T. Preger, I (Leipzig 1901) 104-5.

63. E.g. Proclus, PG 65, cols. 757 ff.; Severian of Gabala, PG 65, cols. 15-25; Romanos. *Hymnes*, ed. J. Grosdidier de Matons, II Sources Chrétiennes 110 (Paris 1965), 236-93.

Yet, a passage in the poem would seem to tell against an Epiphany date. Even if one takes into account the avoidance of explicitly Christian terminology by classicising writers,⁶⁴ Paul's reference to Epiphany in his description of the fountain in the atrium as 'God's mystic feast', 'in the month of the golden vestments', 'when the people draw by night the unsullied waters in vessels'. (ll.598-600)⁶⁵ is remote and strained for someone reciting a poem on that day. In addition, there are omissions which make it difficult to ascribe the date of delivery to Epiphany. References to water, a central theme along with light in Epiphany hymns and homilies, are few, while the Jordan and John the Baptist are not mentioned at all, even though an obvious context would have been the description of the baptistery (ll.563-566).⁶⁶

One figure does, however, receive exceptional treatment and this in connection with a part of the church. David is given prominence by Paul in the description of the narthex: 'Here, through the night there rises a melodious sound pleasing to the ears of Christ, giver of life, when the psalms of God-fearing David are sung with alternate voice by the sacred ministers . . . David the meek, whom the divine voice praised, a glorious light . . .' Paul goes on to associate David with the Incarnation through the Virgin, David's 'much-sung scion' (ll.429-437). This mention of David stands out in the poem, especially as no other Old or New Testament figure, with the exception of Christ (ll.702, 709, 764, 801, 804, 894), Mary (l.803) and the apostle Paul (l.787) is singled out and referred to by name. The honorific inclusion of David therefore deserves consideration as a possible indicator of the date of recitation. David, prophet, king, and ancestor of Christ is commemorated on the Sunday after Christmas in the ninth-century *Typikon* of the Great Church.⁶⁷ Although it is not known when this commemoration of David on the Sunday after Christmas originated, there is nothing in the poem to exclude the possibility that it was already in practice in Justinian's reign. In 562

64. Whitby, *The Occasion*, 217n.11 and references.

65. Mango, *Art*, 85 and no.140; also n.69 below.

66. *Ibid.*, 84 n.135.

67. J. Mateos, ed., *Le Typicon de la Grande Église* I (Rome 1962) 160.

Christmas Eve, the day of the encaenia, was a Sunday,⁶⁸ therefore the Sunday after Christmas would have fallen on 31 December. This date, half-way between Christmas and Epiphany, is appropriate not only to the way in which Paul looks back on the encaenia in the prologue but also to the way he looks forward in time to the new year in the closing address to Justinian: 'These things . . . exalt you in the commencement of a long life-bearing year' (ll.934-935).⁶⁹ Considerations of theme and imagery also make the date an appropriate one for the poem's recitation, Sunday was a day on which both 'God and emperor are honoured'. Further, the iconographic type of David as king first made its appearance in the latter part of Justinian's reign, on the apse mosaic of St. Catherine's, Mt. Sinai, where David is represented in crown and chlamys, in a medallion directly below the transfigured Christ as his royal ancestor and prophet.⁷⁰ Christ and king are thus linked and this theme, as we have seen, is one to which Paul draws attention from the opening verses of his panegyric to Justinian. Furthermore, the association of the Incarnation and David and, thus, the connection between Christmas Eve and the day of recitation, is indicated also by David's psalms which, as Paul says, were sung in the narthex during nocturnal vigils (ll.428-432). Psalm 71 in particular, dedicated by David to Solomon, and sung at the Christmas vigil, was applied as early as Origen to Christ as the son of David, and was understood as a prophecy of the Incarnation.⁷¹

Between them, the David (ll.421-437) and the Epiphany (ll.596-604) passages in the poem, each embedded in a description of a part of the church and given extensive treatment by the

68. According to the *Chronicon Paschale*, ed. Niebuhr I, 687; ἡμέρα πρώτη. This is confirmed by the table in V. Grumel, *La Chronologie* (Paris 1958) 316.

69. ἐπεμβάδα (l.935) alludes to the beginning of a consular year on 1 January, marked by the ceremonial 'elevation' of the new consul. See also l.308 of the poem for the word in another context and l.599 for reference to January as the 'month of the golden vestments'. On consular inauguration see Cameron, *Elites and Icons* (as in n.55) 13; *eadem*, *Corippus, In laudem Iustini* (London 1976) Book IV and commentary 175, 199, 202-203.

70. A.D. Kartsonis, *Anastasis: the making of an image* (Princeton 1986) 186; K. Weitzmann, 'The Mosaic in St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 110 (1966) 392-405, esp. 401.

71. Kartsonis, *op.cit.* 191-192.

poet, encompass the entire Christmas period, the one with its association with the Incarnation, the other with its reminder of the 'mystic feast' to come. Whether the poem was recited on 31 December or 6 January — and neither date can be conclusively demonstrated to have been the date of delivery — the implications for our reading of and approach to the text are the same: the panegyric prologue and concluding verses cannot be detached as panels from the main descriptive part of the poem without disturbing the poem's message. These opening and closing passages do not alone provide references to specific events or occasions. The timeless quality of the description is misleading, for it is precisely in the description of parts of the church, the narthex and the atrium, that the references to David and to Epiphany are made. The description, then, can also harbour topical references which, when read in connection with the other parts of the poem, yield a fuller picture.

To turn now to the historical context of Paul's composition. At the time of the rededication of Hagia Sophia, Justinian was over 70 years old. His greatest military victories were behind him. A fifty-year peace treaty had been made with Persia (561), very much at the empire's expense.⁷² His attempts to reconcile religious factions over more than 20 years had failed. The emperor's last years in power were marked by grave troubles. The chroniclers present a catalogue in which natural disasters alternate with social unrest. For the years 560-562 alone the following troubles are recorded. A rumour in Constantinople that the emperor had died caused panic buying of bread; a fire in the city destroyed houses and churches; the capital suffered from civil strife, a drought, and a serious disruption of trade caused by the lack of a south wind. In November 562, a month before the rededication of Hagia Sophia, a plot against the emperor's life took place in which several silver-dealers (*argyropratai*) were involved and Belisarios himself was implicated.⁷³

72. Agathias, *Hist.*, ed. Keydell, 5, 14; Corippus, *In laudem Iustini*, ed. Cameron, Book II, 260 ff; E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire II* (Amsterdam 1949) 516ff; 777-780.

73. Malalas, ed. Dindorf, 493-495; translation (as in n.36) 298-303; Theophanes, ed. de Boor, 234-239. On the conspiracy see the discussion by Whitby, *The Occasion*, 220-222.

These misfortunes, and especially the natural disasters of the 550s — the earthquake of 557 which brought down the dome of Hagia Sophia and was reported as the worst in living memory,⁷⁴ the epidemic of 558⁷⁵ — were identified by some with the convulsions which were to overturn the world at the time of the approach of the Second Coming. The calamities appeared to be serious enough and frequent enough to persuade some at least that mankind was on the brink of the end of the world. Agathias reported in connection with the earthquake of 557 that many people announced the imminent end,⁷⁶ and Romanos' hymn *On the Ten Virgins* written in the 550s, makes constant reference to the disasters and invokes the Second Coming throughout.⁷⁷ There were those too who saw in the emperor whose earlier successes had turned sour, the figure of the Antichrist. Procopius' description of the emperor's demonic form and disembodied head which could be observed flying in the palace at night⁷⁸ is reminiscent of Romanos' depiction of the Antichrist in his hymn *On the Last Judgement*.⁷⁹ The sixth millenium had come and gone, bringing the Antichrist, and not a rebirth.⁸⁰

In his celebration of the church of Hagia Sophia, Paul the Silentiary incorporated recent events — notably the conspiracy against Justinian (ll.24-39) and the earthquake of 557 (ll.186 ff) — turning unpromising material to Justinian's advantage. This is not in itself remarkable, for there were precedents for such treatment in a panegyric context and even in another ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia. Procopius, in the preface to *The Buildings*, referred to the conspiracy of 548, as well as the Nika Riot and fire which destroyed Hagia Sophia in 532, immediately before this description of Justinian's rebuilding of the church.⁸¹ What should be

74. Malalas, ed. Dindorf, 488-490; Theophanes, ed. de Boor, 231-232; Agathias, ed. Keydell, 5, 3.

75. Malalas, ed. Dindorf, 489.

76. Agathias, ed. Keydell, 5, 5.

77. Romanos, *Hymnes*, ed. J. Grosdidier de Matons V, Sources Chrétiennes 283 (Paris 1981) 296-327 (text) 271-291, esp. 272-285 (commentary).

78. Procopius, *Secret History*, 12, 12-23 (79-81)

79. Romanos, ed. Grosdidier de Matons, V, 234-267, esp. str., 5-7.

80. See R.D. Scott, 'Malalas, *The Secret History*, and Justinian's Propaganda', *DOP* 39 (1985) 99-109, esp. 107-109.

81. *The Buildings* I, 16-21. For the conspiracy of 548, see also *The Wars*, 7,32.

stressed in connection with Paul's Ekphrasis is the way in which not only these two events but also the general historical context are made to contribute to a timeless statement.

As has been mentioned, topical and timeless are not separated or divided in different parts of the poem but are juxtaposed throughout, interacting and shifting so that past, present and future become one. Thus, for instance, in the introductory iam-bics for Justinian Paul shifts abruptly from a timeless ideological tableau to description of the very recent conspiracy. It is part of his method to demonstrate the truth of the general statement by reference to the specific. In this case, his assertion that God is ever-present, guarding over Justinian (ll.6 ff.), is shown to be true by the description, immediately following, of the failed conspiracy. In other instances, themes introduced in the iambic prologue are demonstrated later, by description of a scene or part of the church. Such is the case with a theme of the prologue, the extent of Justinian's empire: the Ocean is the boundary of his power in the west, while in the east all men are his subjects (ll.11-16). This statement could be made to apply to any emperor at any time. Indeed, Agathias, in the preface to his Cycle, ascribed a similar achievement to the unwarlike Justin II upon his accession to the throne.⁸² Yet Paul gives visual confirmation of the general picture in his description of the wealth gathered from all parts of the empire to decorate the church. He enumerates the geographical origins of the marbles in a catalogue reminiscent of a visual representation of provinces and cities of the empire bearing tribute to the emperor (ll.379-380, 387-388, 391 ff., 539 ff., 620-646, 673-680).⁸³ The empire is paraded before us.

Another theme introduced in the iam-bics is Justinian's fatherly concern for the city and his subjects and the love which the people of Constantinople nurture for their emperor and his church (ll.41 ff., 71 ff.). Paul illustrates the assertion in a later scene in which he describes Roma's supplication of Justinian⁸⁴ to heal

82. Agathias, *AP* IV, 3, 47-97; A. Cameron, *Corippus, In laudem Iustini, praef.*, 1-36, and commentary, 118-119.

83. See, e.g., the south side of the base of the column of Arcadius; S. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony* (as in n. 3) 59.

84. Mary Whitby, 'Paul the Silentiary and Claudian' (as in n. 34) 507-516 for a discus-

the wound in her breast, that is, the damage caused to the dome of Hagia Sophia by the earthquake. The church is, she insists, 'the most brilliant symbol' of his throne, the greatest achievement of his reign. Justinian's reception of Roma is one of consolation and reassurance (ll.219-254). The image and tone are reiterated later, in the description of the provisions for lighting Hagia Sophia at night. The lights around the cornice of the 'deep-bosomed dome' are compared to a necklace of glowing rubies set in gold which a king might place around the neck of his cherished virgin daughter (ll.866-870). Thus, the description of a specific feature of the church reinforces the image of the intimate relationship of emperor and city and echoes its reassuring effect.

The scene of Roma's supplication has a forerunner in the opening hexameters which introduce the description of the church (ll.135 ff.). In this passage the poet summons the personification of Constantinople to crown the life-giving emperor because, by raising the church in her arms, he has made her more brilliant than her mother on the Tiber (ll.145-151). The images of Constantinople which Paul uses here have parallels in literature and in representations; they all stress her youth, vitality, and fruitfulness.⁸⁵ Paul never refers to the city as the New Rome, an epithet of Constantinople in ecclesiastical contexts from the fourth century,⁸⁶ but always as Roma, as in Justinian's legislation,⁸⁷ yet the contrast between Old and New Rome is implicit in the images he uses of both. Old Rome is 'first-born Latin Roma' (l.164), 'the mother' (l.167), 'on the Tiber' (l.151). This passage is, however, not only an early statement of the contrast between

sion of this scene. The fatherly image of Justinian here is paralleled by Procopius' application of the Homeric phrase 'gentle as a father' (Od. 2. 47; 15. 152) to Justinian in his introduction to *The Buildings* I.1.15.

85. 'fruitful' (l.145); 'Anthousa' (l.156) 'fresh-budding' (l.165). The visual parallel on coins and elsewhere, is Constantinople holding a cornucopia: see J.M.C. Toynbee, 'Roma and Constantinopolis in late-antique art from 312-365', *JRS* 37 (1947) 135-144, continued in *Studies presented to D.M. Robinson* (Missouri 1953) II, 261-277.

86. F. Dölger, 'Rom in der Gedankenwelt der Byzantiner' in *Byzanz und die europäische Staatenwelt* (Ettal 1953, repr. Darmstadt 1964) 89-93.

87. *CJ* I 17, 1, 10.

youthful Constantinople and ageing Rome,⁸⁸ but also a most explicit expression of the superiority of New Rome in religious terms; the poet calls on the 'Capitoline legends of Rome' to yield to him (l.152); 'My emperor has so far surpassed that wonder, as great God is superior to an idol' (ll.163-164). The daughter has outstripped the mother through Hagia Sophia. Such sentiments were certainly appropriate to the specific occasion: patriarch and clergy were present, and honoured, and could be regarded as representatives of the city in this more exclusive gathering for the recitation of the poem. Yet the presentation of Constantinople's superiority in religious terms may also reflect the wider historical situation. Justinian had demonstrated at the Fifth Occumenical Council (553) and later that Constantinople led the way in ecclesiastical policy, imposing doctrine on an unwilling pope.⁸⁹

Seemingly timeless description and specific historical reference are again juxtaposed and the distinctions blurred in Paul's discussion of the empress Theodora who had died in 548. In the iambic prologue his reference to her unites the themes of Justinian's relationship with God and with his own subjects. In her lifetime she was a supporter and helpmate. Upon her death she provided an oath for Justinian's subjects which he has not neglected. Even now she intercedes with God on Justinian's behalf (ll.58-65). Paul's assertion that Theodora's influence and powers are ever-present and alive is borne out in his description of the church furnishings, for Theodora's monogram and image appear next to Justinian's on the entablature of the altar screen (ll.712-715) and on the silk altar cloths where emperor and empress are portrayed joining hands with the mother of God and Christ (ll.802-804). The presence of Theodora in the rededicated Hagia Sophia, on furnishings newly made to replace those destroyed under the collapsed dome, is confirmed also by the inscription on the new altar table which Kedrenos records: 'Your servants, Justinian and Theodora, offer to thee, Christ, thine of thy own'.⁹⁰ It was as if Justinian's first Hagia Sophia had

88. Dölger, *op.cit.*, 93-95; Whitby, *Paul the Silentiary and Claudian*, 514-515, esp. n. 48; E. Fenster, *Laudes Constantinopolitanae* (Munich 1968) 93-95.

89. Stein, *Bas-Empire* II, 660-675.

90. According to Malalas, ed. Dindorf, 489-490, the furniture of the eastern end

never suffered destruction and Theodora had never died.⁹¹

Another example of the misleadingly timeless description of the church can be seen in the attention given by Paul to the silver decorations of the altar screen and ciborium (ll.678-719, 720-754), as well as the silver lighting fixtures of various shapes (ll.806-920). On one level, by providing an elaborate description of these furnishings and decorations the poet was paying tribute to an important part of any church decoration or festive occasion. Chorikios, too, shows how lights in particular were decorative elements on feast days, arranged to spell out the names of benefactors and to convey wishes for a long life.⁹² But, more specifically, these were also the very furnishings which had suffered destruction after the earthquake, and were therefore related to the rebuilt Hagia Sophia.⁹³ They may have been related in another way also to the historical context, for the conspirators who had attempted to kill Justinian a month before the rededication were, to a large extent, silver-dealers.⁹⁴ In August 562, three months before the conspiracy, Justinian had commanded the *argyropratai* to put on a lavish display of illuminations for the encaenia of the church of the holy martyr Theodora.⁹⁵ Could the conspiracy have been a reaction to the heavy demands made on them by the emperor for both churches?

of the church — the ciborium and altar table — were destroyed when part of the dome fell in 558. Kedrenos, ed. I. Bekker (Bonn 1838) I, 676-677, adds the ambo to this list and is the only source to record the inscription on the altar table (677, 14-19).

91. The rededication of the Holy Apostles on the anniversary of Theodora's death (28 June 550) is another example of the honour accorded to the deceased empress: Malalas, ed. Dindorf, 484. See, also, S. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony*, 263, who argues that the San Vitale depiction of Theodora dates to after her death.

92. Edd. Foerster-Richsteig, 24, 44; Litsas, *Choricus of Gaza and his Descriptions of Festivals at Gaza* (as in n. 24).

93. See n. 90 above.

94. Malalas, ed. Dindorf, 493-495; translation (as in n. 36) 301-303; Whitby, *The Occasion*, 220-222; Cameron, commentary on Corippus, *In laudem Iustini*, 2, 357f. (176) who sees the *argyropratai* as bankers. On this function of *argyropratai/argentarii* see also S.J.B. Barnish, 'The Wealth of Iulianus Argentarius: Late Antique Banking and the Mediterranean Economy', *B* 55 (1985) 5-38. There is, however, no reason to believe that they were not also responsible for the manufacture and sale of ornamental silver; see, e.g. *Vie de Théodore de Sykéon*, ed. A.J. Festugière (Brussels 1970) I, 36-37; and note M.F. Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c. 300-1453* (Cambridge 1985) 242-251.

95. Malalas, ed. Dindorf, 492.

The connection cannot be proved but the silver and lights of Hagia Sophia celebrated by Paul certainly bear witness to Justinian's continuing life and power. Lights were symbols of life and hope not only in the metaphors and similes of the written word but also in a routine daily context. Malalas' account of the panic in Constantinople in 560 caused by rumours that the emperor had died illustrates the association of lights and reassurance in the life of the city: 'About the ninth hour the senate called a meeting and sent the prefect to have lights lit throughout the city to show that the emperor was well. In this way the city was calmed after the disturbance.'⁹⁶ So too in Paul's elaborate description of the lighting fixtures with which the main ekphrasis ends we are left with a final image of a church which is a work of hope and salvation. The description of the light culminates in the image of Hagia Sophia as a divine light guiding mankind (ll.916-920).

Through the interplay of panegyric and description, the topical and the timeless, Paul demonstrates the central place of the church in the life of the city and of the emperor. Reassurance is produced through a discussion of the negative followed by a demonstration of the positive. Contrasts between previous sorrow and present joy are elaborated by means of metaphors from nature which reiterate this sequence and its effect: the light of the sun after a winter's night, the tranquility of the sea after a storm (ll.182-184). A great part of the poem is concerned with presenting the significance which the church and its builder hold for the city of Constantinople, but an equally important aspect is the significance of Hagia Sophia for Justinian. The emperor who provides healing, dulling of cares, serenity, forgiveness and release from death for his subjects is also in need of these gifts or wonders. Throughout Paul refers to the intercessory quality of Justinian's deeds — *σώζει σε ταῦτα* — (ll.58; 302-303; 307-310) and especially of Hagia Sophia, hailed as Justinian's greatest accomplishment, one which will ensure Christ's favour forever. The work of intercession on behalf of Justinian is also ascribed to Theodora (ll.58-61) and the patriarch is called upon to assist

96. Malalas, translation (as in n.36) 298.

(ll.979-980; 1027-1029). To these prayers Paul adds his ekphrasis, like a long votive inscription, to accompany Justinian's building, a record of the donor's hopes and needs.

The relationship between the poem and the context of its delivery may become clearer when we look at its place in sixth-century literature. It is a curious and as yet unexplained fact that Paul the Silentiary's *Ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia* is the closest thing to an imperial oration surviving from Justinian's reign⁹⁷ — and surviving, moreover, not from the great decade of the emperor's early achievements, but from the aftermath of the crises of the 540s and 550s. What are we to make of this fact? Is it an accident of survival, or does it reflect a fundamental truth about the state of literary production and patronage between 527 and 565? Recent studies would seem to favour the latter view: we seem to be settling into an interpretation of Justinian as an emperor indifferent or hostile to traditional rhetoric, even as a medium of imperial propaganda, which he preferred to disseminate through laws and hymns.⁹⁸ It is also pointed out that the renaissance of *belles lettres* in sixth-century Constantinople begins late in Justinian's reign and does not come into the open until the reign of Justin II. Among other things, this means that Paul the Silentiary's ekphrasis tends to be seen as forward rather than backward looking, and is associated with the later works of Corippus and Agathias rather than with any pre-existing rhetorical production. Indeed, it is almost suggested that the poem had no immediate antecedents on which to draw — to the point that it can be argued that Paul the Silentiary must have read Claudian, for where else could he have hit upon the personification of Roma?⁹⁹ There is a danger in all this that the picture now emerging will not leave sufficient room for the missing pieces which may be necessary in order to make sense of the fact that in 562 Justinian *did* commission a panegyric ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia in a very learned idiom. Are we to believe that the commission

97. Chorikios' oration on the Brumalia of Justinian (edd. Foerster-Richsteig, 175-9) hardly counts, since it was not recited in the emperor's presence, nor, as far as we know, communicated to him.

98. Cameron, *Procopius, passim*, esp. ch. 2; Scott, *op.cit.*, 104-6 and literature cited.

99. Mary Whitby, *Paul the Silentiary and Claudian*, esp. 512ff.

was the first of its kind, and that only at this late stage in his reign did Justinian choose to have his achievement advertised in epic style, as had been done for Anastasios?¹⁰⁰ There may be something in this supposition, given that Justinian had consciously ushered in a new, vigorous style of government,¹⁰¹ but by 560 had lost much of his confidence, and was having to answer criticisms that he had brought war and destruction where Anastasios had brought peace and prosperity. We should also note that a long and fulsome hexameter panegyric ran round the walls of Juliana Anicia's church of St. Polyeuktos — a building to which, as Martin Harrison has pointed out, Justinian's Hagia Sophia marked a reaction in more ways than one.¹⁰²

However, there are some indications that the *Ekphrasis* represents a continuity rather than a revival of traditional court rhetoric. First, John the Lydian records that he was graciously allowed to recite an imperial encomium.¹⁰³ Second, when Paul tells us (135ff.) that *today* he is not going to celebrate the emperor's military victories, he is surely implying that he, or others, have done so already. Third, the timeless quality of his description, and its lack of reference to architectural modifications made after 558, may well reflect a certain dependence on earlier descriptions — perhaps an ekphrasis written for the first dedication in 537. Fourth, the poem has certain important features in common with Procopius' *Buildings*. Both works pointedly celebrate the emperor's achievements in peacetime; both praise him as a builder of churches, harbours, and the Sangarios bridge; both begin by praising the emperor's clemency to conspirators who have plotted against his life; both characterise opposition

100. In poems by Christodoros of Koptos and Kollouthos: *Suda-Lexikon*, s.v.; cf. Alan Cameron, 'Wandering Poets: A Literary Movement in Byzantine Egypt', *Historia* 14 (1965) [repr. in *Literature and Society in the Early Byzantine World* (London 1985)] 480-1.

101. On Justinian's ideology of renewal, cf. M. Maas, 'Roman History and Christian Ideology in Justinianic Reform Legislation', *DOP* 40 (1986) 17-31.

102. Above, n. 14; cf. R.M. Harrison, 'The Church of St. Polyeuktos in Istanbul and the temple of Solomon', *Okeanos, Essays presented to Ihor Sevchenko*, edd. C. Mango — O. Pritsak [= Harvard Ukrainian Studies, 7 (1983)] 276-9 and works cited in n. 19.

103. *De magistratibus*, III, 28; cf. Cameron, *Procopius*, 11.

to the emperor as rebellion against God; and both proceed to a description of Hagia Sophia which, as we have already noted, follows much the same order in both works. Whether the *Buildings* was written towards the beginning or towards the end of the decade 550-60,¹⁰⁴ it is clear evidence that the encomiastic image of Justinian which we find in Paul the Silentiary was well established by 562. And although this image must have been sharpened in response to the calamities of the 540s and 550s, we can probably assume that it existed in its essentials from the aftermath of the Nika riot, when Justinian first needed to emphasise his healing, intercessory piety.¹⁰⁵

Yet to emphasise the continuity of the rhetorical tradition in which Paul the Silentiary was writing is not to suggest that this tradition was static. Just as Paul's *Ekphrasis* goes beyond those of Chorikios in its skilful use of rhetorical convention and its evocation of sacred symbolism, so it goes beyond Procopius' *Buildings*, not only in its superior descriptive technique, but also in developing intercession as a panegyric theme. This advance may reflect the greater ease with which a younger generation adapted classical genres to Christian purposes. What it certainly reflects is the ceremonial needs of the extended rededication festival. The *Ekphrasis* is not only a panegyric epic; it also, as has been said, takes the place of a votive inscription, and has therefore to be understood in another literary context — that of the psalms, hymns, prayers, and sermons which accompanied the encaenia ceremony on 24 December 562. We happen to possess the text of a kontakion composed for the occasion.¹⁰⁶ However we rate this piece as literature it is, as *theoria*, a remarkably com-

104. *Ibid.*, 9-12; the case for a later dating has recently been argued by Michael Whitby, *op.cit.* (above, n.39) 145ff; see also R. Scott, 'Justinian's Coinage and Easter Reforms and the date of the *Secret History*', *BMGS* 11 (1987) 215-21. There seems to have been no attempt to pursue the possible compromise solution: that different parts of *The Buildings* were composed at different times. For the view that Book I was originally a separate panegyric; see G. Downey, 'Notes on Procopius, *De Aedificiis*, Book I', *Studies presented to David M. Robinson* II (St Louis 1953) 719-725.

105. See Romanos' kontakion *On earthquake and fire*, composed early in 537; *Hymnes*, ed. J. Grosdidier de Matons, V, 470-9, esp. strophes 18ff.

106. Ed. C.A. Trypanis, *Fourteen Early Byzantine Cantica*, Wiener byzantinistische Studien 5 (Vienna 1968) no. 12; p.141ff; translations and commentary by Palmer, 137ff. *infra*.

prehensive statement of the theological significance of the church building, and in its own way is as important a landmark in the articulation of this type of thought as the more famous Edessa hymn. It lacks the Syriac text's number symbolism and specific architectural reference. But it makes the same analogies with the cosmos and the Tabernacle, it is altogether much richer in Old Testament references, and it introduces themes which are beyond the scope of the Syriac hymn yet highly significant for the Byzantine future as well as highly relevant to the occasion: Wisdom building herself a house; the Word dwelling in an *empsychos naos* of human flesh; the church as heaven on earth; extended comparisons with Solomon and the Temple; the living presence of Christ in the church, which is called a 'copy of the liturgy of those on high'. Significant for the future, too, is the didactic way in which the text keeps signalling its symbolism, through words like *skia*, *typos*, *ektypōma*, *eikonisma*, and through pointed juxtaposition of the 'sensible' (*aistheton*) with the 'imaginable' (*noeton*). This is unmistakably the world of Pseudo-Dionysios and Maximos the Confessor.

But it is still the world of Paul the Silentiary. The hymn celebrates the church as a heaven on earth, superior to the firmament as a beacon of divine light to those adrift in the ocean of sin, a universal structure built to endure until the end of the world. We have been here before.

In language and in the circumstances of its delivery, the hymn was accessible to a wider public than the *Ekphrasis* which Paul the Silentiary recited a week later to a select audience of dignitaries. In a sense, therefore, the two works were doing the same thing at different social and cultural levels. But the one was not a mere *metaphrasis* of the other. The hymn went straight to the point, and approached the building from the revealed truth of Scripture and exegesis. The *Ekphrasis* arrived at spiritual revelation through physical contemplation of the builder and the building. It celebrated the church as a work made by imperial hands, while the hymn all but presented Hagia Sophia as an *acheiropoieton*.¹⁰⁷ The two approaches, though complementary,

107. Cf. Procopius, *De aed*, I, 1, 61.

were opposite, and by no means equal. For there can be no doubt that the hymn came first, in more than one sense. It did not need the *Ekphrasis* in order to be understood, whereas the *Ekphrasis* had to assume prior knowledge of the concepts expounded in the hymn. Moreover, the *Ekphrasis* makes several direct concessions to theology, but the hymn makes no concessions to any conventions of classical literature.

All the same, the close coincidence of the two approaches is significant. In purely literary terms, it helps to explain their differences; the depth and subtlety of the *Ekphrasis* make up for the abstraction and flatness of the hymn. In social and political terms, the commission and performance of the former can be seen as a way of reconciling sophisticated opinion to the programme expressed by the latter. And it may just be that Justinian himself was not satisfied with having his church celebrated only in hymns and homilies, but wanted to hear about it in a literary work of architecture which did more than indulge his megalomania and his passion for theology — a work that matched his own very concrete and confident vision of what he wanted the architects of his policy to achieve.

Paul the Silentiary's *Ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia* is as exceptional as the building it celebrates, and it is difficult to draw from it conclusions which are valid for the genre as a whole — except that each ekphrasis must be treated on its own merits. No other architectural ekphrasis is so successful, or tells us so much about the circumstances which gave rise to it, or represents such an important moment in the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages. Equally, no other object of ekphrasis is so well preserved, or so well documented, as Hagia Sophia.

Nevertheless, the insights we have gained can be helpful in studying other, more elusive texts. By way of illustration, it is useful to consider five descriptions of buildings written during the 'Macedonian Renaissance' of the ninth and tenth centuries, when ekphrasis, along with other ancient rhetorical genres, came back into fashion after the cultural recession of the 'Dark Ages'. Three texts were written to celebrate the encaenia of newly built churches: Photius' homily on the Pharos church in the

Palace,¹⁰⁸ and Leo VI's homilies on the churches built by Antony Kauleas and Stylianos Zaoutzes.¹⁰⁹ All three contain ekphrastic *topoi* which we have encountered in Paul the Silentary; at the same time, they differ from the ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia far more than this differs from the descriptions by Chorikios. Photius and Leo have nothing to say about the civic setting, and allude to the fact of the dedication festival without giving any graphic details. They hardly mention architectural forms, but concentrate on the precious metals and rare marbles, and on the iconographic programme of the ceiling mosaics, which they describe in strictly descending order. At the same time, they insist that the church is a material manifestation of immaterial beauty. This mode of presentation can be explained in four ways. It can be explained in generic terms as a reversion to an old Greek tradition of emphasising the building materials and the figural decoration. In art-historical terms, it can be explained as a response to the new theory and practice of ecclesiastical architecture, which liked to see the church as a model of heaven on earth, a hierarchy of bodiless icons suspended from above rather than built up from below. Closely linked with this is the *historical* explanation, which would put both the texts and the buildings in the context of the triumph of Orthodoxy over Iconoclasm, and of the effort to present this as a revival of authentic, native tradition. The same line of explanation would also link the disappearance of the civic context with the decline of the ancient city. But neither together nor separately are these explanations complete without reference to the occasional context of the homilies. Each was clearly written to be delivered in the building it described, as part of the dedication service, and not as the centrepiece of a separate ceremonial recital. It is not surprising, therefore, that in each case the description is cursory and selective, but incorporates explicit mystical interpretation of the church structure. The literary celebrations which at the rededication of

108. Most easily accessible in the translation by C. Mango, *The Homilies of Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople* (Cambridge, Mass, 1958) 184-90.

109. Ed.. Akakios, *Λέοντος τοῦ Σοφοῦ πανηγυρικοὶ λόγοι* (Athens 1868), 243-8, 274-80; partial translation by Mango, *Art*, 202-5.

Hagia Sophia belonged to two separate occasions are here fused into one.

That the register used in the ekphrastic homilies of Photius and Leo VI was largely imposed by the occasions for which they were delivered, and that these and other Byzantine writers of the period had a much wider range of descriptive options at their disposal, can easily be demonstrated. It is sufficient to read Photius' description of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem to appreciate that he could write a precise, matter-of-fact architectural description when he was asked for information.¹¹⁰ Constantine the Rhodian's *Ekphrasis of the Church of the Holy Apostles* contains important elements which are missing in the homilies — civic setting, detailed architectural description, enumeration of different marbles — and it contains them, surely, because it is not a homily itself.¹¹¹ Its lack of any reference to celebrations suggests, indeed, that it was not even recited ceremonially. Whether it was based on an earlier, Justinianic, description of the church,¹¹² or whether it set out to do for the Holy Apostles what Paul the Silentiary had done for Hagia Sophia, it was clearly inspired by sixth-century traditions of architectural ekphrasis. Of course, it is unmistakably a tenth-century work, and not only because it is written in iambics and addresses itself to Constantine Porphyrogenitus. Its evocation of the civic setting has a patriotic and antiquarian flavour, and it lays great stress on the iconic decoration. Its heavy, explicit tetradic symbolism is a far cry from Paul the Silentiary's subtle poetic allusiveness. Yet such an allusiveness was also appreciated, and cultivated, in the Macedonian Renaissance. Leo Choïrosphaktes wrote an anacreontic ekphrasis for the inauguration of a bath house built by Leo VI.¹¹³ The poem makes a cyclical and anagogical progression through the bath's iconography, which it describes in very sen-

110. Ed. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus (St. Petersburg 1892); tr. J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (Warminster 1977) 146.

111. Ed. E. Legrand, 'Description des oeuvres d'art et de l'église des Saints Apôtres de Constantinople', *REG* 9 (1896) 32-63.

112. There may be an echo of a Justinianic ekphrasis in the fulsome treatment of Justinian as opposed to Constantine (l.365ff).

113. See P. Magdalino, 'The Bath of Leo the Wise and the 'Macedonian Renaissance' Revisited', *DOP* 42 (1988), forthcoming.

sual terms while only hinting at its allegorical significance. The reason for this is clearly revealed in allusions to metrical encomia and ‘theological doctrines’ inscribed beside the pictures. That such a division of labour between evocative description and didactic inscription was traditional and widespread can be inferred from the works of Paulinus of Nola, whose lucid, empirical descriptions of churches contrast with the symbolic, exegetical content of the verses which he composed to be inscribed on their walls.¹¹⁴

The close and vital relationship between construction and context which we have discerned allows us to propose the following model. An ekphrasis occupies the three-dimensional space formed by the intersection of four planes: (1) that of objective description; (2) that of literary form; (3) that of historical context; (4) that of occasional context. Our task is to visualise the resulting tetrahedron in relation to the surrounding pieces which correspond to each of its four surfaces. In this, the historical and occasional planes are just as important as the descriptive and formal ones. It makes a difference whether an ekphrasis was part of, or accessory to, a liturgical ceremony, and whether it was presented inside or away from the building described. It also makes a difference whether it was the product of studious composition, or whether it was improvised at short notice. Here it is instructive to set beside Paul the Silentiary some twelfth-century verses on a piece of ancient sculpture, which the author, as he tells us in the title, was required to compose on the spot as a test during a job interview.¹¹⁵

The trouble is, of course, that such pointers are rare, now that each ekphrasis has become detached from the cavity into which it originally fitted, and the surrounding pieces can almost never be recovered. The ekphrasis as we see it is an isolated gem rather than a jewel in a setting. It is also a distorting prism, transparent but refractory, which when looked at through its descriptive and literary facets seems to reduce its historical and occasional dimen-

¹¹⁴ R.C. Goldschmidt, *Paulinus’ Churches at Nola. Texts, Translations and Commentary* (Amsterdam 1940).

¹¹⁵ See O. Lampsides, ‘Beitrag zur Biographie des Georgios Paläologos des Megas Hetäreiarches’, *B* 40 (1970) 394.

sions to insignificance. Ekphrasis, like other Byzantine literary genres, tends all too easily to abstract itself from its context. This may tempt us to conclude that the search for a particular context is futile, and that we should read ekphrastic texts, just as we are now being urged to read works of art, without attempting to invest them with a topicality that they do not themselves acknowledge.¹¹⁶ Paul the Silentiary's *Ekphrasis* will help us to resist this temptation, in art as well as in literature. Here we have a work that is demonstrably both topical and timeless — its timelessness being a function of its topicality. It shows the great Byzantine optical illusion under construction. It shows the lengths to which Byzantines would go to blind the Evil Eye of Time, even when they half believed that the Second Coming was at hand.

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116. See R. Cormack, 'Patronage and New Programs of Byzantine Iconography', *The 17th International Byzantine Congress, Major Papers* (New York 1986) 609-38, esp. 620-1.