Revisiting Lips Monastery.  
The inscription at the Theotokos Church once again.  
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Istanbul, late afternoon of March the 24th, 2010. After a long day, we, a group of twenty-one Byzantinists, participants in the LABS tour organized by Dr Lucas Schachner and Dr Georgi Parpulov, arrived at the Fenari Isa Camii (Lips Monastery). Working on epigrams myself, I stood dumbstruck in front of the famous inscription on the Theotokos Church. It was my first visit to the monument. At the beginning of this year, and thanks to the hospitality and help of the former member of the OBS Dr Efthymis Rizos, I had the chance to visit the περικάλλεα ναόν again. The specific purpose of the second visit was to understand the spatial arrangement and the significance of the inscription.

Before continuing, I would like to provide some information on the ‘vicissitudes’ of the building. The consecration of the Theotokos Church (North church) was celebrated in June 907. The church was the core of a monastic settlement. Nothing is known about the monastery or the church until the very late thirteenth century, when Theodora Palaiologina, widow of Michael VIII, restored and expanded the monastery. At this point, a church dedicated to St. John the Forerunner (South church) was attached to the Theotokos Church. Almost contemporaneously, a long exonarthex was added to both churches. After 1453, the complex remained in Christian hands until after 1460, when it was turned into a mescid (small mosque without a pulpit) although without any critical alterations. In 1633, the complex was seriously affected by a fire which destroyed half of the city. Three years later, it became a regular mosque. Radical changes to the structure occurred around this time. Moreover, the building was damaged by conflagrations in 1782 and 1917. The latter allowed the first systematic investigation of the monument by Theodore Macridy in 1929. In the 1960s, the building was studied again by archaeologists and the restoration was conducted. Today, it is a fully functioning mosque. The archaeological report by Macridy was translated and edited by Cyril Mango in DOP 18, 1964, 253-77. Remarks and findings by Arthur Megaw, Cyril Mango and Ernest Hawkins and after the 1960s survey were published in the aforementioned volume on pp. 279-315 and in DOP 22, 1968, 177-84. In 2004, Vasileios Marinis completed his PhD thesis with the title The Monastery tou Libos. Architecture, Sculpture and Liturgical Planning in Middle and Late Byzantine Constantinople at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The inscription I was so taken by can be found on the east façade of the Theotokos Church. It clearly dates from the tenth century. Much of the text is missing. The remaining inscription reads:

[...]Ε[Ε]Χ ΠΟΘΟΥ † ΜΗΤΡΙ ΘΕΟΙ ΝΕΩΝ ΠΕΡΙΚΑΛΛΕΑ ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΣ † [...]ΟΝ ΟΛΙΒΙΟΝ ΕΡΓΩΝ † ΥΡΑΝΙΩΝ ΦÆΩΝ ΟΙΚΗΤΩΡΑ ΚΑΙ ΠΟΛΙΟΥΧΟΝ † ΤΟΝ ΔΕΙΣΟΝ ΠΑΝΑΧΡΑΝΤΕ ΠΡΟΑΙΡΕΣΙΝ ΑΝΤΙΜΕΤΡΟΥΣΑ † † ΝΑΟΣ ΤΟ ΔΩΡΩΝ Ω ΜΑΘΗΤΑΙ Τ[---] [...] from affection. Constantine (offers) to the mother of God a gorgeous church [...] blessed deed; measuring his (pious) disposition, show him, oh Panachræde (most pure Lady), to be inhabitant and citizen of the heavenly splendour (Paradise). My gift is a church, oh Disciples (of Chist) [...]  

The inscription consists of three epigrams. The epigrams are separated by crosses and the verses by three dots. There are no spelling mistakes. One epigram is in hexameter and two are in dodecasyllables. The first epigram is written in dodecasyllables. The use of the word πόθος is typical for dedicatory epigrams. The second epigram is written in impeccable hexameters. The use of the word Πανάχραντε led some scholars to believe that the church was named Παναγία Πανάχραντος. However, the modifier Panachrantos is very frequent in relation to the Virgin Mary (see TLG). At the third verse, Constantine asks Mary to grant him a place in Paradise. The word πολιούχος is usually used for the patron saint or the Virgin, however in this case it has its literal meaning: dweller of the city (see scholia in Aeschylus, ed. O.L. Smith, Θ, 69b, cf. πολιούχος: Aeschylus, Eumenides 775). The phrase οἰράντα φάσια can be found in one of the sepulchral epigrams by Gregory the Theologian for his mother Nonna (The Greek Anthology, ed. Beckby, VIII, 38). Furthermore, the phrase οἰκήτωρ

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The cornices on which the inscription was possibly written may have continued around the building. The walls are separated into three registers by the cornices and the inscription is written on the upper cornices. Regrettably, this level is covered by the new constructions at the south and the north façades. The remnants of the original north façade suggest that the cornices originally continued and the east façade of chapel A also indicates such a continuation of the cornices. According to archaeologists, the window looking onto the south terrace (fig. 2, i) became a door, while some kind of construction was built at this place. Looking at photographs before the restoration, like the pictures from the Nicholas Artamonoff’s collection (now at Dumbarton Oaks, fig. 3), it becomes evident that the two churches were connected at that point by a Turkish construction which filled perfectly the Palaiologan structure. It is possible that the cornices were demolished at the moment of construction of the Palaiologan church in order to accommodate the new plan. Nowadays, the level of the cornices is evidently missing (see fig. 4). Therefore, what evidence there is does seem to suggest that the cornices ran around the building. This view is corroborated by comparing the Theotokos Church to the Myrelaion (Bodrum Camii), where the cornices encircle the church (see C.L. Striker, The Myrelaion, 1981).

It remains puzzling how much of the epigram is actually missing. Fragments from the dedicatory inscription for three of the seven dedications of the building have been preserved. There is no reason to assume that they were limited to the cornices of the pastophoria and the main apse, since the rest of the cornices are missing. Mathematics can perhaps offer some help. Following the plan by Arthur Megaw, the length of the second epigram (the only surviving inscription with a start and an end) runs along the central apse, for 6.67 metres. If the length of all the epigrams was approximately the same (four verses), then a sum of approximately 47 metres can be calculated. However, it is equally possible that each epigram ran for just two or three verses, although the evidence from the dodecasyllabic epigrams suggests that they did run for at least two verses, with one verse probably mentioning the donation and the second being an invocation for the donor. Moreover, the epigrams could not have

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run for more than four verses each, given that four verses is the length of the main dedication. Therefore, if the remaining six epigrams had three verses each, the total length of the inscription could have been around 37 metres and if they consisted of two verses, the inscription could have measured around 27 metres.

Given these numbers, it seems impossible that the epigram ran right around the building, which has a perimeter of 85.50 metres. Arguably, the epigram on the cornices at the fourteenth-century chapel next to the Pammakaristos church runs only the West and the South façades, while the cornices continue also at the East side (Manuel Philes, ed. Miller, I, 223, cf. C. Mango in: The mosaics and frescoes of St. Mary Pammakaristos (Fethiye Camii) at Istanbul, 1978, p. 16, n. 76.).

The East façade of the Theotokos Church measures 21.78 metres and thus the inscription most probably covered the whole façade (fig. 2, zone A). Furthermore, the inscription perhaps borrowed some space from the two side façades (North and South). It could have run for 34.2 metres if it covered just the external façades of chapels A and B (fig. 1, zone B); if it ran to just before the narthex, this adds up to 54.18 metres (fig. 1, zone C). If the latter hypothesis is correct then the inscription would encircle the most sacred part of the building and reach a level up to the apses of chapels 3 and 4.

Unfortunately, since so much is missing from the original building, it is not possible to suggest the exact spatial arrangement with certainty. Nonetheless, what is suggested by the inscription itself is a linear arrangement, which reinforces the idea of the oral performance of the inscribed epigram. In other words, the tenth-century viewer was able to walk around the building reading the epigram aloud. This way he re-enacted the prayers for Constantine Lips.

In contrast to what has been recently suggested (L. James, Art and text in Byzantium, 2007, p. 191), I found the inscription perfectly legible. In the tenth century it must have been even easier to read, since the letters were originally inlaid with lead and this has unfortunately been lost. As expected for an inscription before the year 1000, there are no abbreviations or ligatures diminishing the readability of the text. The inscription stands about 7 metres high, is at a good angle and the letters are 9 centimetres high.

The literacy level of the audience is a crucial issue. In order to understand the elaborate epigram, a high level of education would have been necessary. The church was established at the time of the Macedonian Renaissance by a high court official. Symeon the Logothete (ed. I. Bekker, 280) mentions that the Emperor himself visited the monastery for the occasion of its consecration. The monastery had a high status, since it was, right from the beginning, under the direct jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople (σταυρωτήριον, Marinis, 79–80). Consequently the intended immediate audience (the imperial court) was able at least to read the inscription (though it is not certain that how many of them were able to understand it). Unfortunately, nothing is known about the tenth-century convent and the literacy of the nuns or the monks. Also, it is not know whether pilgrims could visit the church easily. At any rate, the very existence of the highly sophisticated inscription would add to the importance of the foundation.

My final point is that the multiple epigrams, which correspond to the multiple dedications of the church, have a special role relating to the salvation of the donor. Each saint is basically asked to pray separately for Constantine. Convincingly, the hexametric inscription covers the full length of the central apse of the church, i.e. the place nearest the altar. This was a deliberate choice: the final cross is accompanied by three dots, so that the inscription covers up to the end of the side of the apse. The inscription has the role of a constant, immediate (given its placement), invocation to the Theotokos. Additionally, when the pilgrim entered the central nave, he or she would read on the lintel: Theotokos, help your servant Constantine (Θεοτόκε βοήθει τῷ σῷ δούλῳ Κωνσταντίνῳ; Macridy, DOP 22, 1968, 259). The whole building and its spectators are praying for the salvation of the donor (who perhaps was buried there – see V. Marinis, DOP 63, 2009, 63–4): each saint, the members of the convent and the pilgrim are thus placed into an intercessory role on behalf of Constantine.
Figures:


2. Roof Plan, North Church, without post tenth-century addition. Redrawn after E. Mamboury's plan (printed in Th. Macridy, DOP, 18, 1964, fig. 9) and edited.

- Surviving construction
- Missing but attested construction
- Hypothetical construction

3. South Church, Late 1930’s. Nicholas V. Artamonoff Collection, Item #135.