On the Founder of the Skripou Church: Literary Trends in the Milieu of Photius

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The Church of the Dormition of the Virgin of Skripou (formerly Orchomenus) in Boeotia is well known both for its architecture\(^1\) (typical of the post-iconoclastic religious style) and the inscriptions it bears. The latter have been studied in depth, mostly from a historical perspective in which they are considered as documents.\(^2\) And yet, the analysis of the literary and cultural context in which they were composed will allow us to learn more about the conditions surrounding the building of the church and, especially, the personality of its founder, the protospatharios Leo.


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The church walls bear four inscriptions: the first is a single line along the apse, commending the souls of Leo and his family to the Virgin. The second and third inscriptions are in the adjoining naves respectively, one dedicated to the apostle Peter and the other to Paul. These three were engraved in situ by a local workshop; they repeat the titles of the church’s founder (basilikos protospatharios and epi ton oikeiakon), but use three different ways of dating (the emperors, the patriarchate of Ignatius, year 6382 of creation), showing that the church was completed in 873/4.

The fourth inscription is the most striking. It is placed by the east front, in the narthex, and contains a laudatory poem in twelve Homeric hexameters. Unlike the other inscriptions, which were carved in relief, the letters of this one were cut into the stone. Its palaeographic quality is different too: its poor

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3 Παναγία Θεοτόκε σὺν τῷ μονογενεῖ σου υἱῶ βοήθει τοῦ σοῦ δούλου Λέοντος βασιλικοῦ πρωτοσπαθαρίου καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν οἰκειακῶν σὺν τῇ συνεύνῳ καὶ τοῖς φιλίτατοις τέκνοις αὐτοῦ ἐκ πόθου καὶ πίστεως μεγίστης ἄναστήσαντος τὸν σὸν ἅγιον ναόν ἀμήν. Ἐπὶ Βασιλείου καὶ Κωνσταντίνου καὶ Λέοντος τῶν θειοτάτων βασιλέων τῶν Ρωμαίων, “Most Holy Mother of God, with your only-begotten son, help your servant Leo, imperial protospatharios and epi ton oikeiakon, who together with his wife and dear children, out of his desire and great faith, built your holy church. Amen. Under Basil, Constantine, and Leo, most divine emperors of the Romans.”

4 Ἐκαλλιέργησεν τὸν ναὸν τοῦ Ἁγίου Πέτρου τοῦ κορυφαίου τῶν ἁγιομάρτυρων Λέων ὁ πανεύφημος βασιλικὸς πρωτοσπαθάριος καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν οἰκειακῶν ὑπὲρ λύτρου καὶ ἀφέσεως τῶν πολλῶν αὐτοῦ ἁμαρτιῶν ἐπὶ Ἰγνατίου τοῦ οἰκουμενικοῦ πατριάρχου. ἀμήν, “Leo, the commendable protospatharios and epi ton oikeiakon, built the beautiful church of Saint Peter, the apostles’ leader, for payment and remission of his many sins, under the Ecumenical Patriarch Ignatius. Amen.”

5 Ἐκαλλιέργησεν τὸν ναὸν τοῦ Ἁγίου Παύλου τοῦ ἁγίου Λέων ὁ πανεύφημος βασιλικὸς πρωτοσπαθάριος καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν οἰκειακῶν ὑπὲρ λύτρου καὶ ἀφέσεως τῶν πολλῶν αὐτοῦ ἁμαρτιῶν ἐν τῷ ἱστομένῳ κόσμῳ ἐξοσκελεστήριῳ ἐκκρισιστῆριῳ ὑγιεινοστήτω β”. “Leo, the commendable protospatharios and epi ton oikeiakon, built the beautiful church of Saint Paul the apostle for payment and remission of his many sins in the year 6382 of the creation of the world.”
engraving contrasts with the high quality of the (non-metrical) apse inscription. Additionally, this inscription has only three spelling errors, as opposed to the many errors in the others. Likewise, the stone is different (white marble rather than the grey limestone used for the other inscriptions). The verse outlines a panegyric on Leo written in epic terms and containing many mythic references:

Οὐ φθόνος οὐδὲ χρόνος περιμήκετος ἔργα καλύψει σῶν καμάτων, πανάριστε, βυθῷ πολυχανδέι λήθης· ἔργα ἐπεὶ βοώσι καὶ οὐ λαλεοντὰ περ ἐμπης, καὶ τὸδε γὰρ τέμενος πανοίδιμον ἔξετέλεασ<σ>ας
μητρὸς ἀπειρογάμου θεοδέγμονος ἵφι ἀνάσσης τερπνόν, ἀποστίλβον περικαλλέα πάντοθεν αἶγλην, Χριστοῦ δ’ ἐκατέρωθεν ἀποστόλῳ ἐστατὸν ἀμφω ὄν Ῥώμης βόλαξ ἰερὴν κόνιν ἀμφὶ<ι>καλύπτει.
ζώοις ἐν θαλίῃσ<ι> χρόνων ἀπείρονα κύκλα,
ὡς θαλίστης<ι> χρόνων ἐπ’ ἀπειρονα κύκλα,
γηθόμενας κτεάτεσσι καὶ ἐν τεκέεσσιν ἁρίστωι χώρων ἐπικρατέων τε παλαιφάτου Ὀρχομενοῦ.

No envy, no prolonged time will hide the achievements of your efforts, o best of all, in the yawning abyss of oblivion, since your achievements cry it even though they do not speak.
For you have completed this temple, sung by everyone,

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6 This rather poor palaeographic medium does not cohere with the high literary quality of the verses. A very similar example is the early tenth-century poem on the sarcophagus of Galakrenai, the monastery of the patriarch Nicholas Mystikos, whose poor lettering conflicts with a classicistic epigram. Its Nonnian hexameters commemorate Michael, the patriarch’s synkellos, and they are remarkable for their use of Homeric tags, Nonnian phrases, and explicit borrowings from the Palatine Anthology; cf. I. Ševčenko, “An Early Tenth-Century Inscription from Galakrenai with Echoes from Nonnos and the Palatine Anthology,” DOP 41 (1987) 461–468; Lauxtermann, Byzantine Poetry 120 and 349; Rhoby, in Scrivere e leggere 740 ff. On its lettering see C. Mango, “Byzantine Epigraphy (4th to 10th Centuries),” in D. Harlfinger and G. Prato (eds.), Paleografia e codicologia greca (Alessandria 1991) I 235–249, esp. 246.

7 Line 4 ΕΞΕΤΕΛΕΣΑΙ, 8 ΑΜΦΗΚΑΛΥΠΤΕΙ, 9 ΘΑΛΗΙΣΙ.
of the virgin Mother, the great sovereign who received God, a delight, such a beautiful brightness gleaming all around, on each side standing the two apostles of Christ, whose holy dust the earth of Rome covers.

May you live in abundance through the endless cycle of time, rejoicing in your possessions and your excellent offspring and ruling over the territory of Orchomenus of ancient fame.

This poem, praising the dedication of the church of Skripou as an imperishable memorial to Leo’s achievements, able to survive the passage of time, has been satisfactorily commented by other researchers. On N. Oikonomidès’ analysis of the four inscriptions, Leo would have been a wealthy landowner from Boeotia who had made a career in the Empire’s capital, achieving the honorific titles (ἄξιος διὰ βραβείου) of basilikos protospatharios and ἐπὶ τῶν οἰκειακῶν. The first allowed him to be a member of the Senate and to participate in the retinue of honour that accompanied the emperor at certain ceremonies. The second highlighted the fact that he was based in Constantinople and related to the court, as he was identified as a protospatharios of first rank, as opposed to the protospatharioi exotikoi. In the poem we do not find the full titles but only the expression πρωτοσπαθάριος ἐγίστος, as neither βασιλικός nor ἐπὶ τῶν οἰκειακῶν can fit within the dactylic rhythm.

8 While the verb ἀνιστήμην in the apse inscription need not mean that the church was “rebuilt,” καλλιεργῶ, employed in both aisles inscriptions, usually means that we are dealing with newly constructed buildings, as stated by Oikonomidès, TravMém 12 (1994) 485.


The construction of the church of Skripou also must be understood as a status symbol: a provincial man like Leo, who had been successful at court, wished to show off his personal wealth and his closeness to the emperor before his Boeotian countrymen. This explains the repetition of his titles in all the inscriptions, which were placed low to make reading easier. Indeed, the words basilikou protospathariou of the first inscription are at the apex of the apse, the most sacred area of the church, and basilikou is written larger than the rest, underlining the connections between the donor and the emperor.

The inscription in verse served also as an emblem of power, as it was a textual and visual symbol brought from Constantinople, where the practice of Homeric hexameters had been recovered during the second half of the ninth century. There is no doubt that the text was composed in the capital, where it was most likely engraved by order of Leo. This interest in


14 In fact this fashion belonged exclusively to Constantinople, and was not cultivated by all the authors in the capital: see Lauxtermann, Byzantine Poetry 120.

15 That would explain both the different technique adopted and the use of a type of marble that came from outside of Boeotia. Papalexandrou, Virgin of Skripou 151 ff., suggests that it was engraved in some place close to its final destination, e.g. Thebes. Oikonomidès, TravMém 12 (1994) 490–491, had already considered the possibility that it was engraved in Corinth, the nerve centre of the region in the ninth century, although he did not rule out that it was engraved in Constantinople and carried by Leo as a luxury item manufactured in the capital.
ancient literature and culture may help us identify this figure. Prospopographical research on the founder of the church has looked for the coincidence of the name Leo with these titles. Thus, it has been concluded that a seal published in 1886 names to the same man.\textsuperscript{16} Some seals published subsequently with the same name and titles of our founder are likely to have belonged to him.\textsuperscript{17} It is even possible that another seal of his survives,\textsuperscript{18} although in this case we would have to adjust the dating suggested by the editors slightly to the years immediately preceding the mid-tenth century. And a seal at Dumbarton Oaks also belonged to some Leo basilikos protospatharios and epitont oikeiaikon.\textsuperscript{19}

All in all, there is little historical news to be obtained from both the poem and the seals attributed to the benefactor, and we can deduce very little about his private life. The term τεκέσσιν (11) that includes Leo’s children in the commendation to their father\textsuperscript{20} states that they are the origin of their


\textsuperscript{17} G. Zacos and A. Veglery, \textit{Byzantine Lead Seals I.2} (Basel 1972) 2130A, 2130. See \textit{PmbZ} nos. 4500 and 4521; the rank of patrician given in both seals may have been an award received after the foundation of the church of Skripou.

\textsuperscript{18} G. Zacos and J. W. Nesbitt, \textit{Byzantine Lead Seals II} (Bern 1984) 212.

\textsuperscript{19} J. Nesbitt and N. Oikonomidès, \textit{Catalogue of Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art III} (Washington 1996), no. 39.6. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor T. Pratsch for granting me access to the pertinent entries of the \textit{PmbZ} II (867–1025), forthcoming.

\textsuperscript{20} Homer uses τέκος, a poetic variant of τέκνον, to refer to a hero’s children (\textit{Il.} 3.160, 5.71; cf. \textit{Aes. Sept.} 203, 677). Occasionally the term is also used of the offspring of an animal, such as eaglets: \textit{Il.} 12.222.
father’s joy and, at the same time, that they will be able to ensure the future patronage of the church he had built. Given the plural, we know that Leo had at least two children, probably male.

However, the literary side of the poem has gone rather unnoticed in the search to identify its author. The Macedonian Renaissance did indeed turn its sights on classic models to imitate and update. But it is equally true that the number of cultivators of this new fashion was small and that the number of writers with the ability to write such an exquisite piece as the Skripou poem was even smaller. In addition to its metrical correctness, there are numerous learned references: 3 ἔργα ἐπεὶ βοῶσι καὶ οὐ λαλέοντά περ ἐμπής, cf. Od. 15.361 ὁφρα μὲν οὖν δὴ κείνη ἐν, ἀχέουσά περ ἐμπής; 5 μητρός ... ἵψανάσσης, cf. Od. 11.284 ὃς ποτ’ ἐν Όρχομενῷ Μινεώφ ἵψι


23 Apart from the hiatus in 3 ἔργα ἐπεὶ and two short vowels that are stretched, 4 ἔξπελες<σ>ας and 7 Χριστοῦ δ’ ἐκατέρωθεν.
ἀνάσσεν; 24 9 ζώοις ἐν θαλίσσι, cf. Hdt. 3.27 οί Αἰγύπτιοι εἵματά τε ἔροφεν τὰ κάλλιστα καὶ ἦσαν ἐν θαλίσσι; 9 χρόνων ἐπ᾽ ἀπείρονα κύκλα, cf. Anth. Pal. 9.468 μετ᾽ ἀπείρονα κύκλον ἀέθλων (and Bacchyl. 9.30 τοῖς Ἐλλάνων δι᾽ ἀπ[είρονα κύκλον]; 10 ὁ πολύαινε Λέον, cf. Ηl. 10.544 ὁ πολύαιν Ὑθυσεύ; etc. 25 This is not just about recovering old literary forms but is clearly a dialogue with them, as we can see in the phrase that closes the poem, παλαιφάτου Ὀρχομένοι. Although there were very few remains of the old city, the classical place name was used here, but the passage of time is clearly taken into consideration when it is described as παλαιφάτος, “legendary, of ancient story,” which had been used by the tragedians and Homer (Od. 9.507, 13.172, 19.163).

The use of verse inscriptions to celebrate the foundation of a church was not unique to the Skripou temple. Three years earlier (870/1) Ignatius the magistor ton grammatikon composed three short poems to celebrate the restoration and redecoration of the church of the Theotokos τῆς Πεγες in the outskirts of Constantinople. 26 After it suffered heavy damage in a terrible

24 Praise of the Virgin from the place where she will receive worship (Orchomenus) is augmented by using the Homeric verb ἀνάσσω. This is a scholarly reference to Homer inspired by the mythical royal house of the region. The metrical position highlights this intertextual play, as the original Homeric colon is kept (Od. 11.283–285, ἀπολοιπτήν κοῦρην Ἀμφίον / ὡς ποτ᾽ ἐν Ὀρχομένῳ Μινυέω ἦς ἀνάσσεν, “Youngest daughter was she of Amphion, son of Iasus, who once ruled mightily in Orchomenus of the Minyae”). That said, ἦς ἀνάσσες with the genitive of ἀνάσσα (as in Il. 14.326 οὕτω ὅτε Δήμητρος καλλιπλοκάμῳ ἀνάσσῃς) is reinforced by the Homeric adverb ἦς. There is no need to argue for a novel “Iphianassa” dedication to the Virgin Theotokos on the basis of the ritual epithet παντάνάσσα used by Romanos the Melode (56.1.17 Θεοτόκε παρθένε, παντάνάσσα) as do Okonomidès, TraMém 12 (1994) 484, and Lauxtermann, Byzantine Poetry 119.

25 For parallels in several poems of the Anth. Pal. see Lauxtermann, Byzantine Poetry 120.

26 These epigrams, mostly couplets and all in iambic trimeters, are preserved as Anth. Pal. 1.109–114. For this church see E. Gedeon, Ἡ Ζωοδόχος
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earthquake in 869,27 the emperor Basil I (867–886), together with his sons Constantine and Leo, took the reins of its rehabilitation (Theoph. Cont. p.323 Bonn). Like the protospatharios Leo, the imperial candidate Basil also commemorated the construction of a church, Saint Gregory the Theologian in Thebes, two years earlier (871/2), with a five-line poem.28 For his part, the founder of the Theotokos church of the Lips monastery complex in Constantinople opted for an inscription consisting of two dodecasyllables, four hexameters, and two further dodecasyllables (in this order) when he funded its construction in the late ninth/early tenth century.29 In a short hexametric


29 C. Mango and E. J. W. Hawkins, “Additional Notes,” in Th. Macridy,
epigram the *patrikios* Constantine Lips offers this gorgeous church to the Virgin and in simple and direct language asks her to grant him a place in Paradise.\(^{30}\)

All these inscriptions would play very similar roles: to memorialise the founder and to hail him by the proclamation and reading aloud of an unusual poetic text.\(^{31}\) Nevertheless, the differences between them are immense. In addition to the use of the dodecasyllable and the iambic trimeter,\(^{32}\) which was far more common in the ninth century, their language and syntax are far simpler than in the Skripou text. That includes the hexameters of the Lips epigram, which have a lower style and literary quality. In all those compositions, the absence of Homeric features is accompanied by a complete absence of intertexts or references to the ancient literature.

By contrast, Skripou’s poem is intended for an ideal reader who is able to recognise and understand its complex allusive play. Few Byzantines would fit this profile and, surely, all of


them would have lived in or had contact with Constantinople. Leo the protospatharios decided to imitate the beneficent action of the emperor Basil and rebuild a church in honour of the Virgin Theotokos at his place of origin.33 His desire to show off his high status before his Boeotian countrymen led him to inscribe this refined poem, trying to share with them the socio-cultural interests of the capital.34 We cannot know who composed the poem but we can know the person who commissioned it, Leo the basilikos protospatharios and epi ton oikeiakon. The technical correctness and complex allusive meaning of the poem suggest that he was a man with extensive education who had a special interest in literature and was among the readers (maybe also among the poets) who since 850 cultivated a classicist poetry filled with references to the ancient world. This profile fits perfectly with the so far unidentified addressee of patriarch Photius’ epistle 209, as we shall see below.35

33 Basil I was probably pleased with this foundation, since in his imperial policy for Greece there was decided encouragement and support for church building there, right up to the border with the Bulgarian kingdom, in order to establish Byzantine supremacy both real and symbolic. From this time come the buildings of Skripou, Thebes, Athens, Epiros, Kastoria, and Peristera (outside Thessalonike). See P. Vokotopoulos, Ἡ ἐκκλησιαστικὴ ἀρχιτεκτονικὴ εἰς τὴν Δυτικὴν Στερεὰν Ἑλλάδα καὶ τὴν Ἑπείρον (Thessalonike 1975); Cormack, in Byzantium in the Ninth Century 152.

34 As Oikonomidès rightly pointed out, TravMém 12 (1994) 489–493, the fact that the two side naves were devoted to Peter and Paul, the two Roman apostles, accords with the foreign policy promoted by Basil I since his accession. This policy aimed at rapprochement with the papacy, not only through the deposition of Photius and restoration of Ignatius as patriarch of Constantinople in 867, but also by promoting the worship of St. Peter, patron and predecessor to the pope of Rome; cf. V. von Falkenhausen, “San Pietro nella religiosità bizantina,” in Bisanzio, Roma e l’Italia nell’Alto Medioevo II (Spoleto 1988) 627–674.

35 A good survey of the patriarch can be found in Pmbzt no. 6253. On his family ties and his social network see O. Prieto Domínguez and P. Varona Codeso, “Deconstructing Photius: Family Relationship and Political Kinship in Middle Byzantium,” RREByz 71 (2013, in press).
ter was addressed to “Leo the protospatharios.”

The absence of the title *epi ton oikeiakon* makes sense if we follow the explanation of Oikonomidès: rather than a title *per se* this implies a very high status in palace ceremonies. There is no doubt that this was very important for Leo, and that is why he chose to repeat it in the three inscriptions closest to the apse; but for someone like Photius, the patriarch of Constantinople, this was irrelevant.

*Ep.* 209 has traditionally been seen as a pious exhortation for Leo to study the Scriptures, rather than devoting himself exclusively to military duties; but in fact it contains abundant information about the personality of its addressee and the cultural environment of at least a part of the court.

> Λέοντι πρωτοσπαθαρίῳ· Ἡρακλεί, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῷ λογίῳ Ἕρων τὸ τῆς Ἀμαλθείας κέρας οἱ ποιηταὶ ἐγχειρίζουσι· μὴ τοῖνυν στρατεύεις καὶ πόνοι σωματικοῖς ὁλον σεικτὸν διδοὺς τῶν καλῶν μαθημάτων ἀφιτάτον, ἐκείθεν σοι ὡς οὐλόν τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν τοῦ βίου οἰόν καὶ κολα-

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36 See *Pmb.Z* no. 4525.


38 Indeed, neither the title *epi ton oikeiakon* nor any similar titles are found in any of the headings (*initiolationes*) of Photius’ 299 epistles; see B. Laourdas and L. G. Westerink, *Photii patriarchae constantinopolitani Epistulae et Amphilochiae I–III* (Leipzig 1983–1987).

κείας ἀλήθειας δίδου κἂν ἐν μέρει τὰ σεμνὰ καὶ ἡδέα τῶν ἁσμάτων καταπάθειαν σοι. Τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἀμαλθείας κέρας καὶ τῷ ἀχελῶῳ ποταμῷ, ὅτι τὴν ὑποκειμένην περιμερεῖς χώραν πάμφορον ἑργάζεται, τὸ ποιητῶν αὐτόνομον ἔθνος ἐτοίμως χαρίζονται, καὶ ουδὲν ἀνθρώπῳ μέγα τυχεῖν ἄφθονον ἐκ φύσεως ἔχει καὶ τὰ ἄψυχα· τὴν δ’ ἀλήθη καὶ θείαν εὐδαιμονίαν καὶ ἀνθρώπῳ πρέπουσαν, καὶ πρὸς ἣν ἡ Ἀμαλθεία παρατίθεμεν νόσος καὶ πενία εὕρισκεται, ἐκ μόνον ἐστὶν τῶν θείων λογίων καὶ τῆς ἐκεῖθεν γεωργίας ὑπάρχει.

To the protospatharios Leo. Bear in mind that not only to the long-suffering Heracles, but also to the scholarly Hermes the poets entrust the horn of Amalthea: therefore, don’t turn away from good teaching and don’t devote yourself wholly to military obligations and corporal suffering in the belief that happiness in life flows from them alone. Instead, devote yourself also to our own noble Muses (who differ from the Greek ones so much as the free natures differ from the customs of slaves and truth from flattery) even though you are just partly bewitched by their solemn and sweet songs. It is right that the autonomous race of poets readily ascribes the horn of Amalthea even to the river Achelous, since it makes the surrounding territory fruitful by flowing through it. And it is no great thing for man to obtain what even soulless things have from nature. But the happiness that is true and divine and fitting for man, and compared with which Amalthea is found to be sickness and (spiritual) poverty, can only be collected from the tillage of the divine words and the hereafter.

40 Palaeph. De incred. 45; Strab. 10.2.19; Dio Chrys. 63.7.
41 A tradition attested again only in Hesychius’ Lexicon α 3410, ἀμαλθείας κέρας· τὸ πάντων ἐπιτυγχάνειν. ἐπειδὴ οἱ εὐχόμενοι τῇ οὐρανίᾳ ἀγίᾳ ἐπιτυγχάνουσιν· ἢ ὅτι Ἐρμῆς Ἡρακλεῖ ἔδωκε τὸ κέρας, ὅταν τὰς Γηρυόνου βοῦς ἔμελλεν ἔλαυνεν, “Horn of Amalthea: to achieve everything, since those who pray to the celestial goat achieve it. Or because Hermes handed the horn to Heracles when he was going to take away the cattle of Geryon.”
42 Soph. Trach. 9–21; Diod. 4.35.3–4; Apollod. 2.7.5; Ov. Met. 9.1–88; Hyg. Fab. 31. The river Achelous (now the Aspropotamos) was the natural border between Acarnania and Aetolia in the classical period.
This is a singular epistle among all the letters of Photius, who did not usually articulate a whole letter around mythological elements, as in this one. To better understand its meaning we must reconstruct the personality of the addressee: without doubt Leo was a man of action who aspired to achieve recognition from others through great efforts. In this regard, the parallel with Heracles is obvious. The horn of Amalthea


44 Since it is not an exegetical or ecclesiastical writing, the fact that it was included in the Amphilochia (Quaestiones ad Amphilochium), the collection of theological essays intended for his friend Amphilochus, metropolitan of Cyzicus, is surprising. Cf. Amphiloch. 107: Διὰ τί τῷ τληπαθεῖ Ἡρακλεῖ τῆς Ἀµαλθείας κέρας οἱ ποιηταὶ ἐγχειρίζουσι; On Amphilochus of Cyzicus see Pmb.Z no. 223.

45 Photius regularly built his letters upon behaviour models that were easy to understand for their addressee. Thus, when he wrote Ep. 217 to Nikephoros, he used the winged love image to ask the philosopher monk to come to visit him more quickly. Similarly, when during his second patriarchate he addressed the spatharokandidatos Staurakios to censure his avarice, he used the image of the lead fish that never touches any other animal and also knows how to govern both its own waters and others when the shoal is forced to emigrate (278). As in 209, there are occasions when Photius is subtler and does not openly explain the parallelism, leaving it to his addressee to decipher the true meaning of the letter. Such is 254, sent to the spatharokandidatos Basil (Pmb.Z no. 954), which contains a short essay about the magnet (also named Lydian or Heraclean, after the places where it had been discovered) and its capacity to attract iron. Photius concluded that in the same way as these stones attract, spiritual love can attract souls, thus encouraging Basil to come to him.
represents the realisation of earthly triumph,\textsuperscript{46} pursued by the protospatharios Leo through his military service, as did Heracles. However, Photius offers him a different model, Hermes, who stood out for his love of knowledge and in whose steps Leo must follow to achieve happiness. He has only to turn to Hermes for a behavioural standard on his way towards excellence. In this respect, Leo does not have to pursue Hermes’ pagan wisdom, the wisdom of classical Greece transmitted through literature, but Christian wisdom. In fact, the real message of the epistle is clear: devote yourself to our noble Muses (the Christian ones), who are the ones appropriate for free men and who seek the truth. On the basis of the tripartite contrast chosen by the patriarch, he argues this superiority since, unlike his noble Muses, those of classical Greece (who obviously are not noble) are appropriate for slaves, men who thoughtlessly maintain an old custom that must be banished, as it only leads to flattery. The truth sought by free men can only be achieved through the Christian Muses.

Leo obviously was not on military duty all day long, since he would be unable to understand the many references of this letter if he was not extremely learned. Likewise, Photius’ underlining that his addressee liked Christian poetry only partly (κἂν ἐν μέρει τὰ σεμνὰ καὶ ήδέα τῶν ἄσματων κατεπάθειν σοι) shows that Leo had a well-defined taste distinct from such compositions. While the terms ἄσμα and ήδύς chosen by Photius clearly refer to poetry, it is difficult to say which type of poetry he meant. Perhaps he meant hymnic poetry, whose metrical pattern has a quite different cadence than does dactylic hexameter (so, according to the protospatharios, it would not be properly ήδύς). Perhaps he was thinking of the biblical para-

\textsuperscript{46} According to the definition provided by Photius himself, Lex. α 1105: ἀμαλθείας κέρας· τὸ πάντων ἐπιτυγχάνειν, ἐπειδὴ οἱ εὐχόμενοι τῇ οὐρανίᾳ αἰγὶ ἐπιτυγχάνονται (after Hesychius), but also citing Aristophanes (fr.707*PCG*), ἢ μὲν πόλις ἐστὶν ἀμαλθείας κέρας, σὺ μόνον εὔξας καὶ πάντα παρέσται, “the city is the horn of Amalthea, you only ask and everything is available.”
phrases written in Homeric hexameters by the empress Eudocia, which clearly are σεµνά, and which he reviewed in Bibliotheca cod. 183–184. Photius may have in mind both sorts of composition. Either way, he highlighted its edifying content, τά σεµνά,47 even when its expression was not as pleasant, ἡδέα,48 as classical pagan poetry.

Leo’s preference for the ancient literature over the Christian appears to be more than just a personal taste. On the one hand, this inclination is a natural consequence of his lifestyle, as Leo was a layman who was not overly concerned with religious issues. On the other, his literary taste would have been grounded in one of the main trends of the second half of the ninth century, classicism. In fact, the choice of the image of Heracles, the quintessential warrior, to start this epistle probably reflects not just the title protospatharios held by Leo, but also Heracles’ place of origin and the ancient legends about him.

47 Cf. Photius’ definition in his Lexicon: σεµνά· τά ἅρφητα μυστήρια· οἱ δὲ ἐπὶ τοῦ ἱερόγλυφου καὶ καταστύγγου, “solemn: the unutterable mysteries; and with calm and with a sad expression.”

that, to a large extent, link Leo to him.\textsuperscript{49}

According to Pausanias, there was a temple in honour to Heracles near Orchomenus.\textsuperscript{50} It is not by chance that just as the end of the fifth verse of the Skripou inscription (ἵπτι ἄνάσσης) recalls Od. 11.284 (δὲ ποτ’ ἐν Ὄρχομενῷ Μινυεῖο ἴπτι ἄνασσεν) to vindicate a heroic lineage, the ninth verse (ἀπεὶρονα κύκλα) also contains features of Bacchyl. 9.30 and Anth. Pal. 9.468, where Heracles’ divinisation is precisely the subject,\textsuperscript{51} with Heracles, as in the Skripou poem, addressed in the

\textsuperscript{49} Myth is a resource used in other of Photius’ letters, e.g. Ep. 97, addressed to Anthony, archbishop of Bosphorus (PmbZ no. 565), during his first patriarchate: Photius says that from Inhospitable (Ἄξεινος) the sea was renamed Hospitable (Εὔξεινος) by the Milesians, and could now be known as Pious (Εὐσεβής) thanks to Anthony’s piety. With this wordplay he encourages the archbishop to press the conversion of the Jews in the region. Also, in 47 and 158, sent to the comes Alexander (PmbZ no. 189; the title signals the procurator of the Opsician theme), the patriarch denounces him by contrasting him with his namesake, Alexander the Great. Although the latter was a pagan, he was benevolent, while the comes, despite being a Christian, mistreats the innocents and will be punished for that. In view of these frequent conceptual games inspired by the activities and works of Photius’ addressees, one wonders whether the choice of Heracles as the main motif for Ep. 209 may also have hidden a reference to the literary work of the protospatharios Leo (maybe a poetic text about this son of Zeus?).

\textsuperscript{50} A similar legend links the fertility of the Orchomenus’ plains with Heracles’ victory over the river Cephissus, Paus. 9.38.6-7: σταδίους δὲ ἀφέστηκεν ἑπτὰ Ὄρχομενον ναός τε Ἡρακλέους καὶ ἄγαλμα οὐ μέγα … Θηβαῖοι δὲ τὸν ποταμὸν τὸν Κηφισίον φασίν ὑπὸ Ἡρακλέους ἐξ τοῦ πεδίου ἀποστραφῆναι τὸ Ὄρχομενον τέως δὲ αὐτοῦ ὑπὸ τὸ ὄρος ἐξ ἀλάσσαν εξενέα, πρὶν ἦ τὸν Ἡρακλέα τὸ χάσμα ἐμφάνιζε τὸ διὰ τοῦ ὄρους, “Seven stades from Orchomenus stands a temple of Heracles with a small statue … Thebans say that the river Cephissus was diverted towards the plain of Orchomenus by Heracles, which until then ran under the mountain into the sea, until Heracles closed the opening through the mountain.” This legend is also very similar to Heracles’ fight with the river Achelous, which is echoed by Photius.

\textsuperscript{51} Not only their common content links these classical texts with our poem, but the expression ἀπεὶρονα κύκλα in the ninth verse appears on only these two occasions in Greek literature.
That the church’s donor is addressed directly by the poet is very unusual, and invites us to think that it could be a classical reference, perhaps to Anth.Pal. 9.468. Short poems that commemorate some pious act such as the foundation or reconstruction of a church always follow a pattern: the donor, in the first person, addresses the Virgin Theotokos or the saint to whom the church is dedicated, invoked to remember this pious act on Judgement Day and intercede for him with God. At the same time, in epigrams commemorating the founder of public works (a city wall, a bath, a road, a bridge, etc.) the benefactor is commended in the third person, and there is never an invocation to divinity. Both models

52 σής ἀρετής ἱδρῶτι καλὴν ἀπέδωκεν ἁμοιβήν / σὸς γενέτης, Ἡρακλει, ἐπεὶ πόνος ἀσπετον εὐχός / ἀνδράσιν οἴδεν ἄτειν μετ’ ἀπείρονα κύκλον ἅθλον.

53 Considering the use of the second person, Oikonomidès, TravMém 12 (1994) 491, suggested that the inscription was perhaps a present from a friend who had a good position at the court. It is strange, however, that the author of such a present would remain anonymous and would not feel tempted to make any reference to himself.


55 Lauxtermann, Byzantine Poetry 158–166. A good example is the inscription commemorating the reconstruction of the Chalkis road in Euboea, sponsored by the protospatharios Theophylact in the late ninth century, after the Arab raid in the 870s: CIG 8901, with T. E. Gregory, “Chalkis in Greece,” ODB I (1991) 407; E. Malamut, Les îles de l’Empire byzantin, VIII–XII siècles I (Paris 1980) 222. Similar examples have been gathered by
seem to merge in the Skripou poem, but their combination is not entirely original. The key is found in AnthPol. 9.468, which holds a dialogue with the Skripou inscription and serves as its literary reference. As we saw, these are three verses addressed to Heracles, to praise him because he has achieved an unsurpassable reputation through his relentless efforts. Indeed, the composition is an ethopoiia,56 a scholarly exercise to imagine what can be said to Heracles after his deification. Obviously, the delicacy of the composition dedicated to Leo proves that the author57 had an excellent education, and it should not surprise that he was inspired by a properly scholastic genre of the time. However, in this case, there was no need to create a


56 On the ethopoiia see E. Amato and J. Schamp (éds.), ETHOPOIIA. La représentation de caractères entre fiction scolaire et réalité vivante à l’époque impériale et tardive (Salerno 2005). On the first examples of ethopoiia in hexameters, in papyri and inscriptions and codices, see J. A. Fernández Delgado, “Hexametrische ethopoiia auf Papyrus und anderen Materialien,” in A. Bülow-Jacobsen (éd.), Proceedings XX International Congress of Papyrology (Copenhagen 1994) 299–305. It is interesting that Christian topoi share little of this type of progymnasma. A striking exception is Cain’s ethopoiia (What would Cain have said when he killed Abel?) analysed by J.-L. Fournet, “Une éthopée de Caïn dans le Codex des Visions de la Fondation Bodmer,” ZPE 92 (1992) 253–266. Together with the case we are discussing, a significant group of ethopoia are in the Palatine Anthology (9.126, 449, 451–480).

57 Strzygowski, BZ 3 (1894) 9, attributed its composition to a member of the circle of Photius. In the same sense see C. A. Trypanis, Medieval and Modern Greek Poetry (Oxford 1951) 256. This tempting idea has been recently repeated by A. Paul, “Dichtung auf Objekten. Inschriftlich erhaltene griechische Epigramme vom 9. bis zum 16. Jahrhundert: Suche nach bekannten Autorennamen,” in M. Hinterberger and E. Schiffer (eds.), Byzantinische Sprachkunst. Studien zur byzantinischen Literatur gewidmet W. Hörandner (Berlin 2007) 241, and also by Rhoby, in Scrivere e leggere nell’alto medioevo 737. The characteristics of the epigram itself indeed coincide with the intellectual and aesthetic interests of Photius and his milieu, although authorship cannot be proved with the extant information.
literary fiction but to evoke a context of acclamations when acknowledging a man of high rank.\textsuperscript{58}

It is not unreasonable to assume that at some stage Leo himself, whose love of Antiquity is evident, wanted to be like Heracles. This voluntary comparison must have come to the notice of Photius, who decided to write this epistle to replace this model with a more productive one from his point of view as patriarch. Nevertheless, Photius decided to use the classical culture in the same way as Leo did, thus elaborating a letter that was impossible to understand for those who did not have an extensive knowledge of the ancient world and were used to this type of parallelism.\textsuperscript{59} In fact, the way the final exhortation is built shows that our protospatharios took an active interest in cultivating classical literature: τὴν δὲ ἀληθὴ καὶ θείαν εὐδαιμονίαν ... ἐκ μόνον ἐστὶν τῶν θείων λογίων καὶ τῆς ἐκείθεν γεωργίας ἀμήσασθοι. While the term γεωργία seems to have been especially favored in edifying texts,\textsuperscript{60} it can also refer to the cultivation of pagan or heretical literature,\textsuperscript{61} which according to Photius included all the works of classical culture.

\textsuperscript{58} We have mentioned the performative value of these foundational texts which served also to acclaim the benefactor; see Papalexandrou, \textit{Word\&Image} 17 (2001) 279 ff. Another sign of this use is in the ninth verse, where ἐν θαλήσι seems to refer to Hdt. 3.27: οἱ Αἰγύπτιοι ἐφόρεον τὰ καλλίστα καὶ ἦσαν ἐν θαλήσι, “the Egyptians wore their finest garments and were in festivities.”

\textsuperscript{59} This is the case with Leo’s identification with Heracles. The same can be said of the intentional use of literary elements traditionally linked to the protospatharios’ homeland (Orchomenus), such as the river Achelous or the Muses, worshiped on Mount Helicon in Boeotia. See P. W. Wallace, “Hesiod and the Valley of the Muses,” \textit{GRBS} 15 (1974) 5–24; A. Schachter, \textit{Cults of Boiotia I–IV} (London 1981–1994).

\textsuperscript{60} Cf. Phot. \textit{Epist.} 132.70, ἢ τῶν θείων γραφῶν γεωργία; 164.34, ἢ τοῦ Παύλου γεωργία.

The references to the ancient world, which here is despised by the patriarch, are combined with direct criticism of the poets in the same way as Plato did, and especially for being a race outside of the established conventions (τὸ ποιητῶν αὐτόνομον ἔθνος): poets sing the success of Heracles and Hermes, but they also praise the river Achelous, denigrating man’s nature. It is the mention of the river Achelous that serves as an example of the arguments against this type of creation, as it is awarded the cornucopia by the poets, even though Heracles had defeated Achelous in their struggle to marry Deianira (Soph. Trach. 9–21). In other words, the poets award an inanimate being defeated by such a renowned hero as Heracles (the only one who ascended to Olympus) with a happiness that is not conceded to the victor.

Ultimately Photius’ rejection of the poets is based on their denial of the Christian anthropology, as they grant an inert being such as a river the triumph.

62 Cf. Pl. Resp. 387b: ταύτα καὶ τὰ τουαύτα πάντα παρατησόμεθα Ὄμηρον τε καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους ποιητὰς μὴ χαλεπαίνειν ἐν διαφώμαλεν, οὐχ ὡς οὐ ποιητικά καὶ ἡδέα τοῖς πολλοῖς ἀκούοιν. Αὔτ’ ἐστο ποιητικότερα, τοσοῦτο ἦτον ἀκουστεόν παισί καὶ ἀνθράσιν ὦγ’ ἐκ ἐλευθέρους εἰναι, δούλειαν παθάσιν μᾶλλον πεφοβημένους, “We will beg Homer and the other poets not to be angry if we cancel those and all similar passages, not that they are not poetic and pleasing to most hearers, but because the more poetic they are the less are they suited to the ears of boys and men who are destined to be free and to be more afraid of slavery than of death” (transl. Shorey).

All the arguments in this Platonic passage are featured in the patriarch’s epistle: the Homeric verses are pleasant; the free man must not take delight in poetry since it is a form of slavery, etc. Thus Photius shares Plato’s contempt for poetry, but his alternative is not philosophy but the iconodule Christian religion.

63 This criticism can be compared to his reflection in the Bibliotheca when he praises the empress Eudocia for not following the poets’ practice in her biblical paraphrases, even when she used Homeric verses:  οὔτε γὰρ ἐξομίσει ποιητική μῦθος τὴν ἀλήθειαν τρέσων ἥδυνεν σπουδάζει μεταβλητέον ὁτα, οὔτε ταῖς ἐκβολαῖς τοῦ ἀκροατῆ τὸν διαπλανᾷ τοῦ προεξειμένου, “There is no attempt to deform the truth with fables and use poetic licence to charm the ears of young readers, nor is the listener distracted from the main theme by digressions” (183, 128a.13–16).
and happiness that are denied to many men, who are created in the image of God. Photius insists, however, that this is not real happiness, as the fortune represented by the horn of Amalthea is temporary and, as it is an earthly success, comes with disease and leads only to spiritual poverty. In contrast, the happiness offered by the patriarch is imperishable and truly is appropriate for a man because it is divine (θεία). The only stricture is that this happiness can be reached only through the cultivation of Holy Scripture and the transcendental issues (τῶν θείων λογίων καὶ τῆς ἐκείθεν), in which Photius enthusiastically encourages Leo.

It is by relating the dedicatory poem of the Skripou church to Photius’ epistle 209 that we can identify the benefactor with the recipient of the letter. From a prosopographical perspective this is a useful conclusion, as it increases our information about a figure who had been rather obscure despite the important role he played in the stimulation of the socio-religious life of the Boeotian region. Furthermore, this identification has an immediate effect on Photian studies, since we can now identify another of his addressees, who was certainly one of his followers during his first patriarchate. In fact, by connecting Ep. 209 with the building of the church of Skripou by Leo we can determine the date when Photius wrote it. So far, no date for the letter has been suggested. In view of this identification it seems unlikely that Photius wrote it during his second patriarchate.

64 See Phot. Amph. 5.29: ὁ ἀνθρώπινος καὶ κατ’ εἰκόνα θεοῦ πεπλασµένος νοῦς. The whole letter is certainly a criticism of secular poetry. The traditional view was summarised by B. Baldwin, “Photius and Poetry,” BMGS 4 (1978) 9–14, who wrote that Photius completely rejected the poetic genres because of their immoral and inappropriate content for Christianity and his own personal taste. See also Lauxtermann, Byzantine Poetry 105; Kazhdan, A History 17. Accented polarisation probably was setting in between the reading of classical secular poetry vs. the cultivation of its models; for according to Arethas of Caesarea (ca. 860–935) every scholar knew works such as Sophocles’ Ajax: see S. B. Kougeas, Ο Καισαρείας Άρεθας καὶ τὸ ἔργον αὐτοῦ (Athens 1913) 142. However, in the ninth century, very few took the step of composing poetry according to the classical models.
chate (877–886), when the church of Skripou was already built and the protospatharios Leo, at least for the general public, had already given himself to the Christian Muses. Nor could it be written during the last period of Ignatius’ patriarchate (873–877), when Photius had just become again a friend of the emperor Basil and gotten settled at court as tutor to the crown princes, since the date of the church (873) indicates its consecration and so presupposes that the construction started a few years earlier, just when Photius was enduring the greatest hardships in his exile. Thus, the most plausible date is during his first patriarchate (858–867). In this case, Ep. 209 could easily have been one of the key factors that led Leo to build the church of the Dormition of the Virgin of Skripou, and to follow the example set by the emperor Basil I. In fact, Leo’s desire to please the sovereign led him to replicate the ecclesiastical policy promoted in Constantinople, which not only looked to be reaffirmed in Greece, but also tried for a rapprochement with the pope of Rome (cf. the side chapels dedicated to Paul and Peter) by deposing Photius and restoring Ignatius, who is

65 As seen above, the three inscriptions of the apse show the donor’s piety. Likewise the poem, which celebrates power, privileges, prosperity, and literary culture in praising Leo’s earthly merits, introduces the church as Leo’s greatest spiritual achievement.


68 See 176 above.

named in one of the inscriptions. As we have seen, the pro\-
ospatharios Leo must have been one of many around Photius
during his patriarchate—one of those who did not take long to
turn their backs on him when Michael III passed away and
Basil ordered his exile.\footnote{The patriarch’s epistle collec-
tion is a good testimony of the extremist
attitude shown by some laymen in Constantinople, who decided to support
the Ignatian faction after Photius’ condemnation. Thus for example the
patrician Manuel, who was present in the anti-Photian synod of 869 (Mansi
XVI 188, 309D) and who was the recipient of Photius’ Ep. 226, where the
former patriarch accuses him of plotting his murder. Similarly, in Ep. 5,
directed to the Peloponnesian prospatharios and strategos John (Pmb\^ no.
3310), and 124, addressed to the prospatharios Theodorus (Pmb\^ no. 7970),
Photius asks why they have exchanged the eternal things for the temporal
ones and heaven for hell, betraying him. On Ignatius’ followers see F.
Stephanou, “La violation du compromis entre Photius et les Igna-
and Photios,” in A. Bryer-J. Herrin (eds.), Iconoclasm. Papers Given at the Ninth
Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies (Birmingham 1977) 141–145.

\footnote{Cf. H.-G. Beck, Das byzantinische Jahrtausend (Munich 1990) 204–205.}

\footnote{See Lemerle, Le premier humanisme 159 ff.; P. Speck, Die kaiserliche Univer-
sität von Konstantinopel (Munchen 1974). This higher school would have been
led by Bardas after he was made caesar on 22 April 862, cf. P. Varona
Codeso, Miguel III (842–867). Construcción histórica y literaria de un reinado
(Madrid 2010) 141–151. According to the chroniclers, the school of
Magnaura was run by Leo the Philosopher (Theoph. Cont. p.192.14–23;
Genesios 4.17), on whose work see n.22 above. A grammar professor in this
school was Cometas (Theoph. Cont. p.192.20), a well-known poet of the

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second half of the ninth century this was the only place where such an extensive education as that shown by Leo could be obtained. Also, Photius in all likelihood served as a professor there before being promoted to the patriarchate. The letter reflects this personal relationship and refers to Leo’s rural origin: at the close Photius encourages him to collect the true happiness with the help of the right cultivation—of the afterlife.

As a major landowner, the protospatharios Leo owed his wealth to the agricultural exploitation of his lands in Bocotia, surrounding the enclave of Skripou.

This correspondence between the patriarch and Leo provides us with a better understanding of the intellectual preoccupations of the protospatharios, who had a strong interest in classical culture and poetry. In view of the intertexts evoked in the Skripou poem and the literary skills that must be attributed to the recipient of Photius’ epistle, it seems clear that Leo did not just commission the church’s foundational poem but was actively involved in its writing. And yet, the testimonies preserved are not enough to allow us to be certain of the author of these twelve verses, and while it is clear that the founder of the Skripou church and letter 209’s addressee are the same, we


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cannot affirm or deny that the protospatharios Leo himself composed the poem destined to immortalise his pious work.\textsuperscript{74}

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