

DUMBARTON OAKS

ART • NATURE • SCHOLARSHIP

The Byzantine Portrait: Personhood and Representation **Byzantine Studies Symposium** **April 19-20, 2024** **Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC**

FRIDAY, APRIL 19

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| 8:30 a.m. | Registration and Coffee, Music Room |
| 9:00-9:10 a.m. | Welcome
Thomas B.F. Cummins and Nikos D. Kontogiannis, Dumbarton Oaks |
| 9:10-9:30 a.m. | Introduction
Benjamin Anderson, Cornell University, and Ivan Drpić, University of Pennsylvania |

Identity and Personhood in Intellectual Discourses: the Theological and Philosophical, the Scientific, and the Literary Chair: Claudia Rapp, University of Vienna

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| 9:30-10:15 a.m. | "The Ever-Depictable Individual, the Ever-Relative Image: Navigating Permanence and Transience in Byzantine Iconophile Thought"
Alexis Torrance, University of Notre Dame |
| 10:15-11:00 a.m. | "Principles of Differentiation and Identity in Greek Scientific Manuscripts"
Stavros Lazaris, CNRS & Catholic University of Paris |
| 11:00-11:15 a.m. | Coffee and Tea |
| 11:15 a.m.-12:00 p.m. | "The Literature of the Self in Byzantium"
Stratis Papaioannou, National Hellenic Research Foundation |
| 12:00-2:30 p.m. | Lunch and time in the Gardens |

Portraits of Contemporaries, Those Living or Recently Deceased: Emperors, Donors, and the Occupants of Tombs Chair: Dimiter Angelov, Harvard University

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| 2:30-3:15 p.m. | "The Empire's Three Persons"
Benjamin Anderson, Cornell University |
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- 3:15–4:00 p.m. "Imperial Donors: Portraiture and Gift-Giving"
Cecily Hilsdale, McGill University
- 4:00–4:15 p.m. Coffee and Tea
- 4:15–5:00 p.m. "Between Stone and Soul: Shaping Byzantine Personhood
through Tomb Epigrams"
Foteini Spingou, The University of Edinburgh / Durham
University
- 5:00–7:00 p.m. Reception in the Orangery and Memorial for Robert Ousterhout
Margaret Mullett, Dumbarton Oaks, and Ivan Drpić, University
of Pennsylvania

SATURDAY, APRIL 20

- 8:30 a.m. Registration and Coffee, Music Room

Portraits of Historical Figures: Those Renowned for Their Holiness and for Their Writings Chair: Elizabeth Bolman, Case Western Reserve University

- 9:00–9:45 a.m. "Book-men: Symbolic Portraits of Ascetics' Lives in Late Antique
Egypt"
Thelma K. Thomas, New York University
- 9:45–10:30 a.m. "Physical Appearance and Literary Production as Aspects of
Personal Identity in Byzantine Hagiography"
Martin Hinterberger, University of Cyprus
- 10:30–10:45 a.m. Coffee break
- 10:45–11:30 a.m. "Author Portraits in Byzantine Manuscripts"
Karin Krause, The University of Chicago
- 11:30 a.m.–2:00 p.m. Lunch and time in the Gardens

Modes of Representation: the Mimetic, the Non-Mimetic, and the Inbetween Chair: George Demacopoulos, Fordham University

- 2:00–2:45 p.m. "How to Portray a Serbian King"
Ivan Drpić, University of Pennsylvania
- 2:45–3:30 p.m. "Distributed Personhood and the Byzantine Lead Seal"
Alicia Walker, Bryn Mawr College
- 3:30–3:45 p.m. Coffee and Tea

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3:45-4:30 p.m.

"Condensing Personhood: The Monogram as a Non-Mimetic
Form of Individual Representation"
Michael Grünbart, University of Münster

Concluding Remarks

Chair: Christina Maranci, Harvard University

4:30-5:00 p.m.

Concluding Remarks
Aden Kumler, University of Basel

The Byzantine Portrait: Personhood and Representation Byzantine Studies Symposium April 19-20, 2024 Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC

Benjamin Anderson and Ivan Drpić, Symposiarchs

In recent years, questions of identity, individuality, and subject formation have been at the forefront of Byzantine studies. Scholarship on autobiographical writings, for instance, has demonstrated that the adoption of exemplary voices and roles can enable self-expression, and therefore that the individual and the normative are not necessarily opposite. Similarly, students of Byzantine theology have drawn attention to the discourse on personhood that developed in the course of the trinitarian and iconoclastic controversies, and allowed Byzantine thinkers to conceive of the human subject both in its autonomy and in its relation to others. The cumulative effect of these studies is to undermine the strict dichotomy between individual and type. Subject formation in Byzantium is no longer negatively defined by the absence of Renaissance individualism. It is understood instead as a process of self-definition through engagement with multiple, sometimes widely varying, models.

These advances urge a reconsideration of the category of portraiture in Byzantine culture. How did individual and type play out in the visual realm? What was the human face ontologically and epistemologically, and how did it disclose identity? How did various conceptual frameworks and contexts of use—theological, legal, or ritual—enable portraits to stand in for, rather than merely represent, their human referents? And how did other media of representation, including inscriptions, monograms, and seals, relate to physiognomic likenesses? In pursuing these questions, we hope to formulate a new model of the Byzantine portrait. Such a model will necessarily be dynamic, changing over time as artistic media and conceptions of the self change. By bringing together art historians and scholars of Byzantine literature and theology, we seek to foster dialogue across disciplinary boundaries. Furthermore, we hope to place Byzantine images and texts in relation to recent historical and theoretical work on portraiture, personhood, and representation in the wider premodern world.

ABSTRACTS

"The Empire's Three Persons"

Benjamin Anderson, Cornell University

Sinai Codex 364 contains half of John Chrysostom's homilies on the Gospel of Matthew (1-45). One of its two initial miniatures depicts three imperial persons: Constantine IX, Zoe, and Theodora. The accompanying epigram draws an analogy between the Holy Trinity and this "trinity of earthly sovereigns." This paper advances two arguments. First, the Sinai epigram sheds light not only on the accompanying miniature, but also on portraits of the same three sovereigns in other media, including historiography. Second, "the empire's three persons" maintains its salience beyond the eleventh century. Generalized, it distills two key aspects of

Byzantine culture: the tension between hereditary and elective theories of imperial legitimacy, and the relational nature of personhood (what Alexis Torrance describes as “the transposition of Trinitarian theological discussion into anthropological principles”). The contrast to the English legal fiction of “the king’s two bodies” is intentional and instructive.

“How to Portray a Serbian King”
Ivan Drpić, University of Pennsylvania

Among the more remarkable outcomes of the theological debates during the Byzantine iconoclastic crisis was the development of what may be described as a theory of naturalistic portraiture. According to Theodore the Studite (759–826), a great iconophile thinker and a creative reader of Aristotle, an *eikōn* (image or portrait) is nothing but a visual record of a person’s physical traits. Its task is to provide a detailed inventory of all the “depictable” *idiōmata* (accidental properties) that distinguish the subject from other individuals sharing the same human *ousia* (essence). Theory and practice, as is often the case, did not necessarily coincide. Byzantine portraiture was far more varied than what Theodore’s account would suggest; indeed, countless examples show a deliberate rejection of physiognomic specificity in favor of schematic, generalized forms. This tendency is particularly evident in portraits of Byzantine emperors and other lesser potentates. Exceptions do exist, however. In early fourteenth-century Serbia, a country within Byzantium’s cultural orbit, royal imagery came to exhibit an uncommon interest in naturalistic effects. A series of portraits of King Stefan Uroš II Nemanjić (r. 1282–1321)—a monarch better known by his baptismal name, Milutin—purposefully rely on individualizing elements—facial *idiōmata*—to produce a visage that is both specific and immediately recognizable. The present paper seeks to uncover the logic behind this pictorial choice. It asks: What might the portraits of Milutin tell us about the functions and meanings of physiognomic likeness in the wider Byzantine world?

“Condensing Personhood: The Monogram as a Non-Mimetic Form of Individual Representation”
Michael Grünbart, University of Münster

Since the invention of writing, individuals have used their names to indicate ownership of their possessions, give validity to documents with their signatures, and ensure the preservation of their memory. Monograms offer a more elaborate and significant way to express individuality. They abbreviate and replace a name, a function, or a title—or all of them—by combining letters and thus creating a unique visual impression. Due to their compactness, the human eye can perceive them as characteristic graphic signs at a glance. From the fourth to the eighth century CE a vast number of these graphic signs survive on various objects and in different settings. So-called block monograms, known since the Hellenistic period, gave way to cross monograms around 500. Until then, monograms belonged to official insignia representing both the authority and responsibility of a ruler or a community (e.g., monograms impressed on coins or chiseled on column capitals). From the sixth century onward, one observes a democratization of their usage. The sophistication of the administrative system led to a massive increase in evidence.

The advantages of monograms are manifold: they save space, simplify names, serve as signatures, and form graphic symbols. For the latter reason, even less literate people could identify and memorize monograms as “logos” (e.g., stamps of the emperor’s name designed for amphorae or founders’ marks on buildings). At the same time, monograms could remain

nothing but enigmatic combinations of letters, thus concealing their meaning from outsiders. In contrast to the Latin West, in the Greek-speaking Roman world the use of monograms was widespread in society, especially among ecclesiastical and civil dignitaries. The proliferation of monograms, however, also caused problems. Their ubiquity could lead to misunderstandings. Combinations of multiple titles and functions produced chaotic accumulations of letters that one could decipher only with difficulty, if at all. Moreover, the abundance of identical names (e.g., John) and titles (e.g., *patrikios*) further jeopardized the unambiguous attribution of a monogram to a person and, hence, the effectiveness of his or her self-representation. All of this may explain the rapid decrease in the use of monograms in the eighth century. From that point onward, unabbreviated names (and later, family names) became the standard form of self-identification. One exception is the imperial monogram, which, reflecting the exclusive status of its owner, remained unchanged.

"Imperial Donors: Portraiture and Gift-Giving"

Cecily Hilsdale, McGill University

Within the wide corpus of scholarship on portraiture in Byzantium, donor portraits present a compelling case study on account of their transactional nature. Portrayals of dedication across media and period simultaneously picture and produce personhood according to a finely calibrated modality of transaction. Scholars have accounted for the donor portrait within this votive complex as a visual testament of the donation, making concrete for the long term the act of prestation. But donor portraits far exceeded their documentary value on account of their iconic status (what Anthony Cutler calls their "legal iconicity"). This paper re-visits the transactional logic of imperial portraiture as it was mobilized in the context of donation in order to unsettle the type-individual dichotomy precisely because of the official nature of such imagery as a genre or category of analysis rooted in repetition and convention. My suggestion is that in addition to portraits of the emperor pictured explicitly as a donor (as ktetor or founder or benefactor), the imperial image itself was conceptualized as a gift. The emperor's living visual presence was carefully curated by imperial protocol to maximize its epiphanic potential and his portrait was disseminated widely on currency and as a sign of favor on diplomatic gifts. Anchored by the diverse corpus of imperial imagery in the Palaiologan period, including but not limited to illuminated chrysobulls, the paper thus considers the tensions between the generic expectations of imperial portraiture and the aesthetic possibilities of its practical deployment.

"Physical Appearance and Literary Production as Aspects of Personal Identity in Byzantine Hagiography"

Martin Hinterberger, University of Cyprus

Are the description of a saint's physical appearance and the presentation of their literary work—in the case of saintly authors—essential features of a hagiographical portrait? This paper aspires to answer this question by examining a wide range of hagiographical texts scattered over the Byzantine millennium. At first glance, these two elements seem to be indispensable for a portrait to be complete. A saint's physical appearance, however, is a topic found only rarely in Byzantine hagiography. It does not belong to the staple elements usually present in hagiographical texts. We shall present some examples of descriptions of a saint's physical appearance (beginning with Kyrillos of Skythopolis' *Life of Euthymios*) and explore why in a few biographies we find them while in most cases the saint's appearance is considered irrelevant. Similarly, texts written by a saint were available for only a small minority. Whereas

in a few cases the saint's literary production is not even mentioned, in others it is the biography's backbone. We shall focus on the latter category and try to demonstrate that some biographies (e.g., Niketas Paphlagon's *Enkomion of John Klimakos*) rely on their texts rather than the facts of their life.

"Author Portraits in Byzantine Manuscripts"

Karin Krause, *The University of Chicago*

Over the last two decades, interest in the practice and theory of medieval authorship has increased among medievalists including Byzantinists. However, the insights offered by visual images into concepts of authorship have not yet been fully explored. As far as Byzantium is concerned, there exists no broad, let alone comprehensive, examination of what is commonly termed the "author portrait" in art. Drawing on visual and written sources from Byzantium and engaging with previous scholarship, my paper pursues a synthetic approach in the hope that it may spark the exploration of author portraits across time, artistic media, and literary genres. The paper focuses on author portraits contained in manuscripts because of their direct proximity to text.

The talk is organized around the following questions: What defines an author portrait in the first place and what major iconographic categories do exist? Beyond confirming the authenticity and authority of the text, what significance did author portraits have for the creators, patrons, and users of the books they adorn? How are we to explain that portraits of the evangelists by far outnumber those of other authors, including some of Byzantium's most prolific writers? Do the preserved images reveal tensions between the notion of divine inspiration and human creativity? What is the relation between visual depictions of authors and their literary portraits, particularly those encountered in a manuscript's paratexts, such as epigrams? In what ways do painted author portraits complement literary portraits? Finally, what light can icon theory shed on the purpose and perception of author portraits in Byzantium?

"Principles of Differentiation and Identity in Greek Scientific Manuscripts"

Stavros Lazaris, *CNRS & Catholic University of Paris*

By reducing the meaning of the word *mimesis* to the perfect imitation of reality, modern scholars have too often focused on the degree of realism of an image. We then start thinking that for many Greek and Latin scholars the ultimate intention of artists was the *homoiōsis* (or *similitudo*) between a copy and the original. Inexorably we end up believing that a representation individualizes a subject by differentiating it from all others and can lead us to that same subject. In other words, we think we can find the original through a copy, and we view negatively images that cannot do this.

Based on the general theme of the symposium, my paper assesses whether the notion of visual species individualization, particularly amongst representations of animals and plants in Greek scientific manuscripts, had any currency for Byzantine scholars. More specifically, after a brief introduction to *mimesis* of reality in art and its reception in Byzantium, I first focus on how certain images of animals and plants (especially from Dioscorides' *De materia medica*, the *Physiologus*, and Pseudo-Oppian's *Cynegetica*) are depicted. Secondly, I present some of the ideas of Byzantine scholars that undoubtedly influenced the way in which certain images were depicted in scientific manuscripts. Finally, I consider the importance of captions (textual and

visual) in individualization, in terms of recognizing the subject depicted and contributing to the creation of a diachronic identification.

"The Literature of the Self in Byzantium"

Stratis Papaioannou, National Hellenic Research Foundation

Simply measured by its dimensions, the modern obsession with self-expression and self-revelation is perhaps unprecedented in history. But interest in "self-talk" is apparently a universal human phenomenon. This paper traces the ways in which this common trait maps onto Byzantine literary culture. The goal is not to present any comprehensive overview (a rather impossible task), but instead to set some methodological frameworks by which we may approach Byzantine "self-writing" or, else, "literary subjectivity." The latter will be understood here as a defining facet of literary expression, a ubiquitous "I that speaks under the specific angle of its existence" (to quote Paul Celan), which, whether as overpowering presence or as a dim undercurrent, is distinct from merely the function of the author in the workings of discursive production, and is also much wider than the modern genre of "autobiography."

Three basic questions shall be pursued:

- a) what were the parameters which defined the horizon of self-writing for the Byzantines? We shall thus examine (i) relevant theoretical statements by the Byzantines themselves, (ii) the canon of self-representational texts they chose to copy, read, study, and imitate, and (iii) the limitations and opportunities provided by the Byzantine culture(s) of manuscript books, inscriptions, and oral communication;
- b) in what kinds, i.e., of Byzantine texts, genres, and discourse in general—learned or otherwise—should we look for self-writing? and
- c) how was the relation between the speaking subject and character, between person and *persona*, configured in first-person Byzantine discourse? In this regard, a series of test-cases from both canonical and more marginal texts will be explored.

"Between Stone and Soul: Shaping Byzantine Personhood through Tomb Epigrams"

Foteini Spingou, The University of Edinburgh / Durham University

This paper interrogates a distinct form of textual expression: the tomb epigram. Often dismissed as formulaic, the metrical epitaphs attached to tombs are in fact rich in interpretive possibilities, serving as compelling complements to their material counterparts. Texts from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, found both in situ and in manuscripts, demonstrate that tomb epigrams offer a curated narrative of the self, a narrative deeply enmeshed in societal norms and religious virtues, yet profoundly personal and emotional.

Through analysis of evolving styles, content, and commissioners, and juxtaposition with other death- and praise-related genres, it becomes clear that the relevant elements in tomb epigrams are more than mere verbal signifiers. They are moreover vocal expressions of personhood, negotiated between the deceased, their family, and their community, thus making even an absent portrait palpably present. Furthermore, tomb epigrams attached to images serve as double portraits, indicating an aspiration towards the commemoration of idealized forms of identity.

These epitaphs reveal the aims and goals of the deceased and the family left behind, many of whom would be later interred in the same tomb. They thereby embody a form of societal aspiration painted or inscribed on stone. Lament and personal stories in epigrams provide more than a glimpse into sorrow; they shape communal expressions of loss and articulate societal conceptualizations of personal agency, visual representation, and death.

"Book-men: Symbolic Portraits of Ascetics' Lives in Late Antique Egypt"

Thelma K. Thomas, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

The corpus of monastic wall paintings from the churches, chapels, and monastic cells of late antique Egypt is extraordinary for its size and variety. Portraits of monastic elders in these programs, although conceptually sophisticated, are cloaked in easily legible tropes of verisimilitude and idealism. The figures appear like Roman statesmen with their lined faces, grey hair, and beards signaling advanced age and hard-won wisdom, whereas their bodies present the upright bearing of men in their physical prime. Through such enduring conventions of the representation of the human figure and other rhetorical strategies, these portrait programs inserted local heroes into broad historical and eschatological perspectives. The iconographers of these group portraits also developed non-figural signs of virtuous monastic lives, as did their literary counterparts. Recent scholarship has explored the portrayal of ascetic holy men through, for example, the lens of the monastic habit and the tree, symbolic motifs drawn from human facture and divine creation that had the capacity to launch contemplative viewing. This paper focuses on the motif of the book as a meditative prompt and as a symbolic portrayal of ascetic life.

"The Ever-Depictable Individual, the Ever-Relative Image: Navigating Permanence and Transience in Byzantine Iconophile Thought"

Alexis Torrance, University of Notre Dame

Byzantine iconophile thought gave rise to several proposals regarding the concept of individuality. For one, the capacity to be depicted was heralded as a permanent feature of human nature (not least of the humanity of Christ), and thus of each human individual. This theory, developed especially clearly by Theodore the Studite, contained a rather radical affirmation of the ultimate permanence of individual (or hypostatic) characteristics and properties. This in turn implied that the depiction of a particular human being was the depiction of something permanent and, especially evident in the case of the resurrected Christ, was not just a throwback to that human being's existence within a given time or place. More than this, the image was simultaneously a live portrait intimately connected to the living *hypostasis* of the one represented, and likewise contained eschatological content. This interest in the permanence of hypostatic properties or individual characteristics—a corollary, in the end, of belief in the resurrection—was joined, however, with a need to take seriously the question of transience, and particularly in the context of images, the variability and impermanence of depictions that were ostensibly portraying something permanent. After all, the permanence and "immoveability" of the archetype had to pass through the malleable and unpredictable hands of the artist, and the image itself was famously only due "relative" veneration. This paper lays out the theological contours of these discussions, and argues that they mark a significant moment for the understanding of personhood and representation in the Byzantine intellectual tradition.

"Distributed Personhood and the Byzantine Lead Seal"

Alicia Walker, Bryn Mawr College

Byzantine lead seals were deeply personal objects that served an emphatically public-facing purpose: they operated as surrogates for the owner, mobilizing an individual's social authority to accompany documents, letters, and goods that circulated far from the owner's physical self. In this paper, I adapt the anthropologist Alfred Gell's concept of "distributed personhood" to illuminate how seals extended their owner in time and space. I emphasize that this was achieved not only through inscriptions or conventional portraits that directly represented the seal owner, but also through imagery that evoked works of art associated with the elite social environments that seal owners inhabited. By recalling the spaces and things of powerful people, Byzantine lead seals embodied the people themselves.

Some lead seals depict emperors and saints in ways that seem to fulfill the common definition of "portraiture" as a conventional, mimetic representation of a specific individual. But while imperial seals maintain coherency between owner, portrait, and inscription, seals depicting saints demonstrate a more complex relation between the holy person portrayed and the personhood of the owner named by the inscription. In other cases, the connection between seal owner and imagery is more attenuated. I propose that floral, faunal, and geometric motifs in Byzantine lead seals reified the personhood of the owner by evoking the sumptuous material and visual culture that was essential to their high social standing, such that some seal owners defined their own selves through the luxurious things of elite life.