

**Byzantine Missions: Meaning, Nature, and Extent**  
**Byzantine Studies Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks**  
**April 29-30, 2022**

Sergey Ivanov and Andrea Sterk, Symposiarchs

Though closely connected with the study of conversion and Christianization in the premodern era, the history of Christian missions has received little attention in recent scholarship. The recipients of Christian faith—individuals, nations, or social groups—and the processes of integrating the new religion have continued to attract analysis, but the agents of religious transformation have been relatively understudied, especially beyond the boundaries of medieval western Europe.

How did Byzantium missionize “barbarians”? To what extent did the motives, goals, or methods of missionaries themselves correspond with the vision of Byzantine rulers who may have sponsored them? This symposium examines the meaning of religious mission in Byzantium and how this concept shifted over time under changing political circumstances. Speakers consider literary works, linguistic evidence, and archaeological traces from Lithuania in the north to Nubia in the south, from Croatia in the west to the Golden Horde in the east. They examine how imperial policy built on or coincided with the unofficial missionary activity of monks, merchants, exiles, refugees, and captives. Concurrent with imperial efforts, Miaphysite and East Syrian churches, deemed heretical by the Orthodox Byzantines, conducted their own missionary endeavors reaching as far as Central Asia and China. What do the mission strategies of sibling Christianities suggest about underlying theological ideals, and what light might these comparisons shed on the nature of Byzantine missions?

The symposium aims to illuminate the inner motives that characterized Byzantine missions, the changing incentives that inspired them, and the nature of their missionary activity; and ultimately to better understand how the Byzantines perceived the universal claims of their empire and their church. At the same time, the organizers hope to throw light on the broader religious dynamics of the medieval world.

**Friday, April 29**

8:30 a.m.                      Morning Registration and Coffee

9:00-9:15                      Welcome: Tom Cummins and Nikos Kontogiannis, Dumbarton Oaks

**Re-Thinking “Mission” in Byzantium**

Chair: John Duffy, Harvard University

9:15 - 9:45                      *Missions, Emissions, and Toolkits: Byzantium’s Creative Untidiness*  
Jonathan Shepard (University of Oxford)

9:50 - 10:20                      *Byzantine Missionaries, Foreign Rulers, and Conversion to Christianity:  
Historical Events and Byzantine Reconstructions*  
Alexander Angelov (William & Mary)

10:25 - 10:55                      Coffee and Tea

- 10:55 - 11:25      *Building, Teaching, Caring for the Poor: Byzantine Missions in Theory and Practice from John Chrysostom to Clement of Ohrid*  
Andrea Sterk (University of Minnesota)
- 11:30 - 12:00      Discussion of papers
- 12:00 - 2:00        Lunch

### **Comparative Approaches to Mission**

Chair: Ioli Kalavrezou, Harvard University

- 2:00 - 2:30        *Interpreting Accounts of Non-Nicene Mission: Ecclesiastical Historians on Missionary Bishops*  
Anna Lankina (University of Florida)
- 2:35 - 3:05        *Mission, Conversion, and Myth in Syriac Christian Memory*  
Jeanne-Nicole Mellon Saint-Laurent (Marquette University)
- 3:10 - 3:40        Coffee and Tea
- 3:40 - 4:10        *The Road to Bulayiq: Mission and Translation in the Church of the East*  
Joel Thomas Walker (University of Washington)
- 4:15 - 4:45        Discussion of Comparative Approaches
- 4:45 - 5:00        *Remembering Robert Thomson*  
Tim Greenwood (University of St. Andrews)  
Robin Darling Young (Catholic University of America)
- 5:15 - 7:00        Reception in the Orangery

## **Saturday, April 30**

- 8:30 a.m.          Morning Registration and Coffee

### **Geography and Archeology of Mission: Textual and Material Evidence**

Chairs: Dimiter Angelov, Harvard University & Elizabeth Bolman, Case Western Reserve University

- 9:00 - 9:30        *Remembering Saint Gregory: Armenian Tradition and Byzantine Mission*  
Tim Greenwood (University of St. Andrews)
- 9:35 - 10:05      *Sixth-Century Byzantine Missions to Nubia in Context*  
Jitse H.F. Dijkstra (University of Ottawa)
- 10:10 - 10:30     Discussion of papers
- 10:30 - 11:00     Coffee and Tea

- 11:00 - 11:30      *Byzantine Mission on the Black Sea and in the Caucasus: New Data*  
Andrey Vinogradov (National Research University-Higher School of  
Economics, Moscow)
- 11:35 - 12:05      *Byzantine Missions in the Western and Central Balkans in the Light of*  
*Archaeological Findings*  
Maja Petrinec (University of Zagreb)
- 12:10 - 12:30      Discussion of papers
- 12:30 - 2:00        Lunch

### **Encountering Other Religions**

Chair: Claudia Rapp, University of Vienna

- 2:00 - 2:30        *From Byzantium to China: Syriac Christian Missions along the Silk Road*  
Li Tang (University of Salzburg, Austria)
- 2:35 - 3:05        "Peace be upon whoever follows the guidance": Christian and Muslim  
"Mission" in the Late Medieval Middle East  
Thomas A. Carlson (Oklahoma State University)
- 3:10 - 3:30        Discussion of papers
- 3:30 - 4:00        Coffee and Tea

### **Conclusion**

Chair: George Demacopoulos, Fordham University

- 4:00 - 4:30        *Byzantine Missions and the Mission of Byzantium*  
Sergey Ivanov (National Research University-Higher School of  
Economics, Moscow)

## Abstracts

### **Missions, Emissions, and Toolkits: Byzantium's Creative Untidiness** **Jonathan Shepard (University of Oxford)**

Contrasts are obvious between, on the one hand, Constantinople's liturgical celebration of the conversion of Constantine the Great and, on the other, imperial statecraft in practice. Narratives of emperors' responsibility for the baptism of peoples crop up, as in the *Life of Basil I* commissioned by Constantine VII. However, this same emperor's *De administrando imperio* itemizes techniques and tales useful for holding 'barbarians' (including Christian Bulgarians) at bay, while upholding 'Roman' exclusiveness. Behind the façade of continuity maintained by imperial narratives is the fact of territorial fragmentation in the seventh century, followed by piecemeal re-acquisitions between the ninth and mid-eleventh centuries. Such a 'variable-geometry empire' entailed communications between networks of monks and churchmen across imperial borders and, from the ninth century on, quite frequent dealings of officials, churchmen and traders with non-Greek-speaking and non-Christian populations. At the same time mounting prosperity and victories made Byzantium's brand of Christianity alluring, to some outsiders' eyes.

Three aspects of Byzantium's 'variable geometry' in the era from the ninth century on receive attention in this paper: developments in Cherson, whose culturo-religious 'emissions' brought foreign traders within its ambiance and affected modes of ornamentation, if not belief and whose clergy seem to have been well-equipped to communicate with Northerner; the wandering Eastern Christian clerics from the Armenian- as well as Greek-speaking lands now capable of reaching the North Atlantic; and patriarchs who were coping with (and sometimes accommodating) heterodox communities and ecclesiastical structures embedded within imperial borders, or who were intent on bolstering their own role vis-à-vis the emperor. Such volatile variants of Eastern Christianity contrast with the tidier narratives of imperially instigated missions. In practice, they allowed for a diverse pool of clerics and texts to 'leak' beyond the imperial borders, especially towards the north, and for local clergy to seek orientation from Byzantine-born prelates. Such prelates, even if Constantinople-trained, could accommodate local cults and rites, even while upholding an 'imperial' narrative. The 'toolkit' of one such fourteenth-century assignee who found himself in western Rus for a while may illustrate this.

### **Byzantine Missionaries, Foreign Rulers, and Conversion to Christianity: Historical Events and Byzantine Reconstructions** **Alexander Angelov (William & Mary)**

This paper explores comparatively the history of Byzantine Christian missions into Armenia, Georgia, and Bulgaria. According to tradition, this period from the fourth to the ninth century brought about Eastern Orthodoxy's largest expansion to date. Yet, the historical events have been mostly studied from a regional perspective, and the analytical framework has pivoted around issues of nationhood and nation-building. Thus, I return to the ancient and medieval missionaries and the rulers whom they converted in order to explore the role of the Byzantine imperial court. Most of the Byzantine narratives, on which modern historians rely to reconstruct those events, have been written several centuries after the fact. Thus, I argue that it is critical to treat them as cultural retrospections that had their own separate political and cultural agendas, often removed from the original events. I will outline those agendas and will discuss the complex process of historical remembering in Byzantium. In conclusion, I will remark on how sixteenth-century Church politics and theories of secularism shaped modern narratives of Byzantine conversion and have thus distorted our understanding of Byzantine agendas in mission and the development of Eastern Orthodoxy as a whole.

**Building, Teaching, Caring for the Poor:  
Byzantine Missions in Theory and Practice from John Chrysostom to Clement of Ohrid  
Andrea Sterk (University of Minnesota)**

Like the word “conversion,” the Latin term “mission” poses multiple problems for historians of Byzantine Christianity. A dearth of sources on Byzantine missions and the problematic nature of those that exist—a combination of historical, imaginary, and hybrid accounts—further complicates the topic. This paper will tease out several words in the title of our symposium by examining missionary activity on the ground, what Ihor Ševčenko referred to as “the nuts and bolts” of mission. Evangelistic preaching, baptism of new converts, miraculous healings, and translation of Scripture and liturgical works are typically considered dimensions of mission, but what of education, building, farming, and caring for the poor? Were such activities preparation for evangelization, an aspect of missionary work, or simply tools of Byzantine imperialism used to lure barbarians with the benefits of a superior civilization? How did missionaries themselves or those chronicling their activities understand their work; and how did their motivations compare with those of Byzantine authorities who may have sent them?

To address these questions, I will discuss several case studies, from the letters of John Chrysostom to missions among the Slavs and Bulgarians. I will focus on what “missionaries”—whether official or unofficial, successful or unsuccessful—actually did in their efforts to “convert” or lead pagans to Christian faith. While cultural elitism tinged even the most internationalist missionary theorists and practitioners in Byzantium, I will consider not only particular missionary strategies but biblical motifs and theological ideals that both motivated the evangelists and shaped the nature of their missionary endeavors.

**Interpreting Accounts of Non-Nicene Mission:  
Ecclesiastical Historians on Missionary Bishops  
Anna Lankina (University of Florida)**

The early Byzantine ecclesiastical historians all included accounts of Christian missions led by non-Nicene bishops. These historians—the non-Nicene Philostorgius, and the Nicene writers Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret—wrote during the fifth century and covered roughly the same time period of events, around a hundred years from 320-420 CE. Their histories chronicled events in the late Roman Empire during a critical period of political transformation and Christianization. They all wrote from or in the direction of Constantinople and likely shared the same audience of literary elites who seemed to have a heightened interest in historical writing during the fifth century. These intertwined literary works throw light on the historians’ views of mission, the function of missionary accounts within the broader ecclesio-political themes of the histories, and the expectations of the audience concerning mission and missionary bishops. In particular, the accounts of non-Nicene missions illustrate the relationship between mission and heresy/orthodoxy in the ecclesiastical historians.

My paper will focus on the narratives about the non-Nicene Gothic bishop Ulfila and how the different historians connected his story with other Christianization narratives, specifically about Theophilus the Indian (in Philostorgius) and Queen Mavia (in Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret). I will explore whether these Byzantine historians saw differences between Nicene and non-Nicene missions. These non-Nicene mission accounts reveal both the connection between Christianization and the struggle for right belief and the roles imperial and ecclesiastical authorities played in early Byzantine missions.

## **Mission, Conversion, and Myth in Syriac Christian Memory** **Jeanne-Nicole Mellon Saint-Laurent (Marquette University)**

The beginnings of Christianity in the Syriac-speaking world are shrouded in legend. Syriac hagiographic tradition commemorates its missionary apostles who converted Parthian, Arab, and Assyrian kings and their cities to Christianity. These narratives imagined that Jesus himself had commissioned saints like Thomas and Addai to baptize the peoples of the Middle East. Such legends that linked Syriac Christian settlements back to Jesus provided a lineage of local sacred history, and this presentation of a prestigious apostolic past was useful for defending a city's Christian antiquity, the power of a city's shrines and relics, and the orthodoxy and legitimacy of its bishops.

In the sixth century, in the wake of the Christological controversies that divided Christians, the Emperor Justinian commissioned John of Ephesus to convert the pagans in Asia Minor. Mission and conversion became points of collaboration among Christian bishops and rulers who did not champion the same Christological position. Yet mission was also an area of contention and competition. Hagiographers captured the memories of the sixth and seventh century missionaries of the Syriac-speaking world, clothing them in the literary symbols of apostolic missionary saints.

But what portrait do historical sources paint of the Syriac-speaking missionaries of the early Byzantine period? Did they convert large communities of people to Christianity, and if so, then what did that process entail? In this talk, I will explore the missions of the Syriac-speaking Christians as they are presented in historical and epistolary sources, and I will bring this portrait into relationship with hagiographic legends.

## **The Road to Bulayïq: Mission and Translation in the Church of the East** **Joel Thomas Walker (University of Washington)**

Between ca. 400 and 800 CE, the Church of the East – also known as the East Syrian or “Nestorian” church – underwent an extraordinary geographic expansion. From its roots in the Syriac traditions of Mesopotamia, the Church spread to Iran, Central Asia, southern India, and China. While Syriac remained the Church's principal administrative language, translation played an indispensable role in conveying Christian teaching into new regions. The basic contours of this pattern of translation are well known: from Syriac into Middle Persian and Sogdian; and from Sogdian into Turkic (leaving to the side the more complex case of Chinese Christian literature). It is more difficult to ascertain how East Syrian Christians thought about the role and logistics of translation as a tool for mission. Syriac chronicles, hagiography, and synodical records preserve only brief and scattered references to famous episodes of translation. This evidence must be combined, therefore, with inferences drawn from the fragmentary remains of East Syrian literature in Middle Persian, Sogdian, and Turkic, especially the manuscripts discovered in 1905 at Bulayïq in the Turfan oasis of northwestern China. Apparently, the remnants of a monastic library operating in the ninth and tenth centuries, these manuscripts reveal a nuanced East Syrian approach to translation as a tool for mission. The Bulayïq manuscripts also suggest that East Syrian monks – like the Byzantine missionaries to the Goths and Slavs – understood the power of distinctive writing systems for reaching new audiences.

## **Remembering Saint Gregory: Armenian Tradition and Byzantine Mission Tim Greenwood (University of St. Andrews)**

The figure of Saint Gregory the Illuminator dominates the history of the coming of Christianity to Armenia at the start of the fourth century, with Agat'angelos' *History of Armenia* treated as the standard Armenian account. Yet as Thomson and others noted, there is a gap of more than a century between the activities of Saint Gregory and their representation by Agat'angelos, whose account cannot predate the invention of the Armenian script in the early fifth century. In its present form, the *History of Agat'angelos* comprises a number of traditions which may or may not have been associated with the mission of Saint Gregory. Moreover several versions of the narrative of Saint Gregory have been preserved in Greek, Arabic and Syriac which both correspond to and diverge from Agat'angelos' *History*. This narrative was also transformed in various ways in later Armenian compositions, down to the eleventh century and beyond. This paper will analyse this substantial corpus of traditions for what it may reveal about Byzantine involvement in the conversion of Armenia, disentangling the multiple meanings of Armenia in the process. It will further consider why the memory of this involvement was so contested, arguing that it reflects the complex and evolving relationship between Armenian and Byzantine ecclesiastical authorities. Episodes depicting contact and dependence, or separation and isolation, were retained, reimagined or removed as circumstances required. Whatever the original experiences may have been, Byzantium could be remembered as being involved in the mission of Saint Gregory and the conversion of Armenia.

## **Sixth-Century Byzantine Missions to Nubia in Context Jitse H.F. Dijkstra (University of Ottawa)**

In the third part of his *Church History* (4.6-9, 49-53), John of Ephesus offers an engaging story of the efforts by Justinian and Theodora, in 536-548, to send out rival missions to Nubia, the country beyond Egypt's southern frontier. Theodora prevails, making sure that the Nubian king follows miaphysite Christianity. At about the same time (535-537), Procopius (*Persian Wars* 1.19.34-37) reports that Justinian ordered his general Narses to go to southern Egypt and destroy the Isis temple of Philae, a temple island on the Egyptian frontier. In the past, these events have often been directly connected and have been seen as part of a uniform anti-'pagan' policy on Justinian's part regarding Nubia, which resulted in a swift conversion of the country to Christianity.

Departing from and updating my detailed 2008 study (*Philae and the End of Ancient Egyptian Religion*, Ch. 9), in this lecture we will place both accounts in their literary contexts and demonstrate that they are significantly distorted in order to fit the agendas of the authors in question. Moreover, we will argue that there is no necessary relationship between both events, the 'destruction' of Philae being only a rather insignificant, primarily symbolic event. With the emphasis away from both accounts, we will take a fresh new look at what we know about the religious transformation of Nubia from other sources, including archaeology. Much progress has been made in their study during the last couple of decades, showing, for instance, that Christianity arrived much earlier in Nubia than the account of John suggests. As will be shown, these sources significantly enhance our understanding of the process and provide an appropriate background for the sixth century Byzantine missions to Nubia.

**Byzantine Mission on the Black Sea and in the Caucasus: New Data**  
**Andrey Vinogradov (National Research University-Higher School of Economics,**  
**Moscow)**

In recent years, a lot of new data has appeared on the history of Byzantine mission in the Black Sea region and the Caucasus. Gothic graffiti of the sixth, ninth, and centuries were discovered in the Crimean Mountains, which demonstrate, on the one hand, knowledge of the Wulfila Bible, and on the other, the steady use of the triadological formulas, dating back probably to the mission of John Chrysostom. Recent archaeological and epigraphic finds also raise the question of the wider spread of Christianity in the Crimean Mountains in the sixth century and church building activity in the Khazar period. In the Caucasus, an analysis of architectural monuments and related written sources makes it possible to trace previously unknown paths of Byzantine missions. In particular, it turns out that the first churches in Alania of the tenth century were built not only by Abkhazians, but also by Cappadocian master builders. In turn, the Abkhazian kings practiced strong missionary activity in the newly acquired territories (for example, in Svaneti, Racha, and Zekhia). In their competition with the Bagratids of Armenia, they planted the Chalcedonian creed. New inscriptions from Machkhomeri church in Lazica have showed wide links of this pilgrimage centre with the Central Asia Minor. Finally, an analysis of the architecture and liturgical structure of the churches in pre-Arab Armenian and Kartvelian lands shows, contrary to previous opinions, their greater dependence on Syrian missions, as well as the direct intervention of the Byzantine emperors in the monumental representation of Christianity on the lands conquered from the Persians.

**Byzantine Missions in the Western and Central Balkans in the Light of**  
**Archaeological Findings**  
**Maja Petrinc (University of Zagreb)**

At the beginning of the seventh century AD, Byzantine rule over the northern and western territories of the Empire collapsed as a consequence of the Avaro-Slavic incursion, which resulted in the permanent settlement of Slavs and Bulgarians.

The newly arrived peoples soon started to establish their own states. Along with Croatia, Serbia and Bulgaria, a number of small-scale domains, referred to as Sclavinia in Byzantine sources, were formed in the Balkans, where Christianity had started spreading from the west and the east as early as in the ninth century. The expansion of Eastern Christianity can be traced all the way to the eleventh century. In this presentation, attention will be focused on archaeological findings from this period recovered from the western and central parts of the peninsula. Several types of objects belonging to the mid-Byzantine era, precisely individual findings that have been discovered within cemeteries, were thereby taken into consideration. These are pectoral and reliquary crosses (encolpia) as well as other items of personal piety (small icons, rings).

At this point I would also like to briefly refer to the archaeological findings of fragments of stone sculptures with inscriptions in Glagolitic script that originate from eleventh century churches. They not only bear witness to the spreading of Slavic literacy in Croatia and neighboring Sclavinia but are also a direct trace of the Byzantine missions in the Western Balkans.

## **From Byzantium to China: Syriac Christian Missions along the Silk Road Li Tang (University of Salzburg, Austria)**

According to the "Nestorian" Stele of Xi'an (781CE), the first official Christian missionary Aluoben came from the land of "Da Qin", a place which referred to the Roman Orient, i.e. the eastern part of Byzantium. However, Aluoben did not represent the Byzantine Orthodox Church, but rather the Church of the East. Many East Syriac Christians in the Byzantine Empire became victims during the fifth century Christological controversy and were labeled as the "Nestorian" heretics or sect. The suppression of the "Heretics" including the "Nestorians", which was stated in the Justinian Code forced many affected Christians to escape from the Byzantine Empire to the Sasanian territory where they joined the already established and independent Church of the East. For the following nine centuries, the mission of the Church of the East expanded from Persia to Central Asia and China and won converts from various ethnic groups such as Persians, Sogdians, Turks, Chinese and Mongols.

This paper will investigate the strategy, methods and extent of the Church of the East mission by studying primary sources discovered in Central Asia and China, such as Christian manuscripts and tombstone inscriptions from the seventh to the thirteenth century. It seeks to answer the questions how the church adopted to various political, cultural and ethno-linguistic contexts along the Silk Road; what was the challenge when the Christian message was introduced to local audience and translated into local tongues and what was the success and failure of this mission.

## **"Peace be upon whoever follows the guidance": Christian and Muslim "Mission" in the Late Medieval Middle East Thomas A. Carlson (Oklahoma State University)**

Christianity was not the only universalizing monotheism in the late medieval Middle East. Islam competed with Christianity for converts, and conversions in multiple directions are known from the late medieval period. Paul of Antioch's Letter to a Muslim Friend sought to convert Muslims, and was refuted at length by Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī. Paul's letter was expanded in the early fourteenth century into the anonymous Letter from the People of Cyprus, which refined some of the earlier text's arguments and was sent to Taqī l-Dīn Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya and Muhammad Ibn Abī Tālib al-Dimashqī, both of whom wrote large refutations of the document. Al-Dimashqī's refutation, in turn, called the Christian author(s) of the Letter to Islam, although both refutations also sought to confirm Muslims in their belief of the superiority of their own religion. In between Paul of Antioch's letter and its later revision, Ibn Taymiyya himself wrote his Cypriot Letter letter to a Crusader lord, urging him to treat Muslim captives well while also calling him to Islam. These texts reveal certain similarities in the way that Muslims and Christians sought converts (such as the use of audience's own scriptures, thoroughly reinterpreted), as well as some differences, such as the judgment of the audience's religion and the geographical locus of religious authority. Considering these literary attempts to recruit converts also highlight the boundaries and assumptions of the concept of "mission," and the alternative metaphor of da'wa ("calling") used by both Muslims and Christians to describe seeking converts in the late medieval Middle East.

## Byzantine Missions and the Mission of Byzantium Sergey Ivanov (National Research University-Higher School of Economics, Moscow)

A popular Byzantine theory had it that *"you will not whitewash an Ethiopian"*, which means: converting barbarians cannot change their barbaric nature and, therefore, it is senseless. Moreover, it was regarded as humiliating. Emperor Leo III (allegedly) wrote to Khalif 'Umar II: *"Nothing would induce us to discuss with you our doctrines, since our Lord has bidden us to refrain from exposing our unique and divine doctrine, for fear it would be turned to ridicule."* Yet, this is only one side of the coin.

From the ninth century, the Byzantine iconography of the Pentecost began to depict those who would later become the subjects of the mission of the apostles – the "nations and tongues". We have dozens of such images: icons, parchment miniatures, church frescoes and mosaics, ivory plaques, engravings on the bronze doors. While the apostles sitting as if on top of a semicircular arch remain largely the same, the composition and the appearance of the group beneath those arch changes with time reflecting the development of the Byzantine understanding of the goal and method of the Christian mission. The Pentecost scene is ubiquitous, and its analysis will become the main content of my presentation. Many details in the depiction of the "nations and tongues" are difficult to interpret, for example, the emergence of black Africans, whose Christianization could hardly have taken place in the ninth to twelfth centuries - yet this makes an aspiration to convert them even more symbolic. Besides, the topic of missionary work and the depictions of the "nations and tongues" appear in the scenes of the "Sending out of the apostles" and "Teaching apostles". Marginal illustrations of Byzantine Psalteria often show the process of conversion and are sometimes unrelated to the actual verses those miniatures were supposed to illustrate. It is interesting to note that the Western Church, that was much more actively engaged in missions, did not create anything comparable to such iconography.

True, in some miniatures "nations and tongues" are depicted as Kynocephaloi, dog-headed monsters (like the one from the Psalterium illustration that became the logo of our symposium); this artistic device was especially popular in the Armenian iconography of the Pentecost. Of course, such a metaphor hints that all barbarians are sub-human. Yet, this attitude was by no means prevailing. Recently, an inscription was found on the wall of the stair-tower of St. Sophia Cathedral in Novgorod. It reads: ἔθνος ἄγν(οοῦν καὶ δίκαιον ἀπολεῖς;) *"wilt thou slay an ignorant but righteous nation?"* (Gen.20:4). These words, originally addressed to God by Abimelek, here imply the unenlightened Rus'. The graffito was probably left by a Byzantine cleric who lived among this ἔθνος ἄγνοοῦν nearly 2000 km from Constantinople, and who prayed for salvation of those people, despite their ignorance. The Byzantines always oscillated between these two attitudes. Both Greek cultural snobbery and Constantinopolitan imperial haughtiness got in the way of missionary work, but there was still enough room for religious zeal, personal contacts, and diplomatic calculations.