

# Reconsidering the Concept of Decline and the Arts of the Palaiologan Era

## Symposium and Workshop

24<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> February 2017

University of Birmingham

Strathcona Building – room LT4 (on 24<sup>th</sup> Feb)

ERI Building - ERI Atrium (on 25<sup>th</sup> Feb)



This one day and a half conference combines a symposium and a workshop. The aim is to examine and contextualise the artistic and cultural production of the geopolitical centres that were controlled by or in contact with the late Byzantine Empire, such as the Adriatic and Balkan regions, the major islands of Cyprus and Crete, and the regions surrounding the cities of Constantinople, Thessaloniki, and Mystras. This conference will explore the many intellectual implications that are encoded in the innovative artistic production of the Palaiologan Era often simplified by a rigid understanding of what is Byzantine and what is not.

In its last centuries, the political entity of the Empire of the Romaioi released cultural and artistic energies migrating towards new frontiers of intellectual achievements. The intent is to counter-balance the innovation of these works of art with the notion of decline and the narrative of decay frequently acknowledged for this period; and to promote an understanding of transformation where previous cultural heritages were integrated into new socio-political orders.

## Programme

### 24 February 2017 (1st day)

#### *Symposium*

- 14.00-14.10 Opening remarks: prof Leslie Brubaker (University of Birmingham)
- 14.10-15.00 First Keynote lecture and discussion: Dr Cecily Hilsdale (McGill University), Artistic Means and Ends of Later Byzantine Diplomacy
- 15.00-16.00 First panel – Chair Dr Ruth Macrides (University of Birmingham)  
Dr Ivana Jevtic (Koç University-Istanbul), Late Byzantine Painting Reconsidered: Art in Decline or Art in the Age of Decline?  
Andrew Griebeler (University of California, Berkeley), The Greek Botanical Albums in Late Byzantine and Early Ottoman Constantinople  
Maria Alessia Rossi (The Courtauld Institute of Art) Political ruin or spiritual renewal? Early Palaiologan art in context
- 16.00-16.20 Discussion
- 16.30-16.50 Coffee break
- 17.00-17.50 Second Keynote lecture and discussion: prof Niels Gaul (University of Edinburgh), Palaiologan Byzantium(s): East Rome's Final Two Centuries in Recent Research
- 18.00-19.00 Reception

### 25 February 2017 (2nd day)

#### *Symposium*

- 9.00-9.50 Opening keynote lecture and discussion: Dr Angeliki Lymberopoulou (Open University), Palaiologan art from regional Crete: artistic decline or social progress?
- 10.00 -10.40 Second panel – Chair Dr Daniel Reynolds (University of Birmingham)  
Dr Anđela Gavrilović (University of Belgrade), The Stylistic Features of the Frescoes of the Church of the Mother of God Hodegetria in the Patriarchate of Peć (c. 1335-1337)  
Lilyana Yordanova (École pratique des hautes études, Paris) The Issues of Visual Narrative, Literary Patronage and Display of Virtues of a Bulgarian Tsar in the Fourteenth century
- 10.40-11.00 Discussion
- 11.00-11.20 Coffee break
- 11.30-12.10 Third Panel - Chair Dr Francesca Dell'Acqua (University of Birmingham)  
Dr Andrea Mattiello (University of Birmingham), Who's that man? The perception of Byzantium in 15th century Italy  
Tatiana Bardashova (University of Cologne), Palaiologan Influence on the Visual Representation of the Grand Komnenoi in the Empire of Trebizond (1204-1461)

12.10-12.30 Discussion  
12.30-13.50 Lunch break

### ***Workshop***

14.00-15.30 Three 10-mins presentations and 30-mins discussion  
Lauren Wainwright (University of Birmingham), Pyxis with imperial families and ceremonial scenes, Dumbarton Oaks Collection  
Flavia Vanni (University of Birmingham), Cassone with painted front panel depicting the Conquest of Trebizond, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
Oliver Pickford (The Courtauld Institute of Art), The «large» sakkos (dalmatic) of Metropolitan Photios, 1414-17, Kremlin Museum, Moscow

15.30-16.00 Coffee break

16.00-16.50 Two 10-mins presentations and 20-mins discussion  
Jessica Varsallona (University of Birmingham), Mandylion or Sacro Volto, monastery of San Bartolomeo degli Armeni, Genoa  
Elisa Galardi (The Courtauld Institute of Art), Baptism scene, katholikon of the monastery of the Peribleptos, Mystras

16.50-17.00 Closing remarks: Andrea Mattiello/Maria Alessia Rossi

The Symposium and Workshop are organized by Andrea Mattiello (University of Birmingham) and Maria Alessia Rossi (The Courtauld Institute of Art). For info write to: [axm570@bham.ac.uk](mailto:axm570@bham.ac.uk) or to [m.alessiarossi@icloud.com](mailto:m.alessiarossi@icloud.com)

The Symposium and Workshop have been generously funded by:



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

University of Birmingham



Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies (SPBS)



The Courtauld Institute of Art



MARY JAHARIS CENTER  
for BYZANTINE ART & CULTURE  
at Hellenic College Holy Cross

Mary Jaharis Center for Byzantine Art and Culture



A. G. Leventis Foundation

## ***Abstracts***

Dr Cecily J. Hilsdale, *Artistic Means and Ends of Later Byzantine Diplomacy*

The historiography of later Byzantium is invariably understood in teleological terms where decline precipitates the final fall of the empire. Conversely, this essay insists that the concepts of decline and fall, so tightly intertwined by Edward Gibbon, should be disaggregated from one another. The Byzantines of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries may have understood their historical moment as one of decline, but not one that led inexorably towards fall. In the face of pronounced socio-economic exigencies, later Byzantine emperors actively sought to ameliorate their standing in the medieval world and cultural production figured prominently in this agenda. In the opening essay of the 1991 volume *Twilight of Byzantium*, Doula Mouriki and Slobodan Curcic note that “political and economic decline of the Empire was not neatly paralleled by a similar cultural decline” (3). Indeed, politics and culture in the final centuries of the empire were far from parallel, but rather, as this essay suggests, the vibrancy of the artistic sphere was promoted as a diplomatic strategy in attempt to compensate for the socio-economic fragility of the period.

Dr Ivana Jevtic, *Late Byzantine Painting Reconsidered: Art in Decline or Art in the Age of Decline?*

In the historiography of the twentieth century, the concept of decline provided a rich context for consideration of Late Antique culture. In turn, the narrative of decline also influenced the study of Late Byzantine culture. Though this parallelism is rarely observed, both periods are marked by discrepancies between political turbulences, economic weakening, on the one hand, and cultural strength, rich and diverse artistic production, on the other. Furthermore, Late Antique and Late Byzantine arts present a series of comparable contrasts between reuse and originality, conservatism and innovation, naturalism and abstraction, decline and ascendancy. The co-existence of such phenomena in centuries-long cultures reaching their end opens the question whether those artistic processes represent the symptoms of a *fin d'époque* or late style. Do they reflect the decline in art or do they reveal how art develops in the age of decline?

By focusing on the thirteenth and fourteenth-century painting, this essay uses the concept of decline to discuss the retrospective attitude in iconography and style, the revival of the Antique and classicism in Late Byzantine art. The goal is to understand whether those phenomena represent strategies aiming to increase the value and munificence of Byzantine artistic heritage in the face of political decline.

Maria Alessia Rossi, *Political ruin or spiritual renewal? Early Palaiologan art in context*

Past scholarship has identified Andronikos II's reign (1282-1328) as the beginning of the end of the Byzantine Empire. Yet, his policy of healing the divisions inside the Byzantine Church managed to create a less acrimonious atmosphere, ushering the flourishing of the arts and letters.

This paper aims to suggest an innovative reading of this paradox by connecting this period of intense cultural production to the empowerment of the Orthodox Church and its promotion of artistic endeavours. Three figures will be taken into account to show these links. The patron and statesman, Theodore Metochites; the Patriarch of Constantinople, Athanasios (1289-1293 and 1303-1309); and the ecclesiastic historian and writer,

Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos. Specifically, Athanasios' efforts to reform the morals and the administration of Byzantine society will be linked to the new iconographic programme of the Chora monastery, restored by Metochites, and to the account of miracles that occurred at the Zoodochos Pege, written by Xanthopoulos.

After the rejection of the Union, the Church assumed a leading role. Is it possible that the promotion of theological debates and artistic commissions was used to fight the relentless decline? Can Xanthopoulos' account and Metochites' endeavour be expressions of these circumstances? How did the innovative iconographic programmes and miracle accounts express this renewal and at the same time conceal the contemporary military defeats? By taking into consideration both written and visual evidence, this paper aims to contextualise the reign of Andronikos II, suggesting a different interpretation in-between the idea of ruin and renewal.

Andrew Griebeler, *The Greek Botanical Albums in Late Byzantine and Early Ottoman Constantinople*

By the end of the thirteenth century, illustrated botanical albums based on the sixth-century Vienna Dioscorides (Vienna, Nationalbibliothek, cod. med. gr. 1) and the late ninth or early tenth-century Morgan Dioscorides (New York, Morgan Library, MS M 652) begin to appear in Constantinople. Despite shifting historical circumstances, these albums continued to be made in Constantinople even after its conquest by the Ottomans in 1453.

This essay describes the emergence of Byzantine illustrated botanical albums at the end of the thirteenth century, and their continued development over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. While the earliest surviving albums can be grouped together on the basis of their illustrations' sources and methods of illustration, they do not have the same formatting and texts. Each album seems to have been produced for different, idiosyncratic reasons. Fifteenth-century albums, in contrast, lack accompanying texts entirely and share layouts and formatting—developments that suggest contemporaries had by then formed a clearer conception of the botanical album's form and use.

The emergence of this tradition of botanical album illustration demonstrates the increasing prominence of pictures in late Byzantine scientific discourse and practice. Marginalia in the albums, as well as contemporary medical notebooks and miscellanies also indicate how these botanical illustrations were studied and used. In tracing evidence of use along with shifts in production, I show how Byzantine botanical albums emerged in dialogue with earlier Byzantine, Northern Italian, and Islamic traditions of botanical inquiry and illustration.

Dr Angeliki Lymberopoulou, *Palaiologan Art from Regional Crete: Artistic Decline or Social Progress?*

The weakening of the Byzantine Empire is traditionally associated with its last era, the Palaiologan (1261-1453). During that period the former mighty Empire was but a shadow of itself. Depleted of lands with only a handful of pocket territories, functioning on a devalued coin, wrecked by strife and civil war, aggravated by the issue of the Union of the two Churches and effectively on life-support facilitated by foreigners. It is thus not surprising that this phase is assigned the description 'decline' in historic accounts in secondary sources. At the same time scholarship well into the early 1990s called its artistic production 'Palaiologan Renaissance'. And while contemporary scholarship tends to avoid the latter term altogether, the fact remains that Palaiologan art offers some of the

most stunning monumental decoration in Byzantine culture. These monuments and their patronage are well known. But the question remains: how did 'decline' facilitate the arts?

The essay attempts a look at the issue from a different perspective, engaging with a comparison between well-known Palaiologan monumental art from main urban centres and that of tiny churches found in remote places in regional Crete. Despite the fact that the island at the time the Palaiologans were emperors was under Venetian rule, the religious character of its art remains predominantly Byzantine, sponsored primarily by the native Greek Orthodox population. How do these donors compare with their famous counterparts? Is size and quality the ultimate measure of success or it is time that we re-evaluate decline from the angle offered by the lower and middle classes, that the turbulent Palaiologan times seem to have brought at the front line of history?

Dr Anđela Gavrilović, *The Stylistic Features of the Frescoes of the Church of the Mother of God Hodegetria in the Patriarchate of Peć (c. 1335-1337)*

The topic of the essay is the variety of the artistic styles (stylistic tendencies) present in the wall painting of the church of the Mother of God Hodegetria in the Patriarchate of Peć, the endowment of the Serbian archbishop Daniel II (1324-1337), their nature and their relation to the classical tradition of the first decades of the 14th century. This church represents a precious monument of Serbian medieval heritage on Kosovo and Metochia, with its frescoes executed very shortly before the death of its founder (c.1335-1337). The painters completely fulfilled the programmatic requirements of its highly learned founder and carried out one of the very important painted ensembles of medieval Serbia according to the complexity of iconography. On the other hand, the analysis of the stylistic features of the frescoes shows that the creators of the wall painting possessed different abilities and offers the conclusion of the unevenness of the stylistic qualities of the frescoes of this church. In the present essay we will concentrate our attention on the stylistic features of the leading group of painters, to which belongs the chief master and to their relation to the other painters whose painting is on a generally low level. Already with the fact that the frescoes in the seat of the Serbian archbishopric were executed by the painters of unequal abilities becomes clear that in one wing of the Serbian art around 1335 considerable weakening and abandoning of the classical tradition took place.

Lilyana Yordanova, *The Issues of Visual Narrative, Literary Patronage and Display of Virtues of a Bulgarian Tsar in the Fourteenth century*

When reconsidering artistic production created in a period of turmoil in the context of the Second Bulgarian Tsardom, there is no better example to take into account than the reign and patronage of Tsar Ivan Alexander (1331-1371). Two luxury manuscripts commissioned by him form the focus of this essay – a copy of the Chronicle of Constantine Manasses now in the Vatican Library (Cod. Slavo 2, 1344-5) and the London Gospels (British Museum, Add. Ms. 39627, 1355-6). Both of them are lavishly illustrated and feature several portraits of the tsar which have received extensive scholarly attention since the first decades of the 20th century. However, when put in a chronological and historical perspective, the study of the codices reveals to be incomplete. Were models of Byzantine imperial image adopted and transformed in Ivan Alexander's depictions so as to suit his specific political agenda? Which virtues of the ruler were emphasized in 1345 and later in 1356? How did the state of affairs within the Tsardom and its ideological rivalry with Byzantium and Medieval Serbia enhance the selection and composition of the miniatures? The aim of the essay is to discuss the long neglected agency of the Bulgarian

Manasses and the London Gospels on the background of the dynastic, military and economic struggles during Ivan Alexander's reign.

Dr Andrea Mattiello, *Who's that man? The perception of Byzantium in 15th century Italy*

This essay analyses the frescoes in the private chapel of the Medici palace in Florence and the aftermath of the fall of Constantinople in 1453. While exploring the iconography adopted by Benozzo di Lese in decorating the walls of the chapel, this essay connects the ideology of the de Medici dynasty, established in the fresco, with what they perceived was the prosperous legacy of the Byzantine Empire. Since the Palaiologian reconquest of Constantinople in 1261 by Michael VIII Palaiologos, the Republics of Venice, Genoa, and Pisa, the city of Florence, Rimini and Mantua, the Papal State, the marquisate of Montferrat, and the Angevin kingdom of Naples, and Sicily were foreign political entities interacting and negotiating with the last Imperial family and the cultural and political elites of the Empire of Romaioi. While generically addressed by the Byzantine historian Pachymeres as the group of "the Italian races", τῶν Ἰταλικῶν γενῶν, these political entities were a composite socio-political-economic reality. After 1453 this composite reality reacted differently to the Ottoman conquest and the end of the Byzantine Empire. The scholarship that has studied the relations of these polities with both Byzantium as well as the Ottomans has revealed different views on how relationships, agreements and contrasts were negotiated by the Italians. These views determined different tactics. For example, Pope Pius II, Enea Silvio Piccolomini, orchestrated to fight back the Ottomans through a crusade involving the Italian polities. One of these was the city of Florence with its most prominent family, the de Medici. While being historically difficult to pin-point how the Florentines publicly responded to the Pope, in the private space of the chapel in the family palace in Via Larga, de Medici expressed their concerns with, and hopes for, an East that is no longer Byzantine.

Tatiana Bardashova, *Palaiologan Influence on the Visual Representation of the Grand Komnenoi in the Empire of Trebizond (1204-1461)*

It is generally assumed that the emperors of Trebizond, who belonged to the Grand Komnenoi family, imitated their ancestors, the Byzantine emperors from the Komnenian Dynasty, in many facets of the political, ideological, religious and cultural life. However, in considering the images of the Trapezuntine emperors as a visual representation of imperial power, we can also see the influence of the late Byzantine emperors of the Palaiologan Dynasty, who were contemporaneous to them. The most significant examples of that influence are the Trapezuntine chrysobulls. Currently, there are only two chrysobulls with imperial images: the well-known original chrysobull given to Dionysios Monastery, issued by Emperor Alexios III in 1374, and the one given to Sumela Monastery in 1364 (today it survives only in a late copy). It is also important to discuss the Palaiologan dynasty's possible impact on the visual component of Trapezuntine manuscripts, icons, coins and seals. In the conclusion of my presentation, I will talk about possible reasons behind this influence. One reason is, for example, that some Trapezuntine emperors from the Grand Komnenoi family were supported by Byzantine emperors (for instance, Alexios III Grand Komnenos was supported by John VI Kantakouzenos), which inevitably led to the Trapezuntine emperors imitating their benefactors.