

The Thessaloniki Epitaphios: Notes on Use and Context

Roland Betancourt

For Emilia Cortes

THE LATE BYZANTINE liturgical textile known as the Thessaloniki Epitaphios features a crucial compositional element that has been thus far left unremarked or under analyzed in the literature on the piece: the curiously inverted arrangement of the Communion of the Apostles scene beside the central scene of the Lamentation, or *threnos* (fig. 1). This essay closely reads the iconography of the textile in the context of contemporaneous monumental wall-painting, liturgical sources, and analogous liturgical garb to extrapolate possible forms of use for the textile consistent with its unique iconography and composition.

Discovered by Nikodim Kondakov in 1900 in the modern church of the Panagia Panagouda in Thessaloniki,¹ the Thessaloniki Epitaphios' exact provenance and place of origin remain unknown, though it likely came from a major workshop in Thessaloniki.² On stylistic grounds—its heavy, voluminous style—the work has been dated to around 1300. As is often remarked, the work's closest parallels are found in the monumental wall-paintings of the Virgin Peribleptos (now St. Clement), Ohrid, commissioned by Andronikos II Palaiologos

¹ N. P. Kondakov, *Pamiatniki khristianskogo iskusstva na Afone* (St. Petersburg 1902) 266, 281; M. Le Tourneau and G. Millet, "Un chef-d'œuvre de la broderie byzantine," *BCH* 28 (1905) 259–268.

² For the latest entry on the textile see A. Antonaras, "Epitaphios," in A. Drandaki et al. (eds.), *Heaven and Earth: Art of Byzantium from Greek Collections* (Athens 2013) 155–156.

and painted by Michael Astrapas and Eutybios in 1295;³ the paintings associated by tradition with Manuel Panselinos from around 1290 in the church of the Protaton Monastery on Mount Athos;⁴ and the related frescoes from 1303 in the *parekklesion* of St. Euthymios in Thessaloniki⁵—all of whose artists had roots in Thessaloniki.



Figure 1: Thessaloniki Epitaphios (ca. 1300), Museum of Byzantine Culture, No. BYΦ 57, Thessaloniki, Greece (Photo: © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports. Museum of Byzantine Culture, Thessaloniki)

Iconography

The stylistic and iconographic affinities of the Thessaloniki Epitaphios with monumental wall paintings only make the iconographic peculiarity of the Communion of the Apostles all the more pressing. In the Epitaphios, the Communion of the

³ D. Ćornakov, *The Frescoes of the Church of St. Clement at Ochrid* (Belgrade 1961).

⁴ B. Todić, “Le Protaton et le peinture Serbe des premières décennies du XIV^e siècle,” in R. Samardžić (ed.), *L’art de Thessalonique et des pays Balkaniques et les courants spirituels au XIV^e siècle* (Belgrade 1987) 21–31. On Manuel Panselinos see M. J. Milliner, “Man or Metaphor? Manuel Panselinos and the Protaton Frescoes,” in M. J. Johnson et al. (eds.), *Approaches to Byzantine Architecture and its Decoration* (Burlington 2012) 221–235.

⁵ G. and M. Sotiriou, *H Βασιλική του Αγίου Δημητρίου Θεσσαλονίκης I* (Athens 1952) 213–230. See also T. Gouma-Peterson, “The Frescoes of the Parekklesion of St. Euthymios in Thessaloniki: Patrons, Workshops and Style,” in S. Ćurčić and D. Mouriki (eds.), *The Twilight of Byzantium* (Princeton 1991) 111–129, and “The *Parecclesion* of St. Euthymios in Thessalonica: Art and Monastic Policy under Andronicos II,” *ArtB* 58 (1976) 168–182.

Apostles is divided into two parts, as is often the case, with two groups of six apostles approaching the altar, flanked by deacon-angels waving *rhypidia*, and Christ officiating the sacrament. Christ is duplicated in the scene so as to distribute the bread and the wine on either side to each group of apostles. These elements are all to be expected. However, the Communion scenes appear as if they have been erroneously reversed, given that the distribution of the wine is on the viewer's left and the bread on the right. In nearly all extant examples, the opposite is true—a notable exception being the sixth-century Riha Paten.⁶

It would make sense to place the distribution of the bread on the left, given that if one associates the process of looking from left to right with the temporal sequence of events, the passage from the bread and then on to the wine would be chronologically in accordance with the Biblical narrative. Also, given that the Communion of the Apostles scene is at times accompanied by inscriptions stating the words of Christ, as they do in the Thessaloniki Epitaphios, it would have been particularly awkward to reverse the order of events. Indeed, it is fairly anomalous to have this scene inverted in such a manner.⁷ Exceptions, which deploy the right-to-left arrangement, include the churches of Holy Archangels (Lesnovo) from the fourteenth

⁶ S. A. Boyd, "Art in the Service of the Liturgy: Byzantine Silver Plate," in L. Safran (ed.), *Heaven on Earth: Art and the Church in Byzantium* (University Park 1998) 152–185, esp. 178–179. See also M. Mundell Mango, C. E. Snow, and T. Drayman Weisser, *Silver from Early Byzantium: The Kaper Koron and Related Treasures* (Baltimore 1986), no. 35.

⁷ The left-to-right order is evidenced, for instance, at Virgin Peribleptos (Ohrid), St. Panteleimon (Nerezi), St. Constantine (Svećani), St. Nicholas (Moriovo), St. John the Theologian, Kaneo (Ohrid), Protaton (Mt. Athos), St. Euthymios (Thessaloniki), St. Nicholas Orphanos (Thessaloniki), Panagia Phorbiotissa (Asinou, Cyprus), St. John the Theologian (Patmos), Panagia (Merenta, Attika), and Omorphe Ekklesia (Athens). For full bibliography on these churches see S. Gerstel, *Beholding the Sacred Mysteries: Programs of the Byzantine Sanctuary* (Seattle 1999).

century and St. Athanasios tou Mouzake (Kastoria) of 1384/5.⁸ Both of these churches, though, evidence other iconographic peculiarities: at Lesnovo, Peter is fed the wine from a liturgical spoon, as it would be received by the congregation;⁹ at Kastoria, Judas turns away from Christ as if leaving upon the distribution of the bread.

Formally, this peculiarity is heightened in the Thessaloniki Epitaphios by the fact that the altar is placed to the left of the left panel and to right of the right panel. Laskarina Bouras implicitly noticed this strangeness when she reasoned that: “The two scenes counterbalance one another by their opposing direction of movement and their symmetrical layout.”¹⁰ This “counterbalance” causes the apostles’ movement toward communion to proceed outward rather than inward. Unlike the exceptional wall-paintings or the Riha Paten that invert the scene but are nevertheless bound together by the single and central altar, the Thessaloniki Epitaphios loses that unifying synthesis. In those instances, chronological order might be reversed, but attention is nevertheless still directed toward the sacramental center. In the case of the Epitaphios, its inverted symmetry has the opposite effect by thrusting the viewer outward. As the *threnos* scene manifests the sacrificed Christ, upon which the rite of communion revolves, it would make sense for this central scene to be in the interstice of a centrally split altar with its duplicated Christ, thereby directing devotional movement and piety toward that center, yet this is not the case.

⁸ G. Millet and T. Velmans, *La peinture du moyen âge en Yougoslavie IV* (Paris 1969), pl. 17; S. M. Pelekanidis, *Kastoria* (Athens 1985), pl. 144b.

⁹ While lay communion was no longer a weekly occurrence in this period, when they did commune the laity received the bread and wine mixed together from a liturgical spoon. The clergy, nevertheless, following in the typological image of the Apostles, continued to partake in the bread and wine separately, from within the sanctuary, directly with their hands and lips. See R. F. Taft, “Byzantine Communion Spoons: A Review of the Evidence,” *DOP* 50 (1996) 209–238.

¹⁰ L. Bouras, “The Epitaphios of Thessaloniki: Byzantine Museum of Athens, No. 685,” in *L’art de Thessalonique* 211–231, esp. 214.



Figure 2: *Poterokalymma* (1185–1195), Cathedral Treasury, No. 87, Halberstadt, Germany (Photo: Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie Sachsen-Anhalt, Juraj Lipták)

Pauline Johnstone has suggested that the Epitaphios “is in fact two little aëres and a great aër united into one piece.”¹¹ This observation allowed her to justify the odd length of the textile relative to its width (2.00 x 0.70 m.). The Communion of the Apostles is indeed evidenced on the small aëres used to cover the chalice and paten, the *poterokalymma* and the *diskokalymma*, during the Great Entrance and upon the altar. This is attested by two examples surviving in the Cathedral Treasury in Halberstadt, Germany, dated between 1185 and 1195¹² (fig. 2)—and a similar pair in the Collegiate Church of Castell’Arquato from the fourteenth century.¹³ However, in the case of the Halberstadt and Castell’Arquato *poterokalymmata* and *diskokalymmata* the embroiderers have made no effort to unite the

¹¹ P. Johnstone, *The Byzantine Tradition in Church Embroidery* (London 1967) 119.

¹² F. Dölger, “Die zwei byzantinischen ‘Fahnen’ im Halberstädter Domschatz,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters* Suppl. 3 (1935) 1351–1360.

¹³ G. Morello, *Splendori di Bisanzio* (Milan 1990) 204–205.

two scenes by changing the location of the altar. Even though the chalice and paten would feasibly have sat next to one another on the altar and thus these images could have profitably spoken to one another compositionally, the artists treated them as individual textiles upon individual objects, depicting the altar on the same side in each pair.



Figure 3: *Poterokalymma* (1275–1325), Benaki Museum, ΓΕ 9320, Athens, Greece (Photo: © Benaki Museum)

The impetus to create a standalone object is evidenced in the *poterokalymma* at the Benaki Museum in Athens, dating between 1275 and 1325 (*fig. 3*). There the Christ is placed frontally in the center of the textile, holding the chalice in his hands and staring out at the viewer. Iconographically, this piece has striking similarities to the Communion of the Apostles in the Church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid (*fig. 4*). In both, the artists have stressed the three-dimensionality of the canopy by

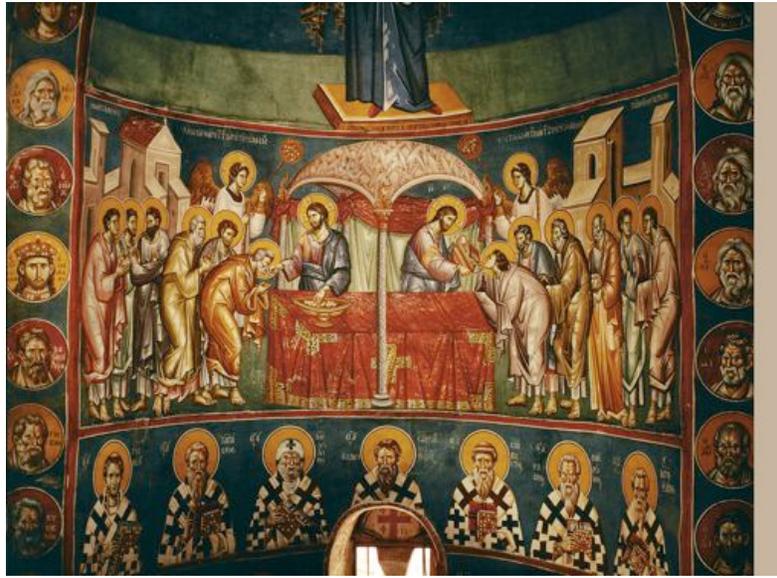


Figure 4: Communion of the Apostles, Virgin Peribleptos (1295), Ohrid, Macedonia (Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY)

bringing one of its columns forward and bisecting the altar in the front so as to capture the sense of the rite occurring within this liturgical space. Christ there also carries a similarly large, double-handled chalice with both his hands, and the altar cloth bears a cross in the front and the corners are edged with ninety-degree gold bands.¹⁴ Again, the bilateral symmetry and frontality of this piece—which surely had its own complementary *diskokalymma*—suggests, at least from what is extant, that such aères did not function in a mirrored manner as do the ones of the Thessaloniki Epitaphios.

Furthermore, the central scene of the Epitaphios at 71 x 42 cm would be too small to function as a standalone Great Aër;

¹⁴ On the iconography of this *krater*-like chalice see M. L. Coulson, “Old Wine in New Pitchers: Some Thoughts on Depictions of the Chalice in the Communion of the Apostles,” in M. Aspra-Vardavakei (ed.), *Λαμπηδών: Αφιέρωμα στη μνήμη της Ντούλας Μουρίκη Ι* (Athens 2003) 145–156.

hence, it can be deduced that the Epitaphios was made as a unified, albeit unique object. Nevertheless, the outward thrust of apostolic progression away from the *threnos*, the incongruence with the usual left-to-right narrative progression of events, and the altars' locations at opposing ends are still unresolved. On such grounds, it could stand to reason that when the piece was sewn together into its decorative border, the two scenes were accidentally interchanged. After all, this is not the case where the two scenes flow in the same direction as in the Halberstadt and Castell'Arquato examples or are frontally composed as in the Benaki *poterokalymma*. The Communion of the Apostles scenes in the Epitaphios do indeed have a clear programmatic vector, but one that does not seem to operate congruously within the context of the textile as a whole.

Considered by most scholars, however, as one of the more—if not the most—highly skilled and luxurious examples of Byzantine textile production, the Thessaloniki Epitaphios' composition ought not to be thought to contain a careless error in placement. It is from this position that I am led to reason that a specific context, use, or purpose would have demanded or thrived on this rearrangement. Certainly, the Epitaphios is a unique object in its own right, and as such it could be expected that challenges might emerge in its design; but it is not an object made by unskilled or unthinking artists. Thus, even if its solutions may not always have been the most graceful, I suggest that they were indeed *solutions* to a compositional, iconographic problem nonetheless. In what follows I offer several extrapolated explanations to the conundrum that I (admittedly) have created here so as to better understand *potential* uses and contexts for this textile that cannot be securely proven by looking at textual or other visual sources in isolation.

Liturgical use

While an epitaphios is used today in the Greek Orthodox Church on Holy Saturday, when it is deposited upon a tomb erected in the center of the nave, the uses in the Late Byzantine world are less known. In light of the work of Hans Belting, Robert F. Taft, Henry Schilb, Warren Woodfin, and others, it



Figure 5: Celestial Liturgy, Gračanica (1321–1322), Serbia [Kosovo, Republic of Kosovo] (Photo: Blago Photo Archive)xx

may be inferred that the use of the Thessaloniki Epitaphios would have most likely been in the context of the Great Entrance.¹⁵ During the Great Entrance, the Holy Gifts would be

¹⁵ H. Belting, “An Image and its Function in the Liturgy: The Man of Sorrows in Byzantium,” *DOP* 34/35 (1980/1) 1–16; R. F. Taft, *The Great Entrance: A History of the Transfer of Gifts and Other Preanaphoral Rites of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (Rome 1975) 206–217; H. Schilb, *Byzantine Identity and its Patrons: Embroidered Aëres and Epitaphioi of the Palaiologan and Post-Byzantine*

brought into the sanctuary, covered in their respective *poterokalymma* and *diskokalymma*, while the Great Aër or epitaphios (as this period did not distinguish between the two terms)¹⁶ was carried separately—either draped over the shoulder of a deacon, as depicted in the Heavenly Liturgy in the drum of the dome at Gračanica, Serbia, of 1321/2 (*fig. 5*), or on two or more deacons' heads, as depicted in the Church of Saint Anthony in Vrontisi, Crete, of 1425–1450 (*fig. 6*).¹⁷ Demetrios Gemistos, in his *diataxis* from about 1380,¹⁸ recounts this process in his description of the patriarchal entrance at Hagia Sophia in Constantinople:

And thus the entrance takes place, led by the master of ceremonies. Then comes the castrensus with the omophorion of the patriarch and the thurible, or the second deacon, then the deacons carrying the rhipidia, with them the deacon carrying the holy bread, and behind him those carrying the other discos. Then comes the archpriest with the holy chalice, and the other priests according to rank. After all the others come the deacons carrying the aer on their heads (ἐπὶ κεφαλῆς), and with them, in turn, the subdeacons bearing the *lavabo* basin.

When the one bearing the holy bread has arrived, the patriarch, coming down from the [altar] platform on which he was standing, meets him and takes the discos from his head and puts it on the holy altar, with him [the deacon] also holding on to it. He [the patriarch] does the same with the full holy chalices, after the deacon carrying the thurible has censed them.

Periods (diss. U. Indiana 2009) 1–6; W. T. Woodfin, *The Embodied Icon: Liturgical Vestments and Sacramental Power in Byzantium* (Oxford 2012) 122–129.

¹⁶ W. T. Woodfin, “Liturgical Textiles,” in H. Evans (ed.), *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557)* (New York 2004) 295–298; see also Schilb, *Byzantine Identity and its Patrons* 20–55.

¹⁷ On depictions of the Great Entrance see I. Spatharakis, “Representations of the Great Entrance in Crete,” in *Studies in Byzantine Manuscript Illumination and Iconography* (London 1996) 293–335; J. D. Ștefănescu, “L’illustration des Liturgies,” *Annuaire de l’Institut de Philologie et d’Histoire Orientales* 1 (1932/3) 21–78.

¹⁸ A. Rentel, “The Origins of the 14th Century Patriarchal Liturgical Diataxis of Dimitrios Gemistos,” *OCP* 71 (2005) 363–385.

All the bishops, priests, and deacons take hold of the aer saying: *Noble Joseph*. And the patriarch places the chalices on either side of the discos one by one, and the deacons remove their veils, and thus the aer is put on.¹⁹

The *diataxis* of Demetrios Gemistos clarifies not only the use and deployment of the epitaphios or Great Aër on the altar, but also how it was carried in during the Great Entrance, upon the heads of deacons at the end of the procession—as is attested by liturgical imagery on contemporaneous monumental wall paintings, such as at St. Anthony in Vrontisi, as discussed, and at the Pantanassa in Mistra of 1428.²⁰



Figure 6: Celestial Liturgy, Saint Anthony (1425–1450), Vrontisi, Crete (Photo: Doula Mouriki)

This practice is discussed by Symeon of Thessaloniki in his “Explanation of the Divine Temple,” who describes the procession of the Great Entrance:²¹

¹⁹ Text of A. Dmitrievskii, *Opisanie liturgicheskikh rukopisei* II (Kiev 1901) 310–311; transl. Taft, *The Great Entrance* 212.

²⁰ On the Pantanassa depiction see S. Dufrenne, *Les programmes iconographiques des églises byzantines de Mistra* (Paris 1970), pl. 38.

²¹ Steven Hawkes-Teeples, *Symeon of Thessalonika: The Liturgical Commem-*

After it come the deacons one after another who have the order of the angels; then those carrying the divine gifts; and after them all the others and those carrying over their head the sacred great veil (οἱ ἐπὶ κεφαλῆς τὸ ἱερόν κατέχοντες ἔπιπλον) which has the depiction of Jesus naked and dead.

Here the textile representing the dead Christ is described as the ἔπιπλον, and is borne behind the Holy Gifts upon the heads of its bearers. These two texts characterize the Great Aër proper, the large and expansive textile whose use requires the cooperation of a host of people in the procession, made manifest by Demetrios Gemistos' comment that "all the bishops, priests, and deacons" take hold of the Great Aër to cover the unveiled gifts (and supplementary vessels) on the altar. Thus this expansive textile responds to the size and scale of the Late Byzantine Eucharistic rite with its proliferation of chalices and patens upon the altar.

Nevertheless, these accounts suggest that the Thessaloniki Epitaphios cannot be affiliated with such practices, but must come into play in some intermediary role between the roles of the Great Aër and the chalice or paten veils, given its size and proportions. However, these sources do sketch out two specific contexts of use for such a textile: it must be cohesively comprehensible during the procession of the Great Entrance when it would be accessible to the congregation, and, secondly, when it was deposited upon the altar in the sanctuary and visible only to the clergy. These are two different situations with very different vantage points, audiences, and functions.

In the Great Entrance, however, there is flexibility in how a textile comparable to the Epitaphios would be carried by the procession. In the depictions of the Celestial Liturgy at Gračanica, it is draped over either the left or the right shoulder of the angel-deacons, on two different occasions. In this example, imagery is not discernable upon the aëres, nor is there any figural imagery on the *poterokalymma* or *diskokalymma*, which feature only simple crosses. However, in the Saint An-

taries (Toronto 2011) 126–127 (*Expl.* 63).

thony example (and others), where the Great Aër is carried over the heads of the procession, as attested by Demetrios Gemistos and Symeon of Thessaloniki, the figure of Christ is featured upon the textile. It is feasible that aëres depicting the Christ frontally, as in the epitaphios of King Stefan Uroš II Milutin, would have been particularly suited to being carried over the heads of the procession as depicted in the Saint Anthony fresco, or even carried on the back of the priest.

Considering the variations in carrying practices, I propose that the Thessaloniki Epitaphios is an index of these practical factors being put into dialogue with extant liturgical typologies and emergent liturgical practices. As Warren Woodfin has pointed out, in their use during the liturgy, textiles often play with their status as moving objects, and the negative spaces that emerge through their actions. For instance, Woodfin observes how the theme of the Annunciation on the *epimanikia* places Gabriel and the Virgin on the left and right cuff of the celebrant's hands, respectively, so as to structure "the locus of the Incarnation" in the space betwixt them as the hands prepared the body and blood of Christ.²² Similarly, I wish to extrapolate (from the textile itself) a practice of carrying the Thessaloniki Epitaphios during the Great Entrance that would play with its unique iconography, neatly resolving the problem of its awkward size, proportions, and iconography, all while operating in keeping with this predilection for liturgical textiles' play as 'moving images'.

The Epitaphios could not have been gracefully brought in by any of the means detailed above. Its rich, thick embroidery work and metal-wire thread would not have permitted the textile to be draped in the manner in which it is often depicted in scenes of the Celestial Liturgy. This textile would not have been flexible enough to drape the body hanging from the shoulder as it does at Gračanica and in other wall-paintings. Its awkward size and proportions also would have prevented it

²² Woodfin, *The Embodied Icon* 100.

from being carried on the heads of deacons as in the scene from Vrontisi, which calls for a much wider textile. Technically speaking, though, the textile's richness would have made it particularly well suited for draping over an altar or held around the body by a single person, which would allow it to curve gently around a form, rather than be draped like silken cloth.

Accordingly, it is proposed that the Thessaloniki Epitaphios was brought into the sanctuary wrapped *per se* around a priest or a deacon's shoulders, who would hold the textile by its top left and right corners with his hands—either holding on directly to the textile, though more likely by strings that attached to it. This would cause the scene of the *threnos* to appear draped over a deacon or priest's back and be seen upright, glimmering from various angles as he walked past. Yet when he is seen coming (that is, frontally), the strange inversion of the Communion of the Apostles scene would be resolved, for then the two altars would be seamed together and the scene would correctly emerge



Figure 7: Communion of the Apostles, Thessaloniki Epitaphios (ca. 1300),
Museum of Byzantine Culture, No. BYΦ 57, Thessaloniki, Greece
(Photo: Velissarios Voutsas)

with the bread on the left and the wine on the right (*fig. 7*). This, of course, would not be a perfect suture. The textile is not meant to be folded so as to reveal a seamless Communion of

the Apostles image with a neatly fused and coextensive altar. Instead, this interval not only allows the textile to be held by its border, but also causes the bearer himself to take on the role of Christ. Standing within the locus of the two altars coming together, the priest/deacon appears in the typology of Christ. At two meters in length, the proportions of the textile would allow for it to nicely wrap around a person, while still allowing the voluptuously clothed body of a priest/deacon to stand out within it, rather than fully enfolding him.

Liturgical context: the Great Entrance

This proposed use of the Thessaloniki Epitaphios is prescribed by the placement of the Communion of the Apostles scenes, which so desire to be seen in this manner. This practice, however, is in fact evidenced in two mid-sixteenth century fresco programs on Mount Athos: in the apse of the *katholikon* of Dochiariou from around 1568 (*fig. 8*) and on the southern wall of the bema in the church of St. Nicholas at the Great Lavra from 1560 (*fig. 9*).²³ In these examples, various angel-deacons process in the Great Entrance of the Celestial Liturgy, carrying liturgical implements, while across their backs and shoulders and held by strings to the hands are various examples of mid-sized aëres comparable in composition and scale to the Thessaloniki Epitaphios. While these frescoes are later in date, the order and composition of the procession itself is in keeping with early-fourteenth century images and texts: angels with censers and candle-sticks open the procession, followed by the *rhypidia*-bearing angel and the angel carrying the paten on his head, both of whom wear the intermediate aër around their shoulders. The two are followed by an angel carrying the corresponding chalice, and then angels carrying additional patens and chalices, concluding with the entrance of the Great Aër over the heads of three deacon-angels. In the example from the Great Lavra, one angel's aër bears the vertical image of the

²³ G. Millet, *Monuments de l'Athos I Les peintures* (Paris 1927) pl. 118.2, 218.2, 219.3, 232.2.

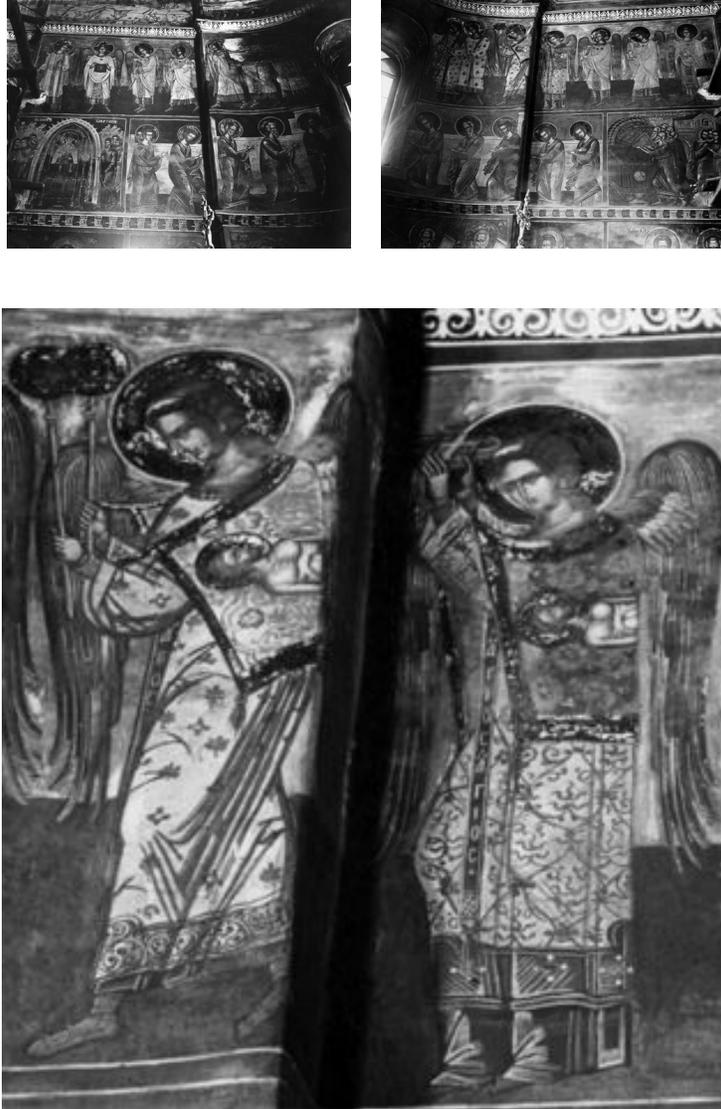


Figure 8: Celestial Liturgy, Monastery of Dochiariou (1568), Mount Athos, Greece (Photo: Collection chrétienne et byzantine E.P.H.E – Photothèque Gabriel Millet)



Figure 9: Celestial Liturgy, Monastery of the Great Lavra (1560), Mount Athos, Greece (Photo: Collection chrétienne et byzantine E.P.H.E – Photothèque Gabriel Millet)

Man of Sorrows, while behind him the other angel's textile depicts the horizontal dead Christ associated with the *threnos* scene.

Closer in date to the Thessaloniki Epitaphios is a notable image depicting a similar use for this intermediate-sized aër, in the northern apse of the Church of Saint Demetrios at the



Figure 10: *Prothesis* niche, Celestial Liturgy, St. Demetrios, Markov Monastery (1375), Skopje, Macedonia (Photo: Marka Tomić Đurić)

Markov Monastery near Skopje, from 1375 (*fig.* 10).²⁴ The painting is in the *prothesis* niche and features an angel-deacon censuring the figure of the dead Christ as the *melismos*.²⁵ The

²⁴ For an overview of the church and its wall-paintings see E. Dimitrova, “The Church of St. Demetrios – Marko’s Monastery,” in P. Velkov et al. (eds.), *Skopje: Seven Monuments of Art and Architecture* (Skopje 2010) 48–59. See also L. Mirković, *Markov Manastir* (Novi Sad 1925) 31–34; I. Sinkević, “Prolegomena for a Study of Royal Entrances in Byzantine Churches: The Case of Marko’s Monastery,” in M. J. Johnson et al. (eds.), *Approaches to Byzantine Architecture and its Decoration* (Burlington 2012) 121–142.

²⁵ On this image in the context of the epitaphios see H. Belting, *The Image and its Public in the Middle Ages: Form and Function of Early Paintings of the Passion* (New Rochelle 1990) 123–129.

deacon bears a non-figural aër wrapped around both his shoulders, freeing his hands to cense the dead Christ upon the altar, who is likewise covered in a similar aër, operating as a *diskokalymma*. The deacon's depiction evokes the practice of wrapping the aër around the back and shoulders as attested in the later imagery from Dochiariou or the Great Lavra.

The important *diataxis* of Philotheos Kokkinos, on which Demetrios Gemistos' own *diataxis* is based, pays particular attention to the rites of the *prothesis* and the beginning of the Great Entrance.²⁶ The work was composed while Philotheos Kokkinos was abbot of the Great Lavra on Mount Athos, sometime between spring 1342 and June 1345. This work sheds light on the practice of the aër, particularly in the Athonite context. In the *diataxis*, there is no mention of what we might call the Great Aër. Instead, in addition to the *diskokalymmata* and *poterokalymmata*, the text attests an aër (τὸ ἄήρ), which is placed upon the left shoulder of the deacon carrying the paten before the beginning of the Great Entrance:²⁷

And the priest raising the aër sets it upon the left shoulder of the deacon, saying: "Lift up your hands for the holies." Then, raising the holy paten, he sets it upon the top of the head (ἐπάνω τῆς κορυφῆς) of the deacon, holding it together with fear and full attention and care. The priest himself raises the holy chalice alone. And thus they begin the Great Entrance, the deacon going before the priest (κρατοῦντος) with the holy paten and a censer on one of the fingers of his right hand.

As is customary, the priest here sets the paten upon the head of the deacon, having placed the aër on his left shoulder, and then gives him a censer to carry in his right hand. The appearance of the similar scene in the *prothesis* niche of the Markov Monastery is thus significant.²⁸ The *prothesis* rite would have customarily been performed not by the celebrant of the Divine

²⁶ Rentel, *OCP* 71 (2005) 368–369.

²⁷ P. Trepela, *Αἱ τρεῖς λειτουργίαι* (Athens 1935) 9.

²⁸ On the decoration of the *prothesis* niche see S. Dufrenne, "Images du décor de la prothèse," *REByz* 26 (1968) 297–310.

Liturgy, but rather by another priest with the assistance of a deacon,²⁹ as is shown there with Peter of Alexandria leading the *prothesis* rite and being assisted by St. Stephen in his role as deacon.³⁰ The scroll held by St. Peter, officiating the rite of the *prothesis*, shows in Serbian the initial words of the Prayer of the *prothesis*. However, the deacon here is censuring the offering, which is done primarily during the rites of veiling the gifts towards the end of the *prothesis*, and even later at the initiation of the Great Entrance itself. Hence, this scene alludes to the process as detailed in Philotheos Kokkinos' *diataxis* for the initiation of the Great Entrance, given that the deacon already bears the aër around his shoulders, that the paten is veiled, and that the *melismos* is present, as a proleptic manifestation of the sanctified gifts' transformation, while the beginning of the *prothesis* rite is alluded to by the writing on Peter's scroll. Other elements suggest that the rite itself has already been undertaken. Thus, the image condenses into one synchronic scene the *prothesis* rite as a whole (from beginning to end), and leads one to the moment immediately before the transposition of the gifts in the Great Entrance, which goes on to be represented across the rest of the church's eastern, lower register.

A comparison of the scene in the *prothesis* niche with the rest of the representations of the Celestial Liturgy is revealing, as the program features different practices of carrying the various types of aëres during the Great Entrance (*fig. 11.1*). In the bottom register of wall-paintings in the sanctuary apse (directly behind the altar), the depiction of the Celestial Liturgy is immensely detailed, featuring the coming of various liturgical implements such as *rhypidia*, the ornate gospel lectionary, a large

²⁹ Rentel, *OCP* 71 (2005) 364. On the *prothesis* and its symbolisms see S. Muksuris, *Economia and Eschatology: Liturgical Mystagogy in the Byzantine Prothesis Rite* (Brookline 2013).

³⁰ C. Grozdanov, "Iz ikonografije Markovog manastira," *Žograf* 11 (1980) 83–95. See also M. Tomić Đurić, "The Man of Sorrows and the Lamenting Virgin: The Example at Markov Manastir," *Žbornik radova Vizantoloskog instituta* 49 (2012) 303–331, esp. 306.



1

Figure 11: Celestial Liturgy, St. Demetrios, Markov Monastery (1375), Skopje, Macedonia (Photo: Marka Tomić Đurić)

Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 55 (2015) 489–535



2



3



4



5



6

jeweled processional cross, the *lavabo*, censers, and tapered candles. To the right of the altar, two angel-deacons bear an expansive Great Aër cinched over their heads, propping it up with one hand in the center (11.2–3). Behind them follows an angel-deacon carrying the paten upon his head, covered by a *diskokalymma* (11.4). This deacon is followed by another who carries a large unveiled vessel, possibly a *hydria*, a water container, contrasting with the wide-brimmed basin of the *lavabo* and its ewer, featured further on in the procession (11.5). On the opposite side of the altar, closest to it, is the celebrant carrying the wine chalice covered by the *poterokalymma* (11.6). And, within the southern niche of the *diakonikon*, two other deacons bear other implements, while draped over their left shoulders is again another thin and long aër. Thus the Markov Monastery scenes attest to the wealth of practices related to the carrying of the various veils and aëres. From the monastery's imagery, one may surmise that the Thessaloniki Epitaphios was not meant to

serve as the expansive Great Aër proper, but rather as one of these mid-sized aëres; yet one that was nevertheless explicitly tied to figures assisting with the care or preparation of the Holy Gifts themselves.

Textually, the *diataxis* of Philotheos Kokkinos elucidates the practice of carrying the aër around the shoulders. Notably, unlike Symeon of Thessaloniki and Demetrios Gemistos' own Constantinopolitan *diataxis*, the Philotheos text makes no mention of any object that could be identified with the Great Aër—only a shoulder-borne, intermediately-sized aër that comes to cover the gifts upon the altar. As the Philotheos text explains, once the procession has reached the sanctuary:

Then he sets the holy chalice upon the holy table, reciting upon it this *troparion*: “Noble Joseph, when tending to the burial.”

Then the priest himself raises the veils from the holy paten and holy chalice and places them among them, and then takes the aër from the shoulders of the deacon (ἀπὸ τῶν ὤμων τοῦ διακόνου).³¹

Note that here the priest takes up the aër from the plural *shoulders* (ὤμων) of the singular deacon (διακόνου), even though previously the text noted its placement on the left shoulder alone.³² Earlier, the deacon was described as acrobatically holding the paten on his head with his left hand and the censer in a finger from his right hand, yet it is unclear how the aër now comes to be on both shoulders. It must be deduced then that there is an abridging here of the deacon's own kinesthetic practices (as is usual in the *diataxeis*), which may have included the wrapping of the aër across the shoulders so as to keep it secure while carrying the paten on the head (with the same arm as that on which the aër had been set) and also the censer in the right hand.

A practice analogous to carrying the aër upon one's back is also attested in the fifteenth-century *euchologion* from the Great

³¹ Trepela, *Αἱ τρεῖς λειτουργίαι* 10.

³² Also cf. Trepela, *Αἱ τρεῖς λειτουργίαι* 83.

Lavra, where the deacon is instructed to carry the textile draped from his forehead and down his back:

Having covered the head of the deacon as mentioned above with the aër which hangs from his forehead to his back (ἀπὸ τοῦ μετώπου ἕως τῶν νώτων κρεμαμένου τοῦ ἀέρος), he [the priest] places the holy paten on his head...³³



Figure 12: Celestial Liturgy, Virgin Peribleptos (14th cent.), Mistra, Greece
(Photo: Ephorate of Antiquities of Lakonia, Velissarios Voutsas)

This practice is in keeping with that evidenced in the late-fourteenth-century church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Mistra (fig. 12), in St. Phanourios at Valsamonero of 1431, and in the *katholikon* of the Chilandar Monastery on Mount Athos of ca. 1321 (retouched in 1803/4), where smaller aëres are draped from the bottom of the forehead to the upper back.³⁴ In the Chilandar Monastery, restored by King Stefan Uroš II Milutin in 1321, an intricate depiction of the Celestial Liturgy on the central dome of the naos features various angel-deacons bear-

³³ Transl. D. E. Conomos, *Byzantine Trisagia and Cheroubika of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries: A Study of Late Byzantine Liturgical Chant* (Thessaloniki 1974) 36. Greek text: Dmitrievskii, *Opisanie liturgicheskikh rukopisei* II 610.

³⁴ See Spatharakis, in *Studies in Byzantine Manuscript Illumination* 300–306.



Figure 13: Celestial Liturgy, Chilandar Monastery (ca. 1321), Mount Athos, Greece (Photo: Taylor Hostetter)

ing aères, on either the left or right shoulder.³⁵ Two of these carry a paten, while another the *artophorion*, a container for the Eucharistic bread, as we have seen being carried by the censuring

³⁵ W. T. Hostetter, *In the Heart of Hilandar: An Interactive Presentation of the Frescoes in the Main Church of the Hilandar Monastery on Mt. Athos*³ (CD-ROM: Tuskegee 1999). See M. Marković, “The Original Paintings of the Monastery’s Main Church,” in G. Subotić (ed.), *Hilandar Monastery* (Belgrade 1998) 221–242.

deacon of the *prothesis* at Markov.³⁶ Towards the end of the procession, however, there is yet another angel who carries a similarly sized and shaped red textile with a gold-embroidered cross upon its center (*fig.* 13). The angel carries this medium-sized aër differently than do the rest on the dome, who have draped them over their shoulders. This suggests that this textile might tentatively play the role of what would be the Great Aër, yet he carries it alone upon his head and draped over his shoulders. As it curves over his halo, it is uncertain whether the textile covers a paten, though given his position in the procession and the fact that he is followed by angels carrying uncovered vessels, which appear to be an empty chalice and perhaps a mixing *krater*, it is reasonable to assume that this angel carries the aër alone. Thus, we might see in this representation a transition in the Athonite context from the use of the medium-sized aër carried with the holy vessels toward the expansive Great Aër, which may well have been a feature of the cathedral liturgy of Hagia Sophia in contrast to monastic practices. If this textile is in a state of transition, it is notable that it is not being carried precisely from the forehead to the back but rather slouched from the center of the head, leaning towards the back—unlike its snug placement on the head in the scene at the Peribleptos in Mistra.

Compare this practice to that depicted in a fourteenth-century *panagiarion* (often referred to as the Pulcheria Paten) from the Monastery of Xeropotamou on Mount Athos (*fig.* 14).³⁷ This object depicts the Great Entrance of the Celestial Liturgy on its rim with a duplicated Christ beside an altar dismissing the procession on the left and receiving it on the right. The angelic hosts move counter-clockwise, a movement that might itself allude to the procession from the northern *prothesis* niche

³⁶ On containers for the sanctified bread see I. Drpić, “Notes on Byzantine *Panagiaria*,” *Žograph* 35 (2011) 51–62.

³⁷ I. Kalavrezou, *Byzantine Icons in Steatite* (Vienna 1985) I 204–205, II pl. 64 (no. 131).



Figure 14: 'Pulcheria' Panagiaron (14th cent.),
Xeropotamou Monastery, Mount Athos, Greece
(Photo: Xeropotamou Monastery, Velissarios Voutsas)

south towards the central apse. Hence, the altar presumably doubles as that of the *prothesis* and the sanctuary with the dead Christ as the *melismos* upon it. The order of the entourage is in keeping with contemporary liturgical practices. Angel-deacons

bearing candles, *rhypidia*, patens, and chalices populate the majority of the arched spaces, yet the procession culminates in two figures, the first holding a large, wide-brimmed vessel, presumably a *lavabo*, and the other carrying an aër, held by its two top-most corners and wrapped cylindrically across his back and shoulders. Rather than depicting the figure merely in profile like most of the other figures, the artist has been careful with the textile's depiction in order to show the manner in which the textile covers the body. The top-most point of the textile curves past the back of his head, stressing this act of enshrouding the body around the shoulders, rather than carrying it from the forehead or upon a single shoulder.

The textile's three-dimensionality in the Xeropotamou *panagiarion* treats the textile as a voluptuous, moving object in space rather than simply a flat plane. This corroborates Anna Muthesius's view that the "painstaking embroidery of the back of the [Thessaloniki] epitaphios also suggests it was meant to be seen."³⁸ Henry Schilb, however, has cautioned against this claim, given that such textiles were usually backed by cloth.³⁹ Nevertheless, in light of the theory proposed here, it would be possible to imagine that the Thessaloniki Epitaphios accentuated its own three dimensionality by allowing its obverse to be left unsheathed and perceptible to the congregants—and, particularly, to the bearer himself who experienced the process of being enfolded into its images. The Xeropotamou *panagiarion* supports this notion, given that the artist has carefully cross-hatched the back of the textile, which here faces the viewer, alluding to the richly-textured surface of a densely embroidered work like the Thessaloniki Epitaphios. The angel-deacon is aptly shown holding the textile by its top corners, and a band on the border of the textile is discernable, all features that suggest a striking similarity to the design of the Epitaphios.

Given these various liturgical practices and possibilities, it is

³⁸ A. Muthesius, *Studies in Silk in Byzantium* (London 2004) 187.

³⁹ Schilb, *Byzantine Identity and its Patrons* 146–147.

worth returning to the images at Dochiariou and the Great Lavra. While later in date, these images are in keeping with the Athonite *diataxis* contemporaneous with the Thessaloniki Epitaphios. If the Epitaphios was created with the intention of being wrapped around the shoulders, then it is possible to approach with greater precision the deduced role of the textile via the later images. Consistently, in the two mid-sixteenth-century frescoes, the shoulder aëres are worn exclusively by two members near the front of the procession: one carrying two *rhipidia*, and the other carrying the paten upon his head. As the Communion of the Apostles is portrayed upon the Epitaphios, it is most likely that this iconography was added precisely to the *threnos* scene for the second member who carries the paten, rather than the one carrying the *rhipidia*. Furthermore, the members carrying the paten in the two frescoes are dressed in a lavishly embroidered garb that is distinct from the other angel-deacons in the procession. It may be speculated then that the figure carrying the paten is an not ordinary deacon, but perhaps a higher-ranking figure, such as the priest or deacon charged with the rite of the *prothesis*.

While the consistency of these two wall paintings may be attributed to their proximity in date rather than indexing an underlying ritual practice, the proliferation of *diataxeis* from the twelfth to the fifteenth century is attributed to the expansion of the *prothesis* rite itself and a desire to consolidate and remediate the growing variants in local practices among the lower clergy.⁴⁰ This project centered on Athos, following in the footsteps of Philotheos Kokkinos. As a part of this codification, an articulate language of veiling developed in regard to layering the *poterokalymma*, *diskokalymma*, and aër at the conclusion of the rite as the gifts awaited their transposition to the sanctuary during the Great Entrance.⁴¹ So it is possible to understand that the priest and deacon of the *prothesis* rite would bear an

⁴⁰ R. F. Taft, "Mount Athos: A Late Chapter in the History of the Byzantine Rite," *DOP* 42 (1988) 179–194, esp. 192–193.

⁴¹ See Muksuris, *Economia and Eschatology* 173–184.

index of their involvement in the preparation of the gifts in the procession. Thus, their shoulder-borne *aër* plays with the covering of the gifts at the end of the *prothesis* by covering the body of the priest or deacon during the Great Entrance. This would signify the prayer said by the priest as he covers the paten and chalice with the *aër*: “Shelter (σκέπασον) us in the shelter of your wings (πτερύγων),”⁴² whereby the image of Christ literally shelters the bodies of the supplicants with the *aër* that is covering them (as the prayer is being said in the *prothesis*) and will again cover the Holy Gifts themselves on the altar. This mention of “wings” would resonate well with the wearing of the *aër* around the shoulders since the term can also be used to refer to the shoulder-blades and would allude to the Great Entrance’s manifestation of the Heavenly Hosts as the Cherubic Hymn is chanted. The *rhipidia* often bear images of the Cherubim, Seraphim, or Tetramorph; and, as Nicholas/Theodore of Andida writes, “the *rhipidia* ... are as a type of the Cherubim.”⁴³ As the *rhipidia* were moved during the procession, the shoulder-borne *aër* itself would flutter like the wings of the angels they represent, and these wings would likewise shelter and protect the supplicants.

Upon reaching the sanctuary, the procession is greeted by the celebrant who sets the vessels on the altar. There the Epitaphios might have been met with the lavishly ornate *sakkos* of the celebrant, such as the *sakkos* now in the Vatican Treasury, dating to around the mid-fourteenth century (*fig.* 15.1).⁴⁴ This *sakkos* features the Communion of the Apostles, which also appears precisely on the celebrant’s shoulders, and when seen frontally the bread is on the left and the wine on the right (15.2–3). Thus, had a similar *sakkos* been worn by the celebrant awaiting the Great Entrance procession at the threshold of the sanctuary, the Thessaloniki Epitaphios would

⁴² Trempele, *Αι τρεις λειτουργίαι* 4–5.

⁴³ Nicholas/Theodore of Andida *Protheoria* 18 (PG 140.441B).

⁴⁴ W. T. Woodfin, “Vatican Sakkos,” in *Byzantium: Faith and Power* 300–301. See also Woodfin, *The Embodied Icon* 57–64, 122–129.



1 (front)



2 (right shoulder)



3 (left shoulder)

Figure 15: *Sakkos* (14th cent.), The Vatican Treasury, Vatican City
 (Photo: Fototeca Nazionale, Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo
 e la Documentazione, E21769)

have resonated with the scene that now confronted it. The Communion of the Apostles on both textiles, draped over both the celebrant's and the deacon's or priest's shoulders, now come face to face as the celebrant and gift-bearers come together to set the vessels upon the altar as mirror images of one another.

Liturgical context: the sanctuary

Upon entering the sanctuary the Thessaloniki Epitaphios would presumably have been laid upon or held over the Holy Gifts, as suggested by contemporary sources. Unlike examples of aëres that depict the dead Christ frontally and so could feasibly be placed facing in any direction, the Epitaphios prescribes a set avenue of approach with a clear top and bottom. Consequently, this directionality allows one to posit that the textile would have been laid upon the altar with the bottom of the scene pointing toward the priest, according to his vantage point. Thus, the ever receding, ever magnifying scene of the Communion of the Apostles upon *sakkos*, aër, *diskokalymmata*, *poterokalymmata*, apsidal wall-painting, and so on would cohesively populate the sanctuary across various media and formats.⁴⁵

It is possible that the two scenes of the Communion on the textile would have hung over the edges of an altar to which the Epitaphios was fitted, leaving only the dead Christ himself now visible upon the table, while the scenes of the Communion decorated the altar's sides. Hanging off the side of the table, these scenes would have exhorted the clergy to come toward the altar and take communion, just as did the Apostles before them. This might suggest that the Thessaloniki Epitaphios operated analogously to the *eileton*, a cloth that was laid out below the holy gifts and that would develop into the *antimension*, the relic-bearing, consecrated corporal in the Greek Orthodox Church, which itself develops from small portable altars used for the distribution of the communion (to which the term referred in earlier centuries).⁴⁶ Symeon of Thessaloniki describes that it is usual to have the four evangelists manifested on the cloths that cover the altar:

⁴⁵ For a discussion of these various textiles and their liturgical mimesis see Woodfin, *The Embodied Icon* 98–102.

⁴⁶ J. M. Izzo, *The Antimension in the Liturgical and Canonical Tradition of the Byzantine and Latin Churches* (Rome 1975) 110–124.

The sacred altar has four pieces of cloth at its four corners, because the fullness of the Church is composed of the ends of the earth. The names of the four evangelists are on these four because through them the Church was established and the Gospel travelled through the whole world.⁴⁷

The symbolic representations of the four evangelists on the Thessaloniki Epitaphios would heighten its relation to such altar coverings, evidencing once again this textile's penchant for creating a *mise-en-abyme* of ever-receding layers of duplication and manifestation, or perhaps even a use analogous to that of the *eileton* or *antimension*.

Such textiles, however, Symeon of Thessaloniki also states, were of a simple woven cloth and thus manifested the burial shroud and the *soudarion*.⁴⁸ Pauline Johnstone is right to note that while this textile might have been painted (or printed, as it is later), it would certainly have not been embroidered since embroidery would produce an unstable footing for the chalice and paten, and its fine threads could harmfully catch fragments of the body and blood of Christ.⁴⁹ In the late Byzantine period, however, the textile does come to be decorated with the image of the dead Christ, developing eventually into the complete *threnos* by the sixteenth century.⁵⁰ Consider, for instance, the depiction of the dead Christ on a textile set upon an altar at the late-twelfth-century church of Zoodochos Pege in Samari in Messenia (*fig. 16*).⁵¹ This textile, while often discussed in conjunction with the development of the epitaphioi-*threnos* motif, does not lie over chalices and patens, but rather is flat.⁵²

⁴⁷ *The Liturgical Commentaries* 90–93 (*Expl.* 18).

⁴⁸ *The Liturgical Commentaries* 110–111 (*Expl.* 42), 262–263 (*Lit.* 159), cf. 90–93 (*Expl.* 18).

⁴⁹ Johnstone, *The Byzantine Tradition* 24.

⁵⁰ Izzo, *The Antimension* 38–39.

⁵¹ H. Grigoriadou-Cabagnols, “Le décor peint de l’église de Samari en Messénie,” *CahArch* 20 (1970) 177–196.

⁵² See Belting, *DOP* 34/35 (1980/1) 12–15, and *The Image and its Public* 123–129.



*Figure 16: Zoodochos Pege (12th cent.), Samari, Messenia, Greece
(Photo: Ephorate of Antiquities of Messenia)*

Whether one sees the Christ as set upon it or depicted within it, the light-colored textile with its fringed edges and simple bands at the end would thus seem to depict a simple linen cloth, rather than a richly embroidered epitaphios or aër. Thus, it echoes directly the symbolism, iconography, and material of the altar cover upon which the holy implements and vessels were set. Consequently, if it is not to be understood simply as the burial shroud with Christ lying upon it, the textile depicted

in the wall painting (and the related twelfth-century enamel in the Hermitage)⁵³ is best referred to as an *eiletōn* or *antimension*, rather than as an epitaphios or an aër, which would have been radically different in materiality and design. Thus the typology of the altar cover serves as an important point of comparison for the Thessaloniki Epitaphios' use, given that there is a generative iconographic play between these textiles, which thus far has led scholars to confuse the altar cover and the Epitaphios when faced with such enigmatic examples of their depictions.

The most likely function of the Thessaloniki Epitaphios upon the altar, however, is that it was placed or held suspended over the Holy Gifts (and supplementary vessels) until the moment of the Creed. Symeon of Thessaloniki attests to this practice in the fourteenth century:⁵⁴

They hold the sacred veil (τὸ ἱερὸν κάλυμμα) over the gifts until the sacred creed is completed because it is necessary that everything concerning Jesus be professed in purity, and that He then be seen unveiled.

This indicates that in contemporary practices this “sacred veil” is continually held over the gifts. In the late-eighth/early-ninth century, Theodore the Studite refers to an analogous practice in the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts:

Then, the priest shrouds (ἐπικαλύπτει) the gifts with the raised cloth (ἀνωτάτω πέπλω), which the text knows to call the aër. In the moment of the raising [of the Gifts], however, he does not raise the cloth, but from beneath it the bread is raised, saying “The Presanctified Holy.” Then, in this moment, he raises the aër.⁵⁵

Hence, the Thessaloniki Epitaphios would either be held above the gifts by the edges of the *threnos* scene so as to allow the side scenes to hang, or be held up on its own by the proper

⁵³ Belting, *DOP* 34/35 (1980/1) 13.

⁵⁴ *The Liturgical Commentaries* 132–133 (*Expl.* 72).

⁵⁵ “Explanation of the Divine Liturgy of the Presanctified,” *PG* 99.1687–1690, at 1689A.

arrangement of chalices and patens below it. In this model, there is a resonant layering of the Communion of the Apostles scene on *poterokalymma* and *diskokalymma*. As we have seen, the liturgical texts indicate that the chalice and paten veils are removed and placed amidst the vessels on the altar before the aër is set upon the gifts at the conclusion of the Great Entrance. Thus the images of the Communion of the Apostles that might have previously covered the vessels during the Great Entrance would be replaced by their respective depiction in the unique iconographic program of the Thessaloniki Epitaphios.

Given the proportions of the Epitaphios, however, it seems unlikely that its entire two-meter length would have been propped up by the vessels; it is more likely that the vessels lay directly behind the *threnos* scene, as I have been describing, manifesting the body of the dead Christ above the gifts that would soon become the body of the Christ. This gives room for the textile to form a neat box over the wine and bread, leaving only the *threnos* scene visible from above and the Communion scenes adjacent to the Holy Gifts from the side. The textile's rigid embroidery would have been particularly well suited to this act of draping, which would not have been as graceful with the silky aëres often depicted in wall paintings upon deacons' bodies. Suspended above the altar, over the Holy Gifts, the textile would now be seen with the embroidered altars abutting the physical altar and concealing beneath the Communion scenes the Holy Gifts themselves that they portray.

After the completion of the Creed, as the priest recites the Epinikion Hymn, the aër is stated by the *diataxeis* to have been folded and set aside with the chalice veils on the altar.⁵⁶ As the

⁵⁶ In these accounts, the chalice veils are often also folded at this instant, even when they were said to have been removed earlier. This suggests that while they may have been set aside earlier they would have not been folded until now, though the possibility remains that in some instances they were left upon the vessels under the aër. Since *diataxeis* provide sketches of a basic liturgical rite, they often feature abbreviations of practices and processes that might have seemed either common sense to the writer or which might have varied according to local traditions, as has been observed with the

Philotheos Kokkinos *diataxis* explains:

The deacon goes in and, standing at the right of the priest and flanking the holy table, performs proskynesis three times. Then he folds (διπλοῖ) the aër and the veils and sets them in a place. And while the priest recites the Epinikion Hymn, the deacon raises the *asterisk*, wipes it on the altar cover (εἰλητοῦ), kisses it, and sets it with the aër (μετὰ τοῦ ἀέρος).⁵⁷

This account provides a dynamic context for the iconography of the aër, *poterokalymma*, and *diskokalymma*, which now share a common space upon the altar. The resonances between the iconography of the Communion of the Apostles on the Thessaloniki Epitaphios would work well with similar imagery on the veils as the deacon sets these scenes upon one another in the same place on the altar.

However, what becomes crucial here is the act of folding. At this moment in the Divine Liturgy, Christ has become truly present, and as such the unveiling of the gifts makes manifest his presence in the space, thus making the image of the *threnos* particularly pertinent. Accordingly, I would propose that here the Thessaloniki Epitaphios would have been set aside with the Communion of the Apostles folded back, behind the image of the *threnos*—with the images on the veils of the Communion abutting the Communion scenes on the Epitaphios, which now are themselves concealed. This would leave only the presence of Christ visible upon the altar, manifesting the imagery of the *melismos* popular in Palaiologan wall-painting.⁵⁸ The *melismos* depicts the dead Christ prostrate on the altar, often upon the paten with the *asterisk* that held the veils over his body, demonstrating the full manifestation and presence of the Christ in the liturgy's bloodless sacrifice. At this moment, the scene of the

wrapping of the aër upon the deacon's shoulders, which appears to be indicated in one portion of the text, but missing in another. Cf. Trempela, *Αἱ τρεῖς λειτουργίαι* 10–11; Dmitrievskii, *Opisanie liturgicheskikh rukopisei* II 310, 610–611.

⁵⁷ Trempela, *Αἱ τρεῖς λειτουργίαι* 11.

⁵⁸ On the *melismos* see Gerstel, *Beholding the Sacred Mysteries* 37–47.

melismos depicted on the wall-paintings of the period would have been literalized upon the altar as the deacon set the *asterisk* itself *on* the folded Thessaloniki Epitaphios on the altar. This placement, characterized in the Philotheos Kokkinos *diataxis* as “sets it with the aër (τίθησιν αὐτὸν μετὰ τοῦ ἀέρος),” is made explicit in the fifteenth-century *euchologion* from the Great Lavra, which specifies that the *asterisk* is “put away *upon* the aër (ἀποτίθησιν ἐπάνω τοῦ ἀέρος).”⁵⁹ This allows the aër to now manifest the liturgical sacrifice at hand and adds a heightened liturgical reality to the wall-paintings. This demonstrates a generative and mutually constructive interchange between iconographies that cannot simply be seen as art imitating life or vice versa, given that here the imagery of the *melismos* covered with the *asterisk* reflects liturgical realities, which such images themselves in turn may have come to enact.

From this analysis of the textile’s use throughout the liturgy, one may deduce two logics of performative fulfilment in the textile’s design: in the Great Entrance, the textile’s legibility is completed and enacted through its wrapping around the body and the stitching together of the Communion of the Apostles scene; upon the altar, the textile generates meaning not by what it shows but rather by the strategic concealment of scenes, showing only the Communion to those beside the altar and the *threnos* to the celebrant above it, or under the *asterisk* once it has been folded and set aside. This shrouding and unshrouding is crucial in the liturgy’s own choreography of the concealment and revelation of the Holy Gifts themselves, playing with the Divine Liturgy’s procedural manifestation of Christ. In this manner, the Thessaloniki Epitaphios could be seen to cleverly and intricately respond to two very different but crucial moments in the Divine Liturgy’s unfolding: the Great Entrance and the transformation of the Holy Gifts.

⁵⁹ Dmitrievskii, *Opisanie liturgicheskikh rukopisei* II 611.

Provenance and origins

Since a clear and direct lineage of transmission is impossible to ascribe securely to the Thessaloniki Epitaphios, I wish to address plausible avenues for its commission and afterlife that follow on the findings of this liturgical and iconographic analysis. While the textile is understood to have been made in a major workshop in Thessaloniki, opinion on its provenance and commission is bifurcated between Ohrid stylistically and Athos iconographically. As Henry Schilb has noted, Gabriel Millet associated the Epitaphios with the Chilandar Epitaphios, donated by the metropolitan John of Skopje around 1346, purely on iconographic grounds; yet on stylistic grounds Schilb argues that it is better associated with the Andronikos Epitaphios from Ohrid, a point which Sharon Gerstel has supported.⁶⁰ Hence, while one can see various avenues of connection between Ohrid and Mount Athos, these seem to be bifurcated between a telling methodological division: style versus iconography.

First, the Ohrid connection is certainly a useful and persuasive one: the Church of the Virgin Peribleptos is dated to 1295, commissioned by Andronikos II Palaiologos, as is indicated by a painted inscription over its narthex's west door. Andronikos II is a relevant name in this discussion not only for his commission of this church but also for the aër that bears his name. Made sometime during his reign, the Andronikos Epitaphios probably dates to the time of Archbishop Gregory, 1313 to 1328, when the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Ohrid was renovated. At a later date this aër would be transferred to the Church of the Virgin Peribleptos, when the cathedral became a mosque.⁶¹ In Hagia Sophia, one finds a uniquely frontal Christ in the eleventh-century depiction of the Communion of the Apostles (*fig. 17*) that one might associate with the

⁶⁰ S. Gerstel, "The Aesthetics of Orthodox Faith," *ArtB* 87 (2005) 331–341, esp. 334.

⁶¹ I. Petrinski, "Epitaphios of the Shepherd of the Bulgarians," in *Byzantium: Faith and Power* 314–315.

Benaki *poterokalymma*. If one is to lend any weight to this Ohrid connection in the case of the Benaki textile's intended use, perhaps alongside the Andronikos Epitaphios and others, this would position the city of Ohrid as a node for this type of artistic production, making it an interesting possible site for the use of the Thessaloniki Epitaphios.



Figure 17: Communion of the Apostles, Hagia Sophia (11th cent.), Ohrid, Macedonia (Photo: Gianni Dagli Orti / The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY)

Second, following the stylistic connection to the frescoes of the Protaton on Mount Athos, we can consider an Athonite connection to this textile. The Protaton Monastery's decorative program omits the Last Supper from the narrative sequence throughout the nave so as to place it behind the iconostasis on the sanctuary's southern wall.⁶² This allowed the artist to stress the liturgical rather than historical unfolding of the scene in the church's program and emphasize its adjacency to the Communion of the Apostles scene in the apse's intermediate zone, now badly damaged. Such a liturgical emphasis on communion would have made an epitaphios bearing the Communion of the Apostles scene an apt complement. Both the change in the Last

⁶² Gerstel, *Beholding the Sacred Mysteries* 56.

Supper's location and the addition of the Communion to the Epitaphios would reflect a desire on the part of the artists and patrons to stress certain eucharistic and theological themes, perhaps no longer fully accessible to us.

Beyond the stylistic resonances with the Protaton, additionally, it is worth recalling the other Athonite connections to the textile, such as the mid-sixteenth-century frescos from the Great Lavra evidencing the use implied by the Thessaloniki Epitaphios. Furthermore, a *podca* in the treasury of the Chilandar Monastery on Mount Athos has been associated with the same workshop as the Epitaphios by Gabriel Millet, an observation corroborated by Laskarina Bouras.⁶³ Chilandar had strong ties to Thessaloniki and founded there a *metochion* dedicated to Saint George at the end of the thirteenth century. As mentioned above, the monastery itself was restored around 1321 by King Stefan Uroš II Milutin, who travelled to Thessaloniki in 1299 to marry the daughter of Andronikos II Palaiologos, Simonis, and who also has an epitaphios/aër associated with his name, again with stylistic ties to Athonite wall-painting.⁶⁴ Thus, it could be reasoned that the Thessaloniki Epitaphios may have been tied in some manner to the marriage of King Milutin, utilizing the same workshop that Andronikos II had used earlier for his textile for the church of Hagia Sophia in Ohrid, but being adapted so as to be donated (upon the event of its restoration) to the Serbian monastery of Chilandar on Mount Athos. In fact, Robert Ousterhout, following Djurdje Bošković, has noted that an inscription at the Chilandar Monastery also lists its *protomaistores* or builders' names as Michael and Barnabas, the former of whom Ouster-

⁶³ G. Millet, *Broderies religieuses de style byzantin* (Paris 1939) 98; Bouras, in *L'art de Thessalonique* 213.

⁶⁴ George Pachymeres 20.4 (IV 315 Fallier); on the political marriages of the late Byzantine court see C. Hilsdale, *Byzantine Art and Diplomacy in an Age of Decline* (Cambridge 2014) 279–287. On the epitaphios see S. Mileusnić, "Epitaphios of King Stefan Uroš II Milutin," in *Byzantium: Faith and Power* 315–316.

hout proposes may be the same Michael mentioned in the inscription of the Peribleptos at Ohrid, thus suggesting that these builders also operated as the painters of the church.⁶⁵ Hence it is plausible to consider that Andronikos' builders, painters, and textile artists were used not only for the Ohrid projects, associated with the Thessaloniki Epitaphios and its family of objects, but also for the Chilandar Monastery's restoration and his own wedding preparations in Thessaloniki in 1299.

The practice of carrying the aër around the shoulders would also be well suited in an Athos-inflected context, having perhaps been prevalent in or particularly associated with the monastic, and possibly Serbian rite. After all, the earliest depiction of this practice appears in the Serbian Markov Monastery and in the Athonite *panagiarion* from Xeropotamou. Hence, Athos seems to attest not only to possessing other textiles from the same workshop and wall-paintings from the same artists, but also to having deployed the practices that the Thessaloniki Epitaphios implies by its iconographic composition. This constellation of evidence, while neither conclusive nor direct, should nevertheless not be taken lightly.

An Athonite presence is indeed well attested in the city of Thessaloniki with a variety of *metochia* around the city.⁶⁶ The Church of the Panagouda, where the Epitaphios was discovered in 1900, while a modern construction dating to 1818 after the burning of an earlier building the year before, is attested in earlier sources under the title of Panagia Gorgoepikoos.⁶⁷ This site, for instance, first appears in Theodore

⁶⁵ R. Ousterhout, *Master Builders of Byzantium* (Princeton 1999) 57, 252–253; cf. D. Bošković, “Sur quelques maîtres-maçons et maître-peintres des premières décades du XIV^e s. en Serbie et Macédoine,” *Starinar* N.S. 9/10 (1958/9) 125–131.

⁶⁶ C. Giros, “Présence athonite à Thessalonique, XIII^e–XV^e siècles,” *DOP* 57 (2003) 265–278.

⁶⁷ A. Papagiannopoulos, *Monuments of Thessaloniki* (Thessaloniki 1983) 107. See also O. Tafrahi, *Topographie de Thessalonique* (Paris 1913) 184; Th. Papa-

Kerameas's testament from 1284 where figures from this monastery are noted.⁶⁸ Additionally, it is mentioned in the 1405 account of the Russian monk Ignatius of Smolensk's visit to Thessaloniki.⁶⁹ Most importantly, it appears that the Panagouda church would also come to be a *metochion* under the protectorate of Mount Athos during the Turkish occupation, along with the nearby Church of St. Athanasios, which also burnt down in 1817, was rebuilt the subsequent year, and is attested as early as 1298 to have been a *metochion* of the Great Lavra Monastery.⁷⁰

Sharon Gerstel has recently attempted to chart the movements of the Thessaloniki Epitaphios by suggesting that its first home was the Church of St. Panteleimon in Thessaloniki, moving on to the Church of the Savior, and eventually to the Panagouda.⁷¹ The Church of St. Panteleimon was the *katholikon* of the Monastery of the Virgin Peribleptos in Thessaloniki, built around 1295–1315 by Iakobos, and home to key religious figures of the period.⁷² After the church was converted to a mosque, Gerstel proposes that the textile was moved to the nearby Sotiraki (that is, Church of the Savior *tou kyr Kyros*)⁷³ in which she notes that a relic made for the Church of St. Panteleimon was found corroborating the transfer of artifacts. Eventually, the Epitaphios made its way to the Panagouda, as

zotos, "The Identification of the Church of 'Profitis Elias' in Thessaloniki," *DOP* 45 (1991) 121–127, esp. 121.

⁶⁸ P. Lemerle, A. Guillou, N. Svoronos, and D. Papachryssanthou, *Actes de Lavra: De 1204 à 1328* (Paris 1977) 27–33, no. 75.

⁶⁹ M. L. Rautman, "Ignatius of Smolensk and the Late Byzantine Monasteries of Thessaloniki," *REByz* 49 (1991) 143–169, esp. 161–162.

⁷⁰ *Actes de Lavra* 139–140, no. 89.

⁷¹ Sharon Gerstel, "Witnessing Byzantium: The Greek Perspective" (lecture at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, 16 January 2014). Online at: <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/audio-video/audio/byzantium-gerstel.html>.

⁷² R. Janin, *Les églises et les monastères des grands centres byzantins* (Paris 1975) 386–388, 403–404.

⁷³ Janin, *Les églises* 416; see also Tafrafi, *Topographie* 182–183.

the Church of the Savior has been long known to have been a dependant of the Panagouda, whose clergy conducts its liturgy.⁷⁴ Gerstel's argument is convincing given that a monastic institution in Thessaloniki (closely following the contemporary practices of Mt. Athos) offers a perfect site for the convergence of the very factors that have led scholars to bifurcate the textile's provenance between Ohrid and Mt. Athos, though its creation in the city of Thessaloniki has not been contested.

Iakobos, who founded the Peribleptos, as evidenced by its appellation *tou kyr Isaak* and later *Işakiye Camii*, was a known patron of the arts in the 1290s.⁷⁵ Immediately before that, however, documentation from February 1287 shows him supervising the Great Lavra monastery on Mount Athos, where he signed as "*hieromonachos* and *kathegoumenos* of the venerable imperial Lavra of St. Athansios,"⁷⁶ which may likewise tie him to the Great Lavra's *metochion* of St. Athanasios in Thessaloniki, near the Panagouda. Then, around 1289/93, Iakobos is recorded by a synodal act from Xeropotamou as being elevated to the metropolitan cathedra in Thessaloniki. It is in this time that he becomes an active patron of the arts and is credited with founding the Peribleptos Monastery. Hence, it is plausible that the Thessaloniki Epitaphios' liturgical uses were themselves imported from contemporary Athonite practices in the Great Lavra, given Iakobos's previous post.

In this period, Mount Athos came to be an influential institution in the standardization of the Divine Liturgy. From the twelfth century on, the spread of the Neo-Sabaitic rite came to

⁷⁴ Janin, *Les églises* 416. On the Turkish history of the Panagouda and its dependencies see V. Dimitriadis, *Τοπογραφία της Θεσσαλονίκης κατά την εποχή της Τουρκοκρατίας, 1430–1912* (Thessaloniki 1983) 65–66.

⁷⁵ M. L. Rautman, "Notes on the Metropolitan Succession of Thessaloniki, c. 1300," *REByz* 46 (1988) 147–159, esp. 150–152. See also Sharon Gerstel, "Civic and Monastic Influences on Church Decoration in Late Byzantine Thessaloniki," *DOP* 57 (2003) 225–239, esp. 231.

⁷⁶ P. Lemerle, *Actes de Kutilumus* (Paris 1945) 40–42, no. 3; transl. Rautman, *REByz* 46 (1988) 150–151.

supplant the previously predominant cathedral liturgy of Hagia Sophia.⁷⁷ Accordingly, many twelfth-century *typika* were heavily derived from the Evergetis Rule, and the *typikon* of St. Sabas for Chilandar, from around 1199, is essentially a Serbian translation of the latter.⁷⁸ The mid-fourteenth-century *diataxis* of Philotheos Kokkinos emerges from this context of widespread liturgical standardization, as discussed above. His *diataxis* spread throughout the Greek-speaking world and also permeated beyond as it was translated into Slavonic by his contemporary, the Bulgarian hagiologist St. Euthymios of Trnovo.⁷⁹ Thus, in this period of widespread changes centered on the Athonite world and its spheres of influence, primarily between Serbia and Thessaloniki, it is possible to see the Thessaloniki Epitaphios as reflecting the complex liturgical world around it—bearing the traces of emergent liturgical practices in monastic spheres associated with Athos in the midst of widespread changes to the liturgy away from the Constantinopolitan rite towards that of Athonite monasticism, inflected as it was by Serbian practices.⁸⁰

Conclusion

It is possible to imagine that objects similar to the Vatican *sakkos*, the Benaki *poterokalymma* (along with its now-lost mate), and the wall-paintings of the Peribleptos or the Protaton *could* have belonged together. Not only do they show decorative and iconographic details that could profitably suggest common uses and functions, generating provocatively complex symbolisms across the liturgy, but they could also speak to the function of the Byzantine artist and workshop as being responsible for all

⁷⁷ Taft, *DOP* 42 (1988) 179–194.

⁷⁸ J. Thomas, “The Imprint of Sabaitic Monasticism on Byzantine Monastic Typica,” in J. Patrich (ed.), *The Sabaitic Heritage in the Orthodox Church from the Fifth Century to the Present* (Leuven 2001) 73–76.

⁷⁹ Taft, *DOP* 42 (1988) 193.

⁸⁰ On the interchange between Thessaloniki, Serbia, and Chilandar see S. Ćurčić, “The Role of Late Byzantine Thessaloniki in Church Architecture in the Balkans,” *DOP* 57 (2003) 65–84.

the design elements of the space that they created, from architectural layout to the decorations on the walls, lighting fixtures, furnishings, and so on. This is a provocative solution for the provenance of the Thessaloniki Epitaphios, which would allow us to postulate on stylistic and iconographic grounds possible contexts of use for this object.

In this I hope to have contributed not only some insights on the use and context of the Epitaphios, but also to have considered the Byzantine liturgical program as a unified and creative whole rooted in the complexities of lived performance, whose meanings could never have been exhaustively described by extant images or texts. This exhorts us as scholars to think creatively and imaginatively in order to glimpse all the various possibilities that our objects might have offered. It is crucial to note that the contemporaneous visual and textual evidence alone, without corroboration from close reading and close visual analysis, divulge little about the textile's complex use and conceptual unfolding. Nevertheless, it is necessary that we consider the speculative possibilities offered by such objects as valid historical options lest we overlook the full complexities and intricacies of such reticent artifacts, past and present.⁸¹

November, 2014

Department of Art History
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA 92697
roland.betancourt@uci.edu

⁸¹ This article is dedicated to Emilia Cortes, generous mentor and great friend, who first taught me how to look at textiles. I would like to thank Miodrag Marković for his immense assistance in helping me acquire several of the images for this article, as well as the generosity of Marka Tomić-Đurić and Taylor Hostetter, who graciously offered their own photographs to me. Additionally, I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to all the respective image and antiquities repositories that facilitated the acquisition of further images. Finally, Kent Rigsby and an anonymous reviewer deserve my sincerest gratitude for their careful and insightful reading of the piece.