

# Art and female agency in late Byzantium: three methodological case studies.<sup>1</sup>

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*This essay employs the anthropological notion of female social agency to analyse a selection of case studies in the art history of the late Byzantine Empire. They concern three women – Nicoletta Grioni, Isabelle de Lusignan, and Maria d'Enghien-Brienne – who lived between the mid- to late fourteenth century and the first half of the fifteenth. All three were part of a Greek-Latin Mediterranean socio-cultural context. While their stories are not fully represented in textual primary sources, the present essay examines a selection of heterogeneous visual and cultural materials that help to reinstate their role in history and overcome the male-logocentric nature of the written evidence related to them.*

**Keywords:** Art history; female agency; late Byzantine art; late Medieval art; Mediterranean; art history methodology; east-west interactions

## Introduction

This essay presents a methodology for the analysis of a small selection of late Byzantine and Medieval artefacts and examines their implications for female agency in the period. Building on an established scholarly tradition that has focused on written evidence and literary sources, such an approach seeks to investigate what lies beyond the frontiers of

1 I would like to express my sincere admiration and deepest gratitude for Professor Leslie Brubaker, to whom this essay is dedicated. Leslie has been a guide, an agent of knowledge, and a creative force for many Byzantine students and scholars across different generations and countries. Without her contributions our discipline would be far less intriguing. I also thank Professor David Ricks for inviting me to contribute to this issue of *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, as well as Dr Daniel Reynolds and Dr Rebecca Darley for inviting me to the 'Seeing Through Byzantium' conference where a version of this essay was first presented.

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text, by exploiting visual and material evidence. Scholars have adopted similar methods in the past, as we shall discuss below, but such an approach still requires systematization, by bringing into the research frame disciplines that are at the periphery or beyond the traditional boundaries of medieval and Byzantine studies.

The methodology employs the anthropological notion of agency and applies it to three art case studies with ties to three women who lived between the mid- to late fourteenth century and the first half of the fifteenth, and who were part of the same Mediterranean, Greek-Latin elite socio-cultural context. This approach is inspired by Leslie Brubaker's scholarship, which I developed during my PhD at University of Birmingham, applying it to the study of the Latin *basilissai* of Palaiologan Mystras and of the role these queens had in the late Byzantine Morea, reassessing their agency and showing how Moreote despots were the 'husbands' of relevant social agents.<sup>2</sup>

After the methodological section, the case studies discussed show how this form of art history sets out to extract women from the shadows and from the partiality of texts by engaging with a variety of primary and secondary sources from Byzantine visual culture, thus dislocating the male-logocentric nature of most of primary written sources. The first case study is based on an early-fourteenth century micro-mosaic diptych, now in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo of Florence (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> It is a short illustration of the nature of inference and the relationship between female agency and objects. The second and main case study, based on two fragments of a stone-carved architrave in the Museum of Mystras (Fig. 2),<sup>4</sup> is an application of the methodology to an artefact, which is then discussed in relation to the third example, based on a coat of arms used as decorative elements on the façade of the church of St Catherine of Alexandria in Galatina (Figs. 3, 4).<sup>5</sup> More generally, these case studies show how interrogating heterogenous art objects through the lens of an agency-based framework can usefully direct research questions and inform the multi-dimensional classification of such objects. Finally, I draw some conclusions, returning to the scholarship of Leslie Brubaker.

This essay has two aims: to promote discussion about the frontier between Byzantine and Western medieval art history; and to engage specialists and audiences that could contribute to the advancements and promotion of the disciplines and might find

2 A. Mattiello, 'Latin Basilissai in Palaiologan Mystras: art and agency', PhD diss., University of Birmingham 2018.

3 R. Filardi, *Il Dittico bizantino in micromosaico: atti della giornata di studi: Firenze, Antica Canonica di San Giovanni, 23 novembre 2018* (Florence 2020).

4 The two stone-carved fragments are exhibited in the Mystras Museum (Inv. Nos. 1207, 1208); see *The city of Mystras [Mystras, August 2001-January 2002]* (Athens 2001), 183-4 cat. n. 29. They are also discussed in S. Kalopissi-Verti, 'Mistra. A fortified Late Byzantine settlement', in J. Albani and E. Chalkia (eds), *Heaven and Earth. Cities and countryside in Byzantine Greece* (2 vols, Athens 2013) II. 224-39, 238-9 fig. 210; N. Melvani, *Late Byzantine Sculpture* (Turnhout 2013), 24-5, 135, 138 n. 28; Mattiello, 'Latin Basilissai in Palaiologan Mystras', esp. 97-116; A. Louvi-Kizi, *La rencontre pacifique de deux mondes chrétiens: Les monastères de la Péribleptos et de la Pantanassa à Mistra* (Athens 2022) 10.

5 F. Russo and A. Marinelli, *La basilica di Santa Caterina d'Alessandria a Galatina* (Bari 2012) 18 fig. 4; T.P. Presta, *La Basilica degli Orsini: Santa Caterina D'Alessandria in Galatina* (Galatina 1991) 8 fig. 2.



Fig. 1. A–B. Dodekaorton diptych, micro-mosaic, early fourteenth century, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo of Florence (photograph by the author).



Fig. 2. Stone-carved architrave, late fourteenth century, Museum of Mystras (photograph by the author).

inspiration from the rich repertoire of Byzantine and medieval art. In this sense, it shares the agenda of the 2018 *Heavenly Bodies* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, which explored the close relationship between contemporary fashion and religious art by pairing garments with treasures from the Jaharis collection and the Byzantine galleries (Fig. 5).<sup>6</sup> The Metropolitan Museum showed the general public how Byzantine art and images are a stratified iconographic repertoire which carries a web of significations that are still relevant today. To a trained specialist this might seem obvious, but it bears repeating. The juxtaposition chosen by the Metropolitan Museum has particular significance for Byzantine studies, a discipline so profoundly

6 A. Bolton, *Heavenly Bodies: fashion and the Catholic imagination* (New York 2018).





Fig. 3. Maria d'Enghien-Brienne coat of arms, glass roundel, first half fifteenth century, Saint Catherine of Alexandria, Galatina (photograph by the author).



Fig. 4. Maria d'Enghien-Brienne coat of arms, decoration on the inside façade wall, first half fifteenth century, Saint Catherine, Galatina (photograph by the author).



Fig. 5. Dolce and Gabbana's evening dress autumn/winter 2013-14 collection, as seen at *Heavenly Bodies* exhibition, 2018, Metropolitan Museum New York (photograph by the author).

imbued with the dialogue between the *logos* and the sensorial (mostly visual) world, that any stimulus to interrogate visual and aesthetic culture and to venture towards new gnoseological frontiers has the potential to open novel avenues of inquiry on the aesthetic, authoritative and generative power of the Byzantine visual repertoire. Such questions are cogently analysed in Brubaker's scholarship on iconoclasm.<sup>7</sup> Such avenues of inquiry in scholarly research can foster opportunities to engage the public

7 See *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium: image as exegesis in the homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge 1999); Brubaker and J.F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680-850: a history* (Cambridge 2011); Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm* (London 2012); Brubaker, 'Ernst

inside and outside academic walls, employing new form of museology and performative practices. I am referring here to the long tradition of the performing arts devoted to historical contexts, not only in the tradition of the narrative historical plays – of which examples are many but, within Byzantine studies, significant is the case of the 1884 play *Théodora* by Victorien Sardou based on Prokopios' *Secret History* – but also in the multisensorial contemporary theatrical and performance art traditions masterfully exemplified by directors like Robert Wilson with his 1976 opera *Einstein on the Beach*.<sup>8</sup>

The study of women in the Middle Ages has been shaped by historical written evidence about notable individuals, such as imperial women, queens, or women linked to important religious establishments, who were the subjects of the seminal scholarship of scholars like Donald Nicol and Thalia Gouma-Peterson.<sup>9</sup> Medieval and Byzantine historiography on women and gender has discussed such cases with a high degree of sophistication. The edited volumes by Cordelia Beattie, *Women in the Medieval World*,<sup>10</sup> and, in the Byzantine context, the volume *Female Founders in Byzantium and Beyond*, edited by Theis, Mullett and Grünbart,<sup>11</sup> are notable, as is the scholarship of Leslie Brubaker, who, along with Angeliki Laiou, Alice-Mary Talbot, Mati Meyer, Judith Herrin, and Sharon Gerstel, has defined the field for the last forty years.<sup>12</sup> All these scholars have reshaped the nature and boundaries of gender studies

Kitzinger and the invention of iconoclasm', in F. Harley-McGowan and H. Maguire (eds), *Ernst Kitzinger and the making of medieval art history* (London 2017) 143–52.

8 On Sardou's *Théodora* see more recently F. Carlà-Uhink, 'Theodora A.P. (After Procopius) / Theodora A.S. (After Sardou): Metamorphoses of an Empress', in F. Carlà-Uhink and A. Wieber (eds), *Orientalism and the Reception of Powerful Women from the Ancient World* (London 2020) 167–83. On Wilson's opera see J. Novak and J. Richardson (eds), *Einstein on the Beach: opera beyond drama* (London; New York 2019). See also the Appendix below.

9 D.M. Nicol, *The Byzantine Lady: ten portraits, 1250-1500* (Cambridge 1994); T. Gouma-Peterson, *Anna Komnene and her times* (New York 2000).

10 C. Beattie (ed.), *Women in the Medieval world* (4 vols, London 2017).

11 L. Theis, M. Mullett, and M. Grünbart (eds), *Female Founders in Byzantium and Beyond: an international colloquium: September 23-25, 2008, Institut für Kunstgeschichte, University of Vienna* (Vienna 2014).

12 On Byzantine historiography on women see indicatively the following: Brubaker, 'Memories of Helena: patterns in imperial female matronage in the fourth and fifth centuries', in L. James (ed.), *Women, Men and Eunuchs. Gender in Byzantium* (London 1997) 52–75; Brubaker and J.M.H. Smith, *Gender in the Early Medieval World: east and west, 300-900* (Cambridge 2004); Brubaker and S. Tougher (eds), *Approaches to the Byzantine Family* (Farnham 2013). S.E.J. Gerstel and A.-M. Talbot, 'Nuns in the Byzantine countryside', *Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας* 27 (2006) 481–90; Gerstel and S. Kalopissi-Verti, 'Female church founders: the agency of the village widow in Late Byzantium', *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 60.1 (2012) 195–211; Gerstel, *Rural Lives and Landscapes in Late Byzantium: art, archaeology, and ethnography* (New York 2015), esp. 'The Village Woman', 70-101. J. Herrin, *Women in Purple: rulers of medieval Byzantium* (Princeton 2001) and *Unrivalled Influence: women and empire in Byzantium* (Princeton 2013). A.E. Laiou, 'The role of women in Byzantine society', *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 31.1 (1981) 233–60; 'Introduction [to the proceedings of the 'Byzantine Family and Household' Symposium, Dumbarton Oaks – May 5–7, 1989]', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990) 97–8; *Gender, Society, and Economic Life in Byzantium* (Aldershot

in Byzantium, overcoming previous limitations and biases, extending the scholarship also to previously little regarded liminal female historical figures.

The power of images and the conceptions of gender are two crucial frontiers of inquiry in Brubaker's scholarship, which has embraced Byzantine visual culture and gender studies, and the authority of icons as activators of logocentric and performative actions. Her work has transcended the boundaries of formal art history, systematically investigating images, and widening the social implications of art objects to include gender.<sup>13</sup> In her academic scholarship, as in dramatic, performative, and visual arts, the use of inference is essential, especially when dealing with the history of elusive figures with small or non-existent primary sources. And Brubaker's scholarship has been, in turn, foundational for my own work on the agency of medieval women.

Nonetheless, a significant limitation in the field persists. Women in history tend to hide, and not by choice, behind men, as brilliantly discussed by Brubaker's essay 'Sex, lies and textuality: the Secret History of Prokopios and the rhetoric of gender in sixth-century Byzantium'.<sup>14</sup> More needs to be done to reverse this narrative, to go beyond texts and bring women to the fore. This can be done by looking more at art objects to extract evidence thus far ignored.

## Art and agency

Most research on the history of women during the Middle Ages focuses on textual sources that provide at best a partial perspective. This is because these sources are mostly dominated and mediated by men, even when women are authors or authorities.<sup>15</sup> Many attempts have been made to overcome partiality due to male biases by incorporating art and material culture to refine our reading of women in Byzantine society: a stimulating example of this was the exhibition *Byzantine Women*

1992); *Women, Family and Society in Byzantium* (Farnham 2011). M. Meyer, *An Obscure Portrait: imaging women's reality in Byzantine art* (London 2009). A.-M. Talbot, 'Women's Space in Byzantine Monasteries', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 52 (1998) 113–27 and *Women and Religious Life in Byzantium* (Aldershot 2001). On Brubaker's scholarship see also n. 13 below.

13 Brubaker's studies on gender, women, and Byzantium are numerous. Among them: Brubaker and J.M.H. Smith, *Gender in the Medieval World*, 23–161; Brubaker and H. Tobler, 'The gender of money: Byzantine empresses on coins (324–802)', *Gender and History* 12.3 (2000) 572–94; Brubaker, *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium: texts and images* (Farnham 2011).

14 Brubaker (following in the footsteps of Averil Cameron, *Procopius and the sixth century* (Berkeley 1985) 49–83) interprets and questions the fictional elements about the 'anti-woman' Empress Theodora created by Prokopios, and reveals the inner narrative and fictional nature of the *Secret History*, which, as Brubaker puts it, 'is a successful piece of fiction, a brilliant parody [that] tells us next to nothing about Justinian and Theodora': 'Sex, lies and textuality: the Secret History of Prokopios and the rhetoric of gender in sixth-century Byzantium', in Brubaker and Smith (eds), *Gender in the Early Medieval World*, 83–101.

15 For an exemplary case see Gouma-Peterson, *Anna Komnene and her times* and L.A. Neville, *Anna Komnene: the life and work of a medieval historian* (New York 2016).



and *Their World* curated by Ioli Kalavrezou at Harvard in 2003.<sup>16</sup> In medieval studies, a recent and interesting attempt is *Femina* by Janina Ramirez.<sup>17</sup>

Potential future developments and meaningful exchanges of Byzantine and medieval studies should rely on cross-disciplinary, comprehensive surveys, systematic reassessments, and shared research agendas which collectively reconsider textual evidence in relation to art and material visual culture to get a better sense of women in history. This will embrace the reassessment of the contribution of liminal figures, such as elite women engaging with multi-national contexts, and discuss them as international/intercultural agents across courts, as seen through their agency.<sup>18</sup> To overcome male partiality, such a multidisciplinary approach and methodology can be built on the anthropological notion of ‘social agency’, as an effective tool to complement and challenge written primary sources by exploiting art history, archaeology, anthropology, and semiotics.

A particularly useful articulation of what agency is comes from Alfred Gell’s anthropology of art, where a social agent is generally described as ‘one who “causes events to happen” in their vicinity’.<sup>19</sup> Gell worked in response to linguistic or semantic models of art history, and to established aesthetic categories. Like others before him (Warburg, Panofsky, Bourdieu) he drew on a number of fields – psychology, semiotics, aesthetics – to build an anthropology of art, seeking to explain both its conception and its realization.<sup>20</sup> In his theory, an art nexus made of artists, prototypes, indices and recipients relate to each other in an agent-patient relationship. A chart in Gell’s posthumous publication exemplifies how data indexed in any given artefacts and produced within diverse social and cultural relations,<sup>21</sup> can become elements of a nexus of associations organized on the cognitive process of abduction, a form of inference distinct from induction or deduction, where we can plausibly link one element to another.<sup>22</sup> It is this nexus of associations that is capable of both highlighting overseen information, particularly of a non-textual nature, reassessing little documented historical figures as well as written sources.

16 I. Kalavrezou, *Byzantine Women and Their World* (Cambridge 2003).

17 J. Ramirez, *Femina: a new history of the middle ages* (London 2022).

18 Gerstel’s scholarship is particularly significant as a term of methodological comparison: see S.E.J. Gerstel (ed.), *Viewing Greece: cultural and political agency in the Medieval and Early Modern Mediterranean* (Turnhout 2016).

19 A. Gell, *Art and agency: an anthropological theory* (Oxford 1998), 16.

20 For a general introduction to Gell’s work, see J. Tanner and R. Osborne, ‘Art and agency and art history’, in *Art’s Agency and Art History* (Hoboken 2008) 1–27. For an application of the same methodology in studying performative practices in the twentieth century, see A. Mattiello, ‘Pratiche performative a New York, 1952-1965: Jonas, Kaprow, Nauman, Schneemann: ricerca, tempo e montaggio: dottorato di ricerca d’eccellenza in storia dell’architettura e della città, scienza delle arti, restauro, 19. ciclo (a. a. 2003/2004-2005/2006):’, PhD diss., Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia; Università IUAV di Venezia; Fondazione Scuola studi avanzati in Venezia 2007.

21 The chart is published as “Table 1. The Art Nexus” in Gell, *Art and Agency*, 29, see also 28-50.

22 U. Eco, *Trattato di semiotica generale* (Milan 1978), esp. 185-7.



One of the most profound implications of Gell's work is the idea that the agent-patient relationship can be established between any of the elements of the art nexus. So, not only the artist or the patron can be an agent: art objects – as indices – can exercise agency too, as can prototypes and recipients. This is a methodology that has already been employed to some extent by Byzantinists,<sup>23</sup> and it should be more widely adopted in the study of Byzantine art and visual culture, especially when auxiliary primary sources are sparse.

The three case studies of this essay are exemplary because they each bear a distinct nexus of agent-patient relations with three notable women with important similarities: they lived in the same period; they shared a similar Greek-Latin socio-cultural context; and they are poorly and uncritically represented in primary sources. The first is the Venetian Nicoletta di Antonio Grioni (d. Venice 1409).<sup>24</sup> The second is the *basilissa* of Morea, Isabelle de Lusignan (d. Cyprus 1382 or 1387).<sup>25</sup> The third is Maria d'Enghien-Brienne (1369-1446) Countess of Lecce and later Queen of Naples.<sup>26</sup> The art objects examined in what follows were produced in a Greek-Latin context and carried pluri-cultural Mediterranean values.<sup>27</sup> Their association with each of these women made them capable of exercising the agency of their owner on those who valued and observed them.

23 See recently Glenn Peers's discussion of agency and animism in veneration objects in G. Peers et al., *Byzantine Things in the World* (Houston 2013), esp. 41-85; also Peers, 'Showing Byzantine materiality', in *Animism, Materiality, and Museums* (Amsterdam 2021) 31-42. For a recent study on the theory of perception and cognitive actions linked to Byzantine textual and visual evidence, see R. Betancourt, *Sight, Touch, and Imagination in Byzantium* (Cambridge 2018), esp. 109-96. On agency and Byzantine art, see R.S. Nelson, 'The Chora and the Great Church: intervisuality in fourteenth-century Constantinople,' *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 23 (1999), 67-101 [repr. in Nelson, *Byzantine Painting: Art, Agency, and Appreciation* (Aldershot 2007); Gerstel (ed.), *Viewing Greece*; C.J. Hilsdale, *Byzantine art and diplomacy in an age of decline* (Cambridge 2014) esp. 1-26; Hilsdale, 'Translatio and objecthood: the cultural agendas of two Greek manuscripts at Saint-Denis', *Gesta* 56.2 (2017) 151-78; I. Drpić, 'The enkolpion: object, agency, self', *Gesta* 57.2 (2018) 197-224.

24 On Nicoletta Grioni see M. Bacci, 'Il Dittico a micromosaico del Museo dell'Opera come bene di lusso e oggetto di devozione', in R. Filardi (ed.), *Il Dittico bizantino in micromosaico: atti della giornata di studi* (Firenze 2020) 31-50, esp. 31-34; S.J. Cornelison, 'Saints and status in late medieval and early Renaissance Florence', in D. Cooper and B. Williamson (eds), *Late Medieval Italian Art and its Contexts: essays in honour of Professor Joanna Cannon* (Woodbridge 2022) 289-306, esp. 298-9 n. 35.

25 On Isabelle de Lusignan, see n. 34 below.

26 On Maria d'Enghien-Brienne, see 'MARIA d'Enghien, regina di Sicilia in "Dizionario Biografico"', [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/maria-d-enghien-regina-di-sicilia\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/maria-d-enghien-regina-di-sicilia_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/), accessed 8/25/2023.

27 On the Greek-Latin Mediterranean context in late Byzantium, see A. Lymberopoulou (ed.), *Cross-Cultural Interaction Between Byzantium and the West, 1204-1669: whose Mediterranean is it anyway?* (Milton 2018).

### Nicoletta Grioni: a Byzantine micro-mosaic

The early fourteenth-century micro-mosaic diptych with the Dodekaorton cycle in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence is a good example of female agency seen through an art object (Fig. 1). The diptych represents twelve exquisitely rendered scenes in micro-mosaic with the life of Christ and the Virgin corresponding to great liturgical feasts, and it was part of the treasury of the Baptistery of St John Baptist in Florence. The diptych was donated in 1394 to the Florentine Calimala Guild, the guild of the foreign cloth finishers and merchants, responsible for the Baptistery, by the Venetian Nicoletta di Antonio Grioni, widow of a *koubikoularios* (κουβικουλάριος), a high official – perhaps the Florentine Pietro Torrigiani. He had served at the Constantinopolitan court during the reign of (1341-1354) of John VI Kantakouzenos (b. Didymoteichon 1332, d. Constantinople 1391): the diptych was probably acquired around this time and brought back to Venice by Nicoletta.<sup>28</sup>

The diptych demonstrates the appreciation that existed in Venice and Florence for aristocratic Byzantine art. It also shows how a notable woman, who was part of a network of individuals exposed to the important cultural centres of Venice and Constantinople, could exercise her agency through it: Nicoletta received significant financial support in exchange for donating the diptych, along with sacred relics of Saint John, to the Baptistery. Secondary written accounts related to this diptych, reconstructed recently by Michele Bacci,<sup>29</sup> point to a network of Florentine and Venetian merchants expressing agency through sacred relics and high-quality artefacts, which they imported from Byzantium and gifted to important religious establishments in exchange for connections, revenue, and prestige.

In this case study the art nexus provided by Gell works like this: the *agent* Nicoletta, as either patron or owner, commissioned or acquired the diptych from a Byzantine *patient* artist. The diptych was then brought to Florence and became an *agent* Index towards the *patient/recipient*, the Calimala Guild, which then granted the annuity in ducats to Nicoletta. To understand the importance of this diptych along with the other objects donated by Nicoletta, one ought not only to consider secondary accounts, as discussed by Bacci, but also decipher the indexes of her agency embedded in the object.

A close material and formal analysis of the micro-mosaic and its context establishes a complex network of agencies linking Nicoletta, the Imperial office in Constantinople, and the Baptistery in Florence. The qualities of the diptych and of the other objects donated by Nicoletta were such that they led the Baptistery to grant her the significant annuity of forty-eight Venetian ducats. Over a period of fifteen years, this allowed Nicoletta to collect an amount almost double the average dowry of noblewomen of her time.<sup>30</sup> It not only expressed her financial agency but showed her to be part of a

28 See Bacci, 'Il Dittico a micromosaico'.

29 See Bacci, 'Il Dittico a micromosaico', esp. 31-4.

30 See L. Guzzetti, 'Dowries in fourteenth-century Venice', *Renaissance Studies* 16.4 (2002) 430-73, esp. 449-50.

network of other notable individuals linking Italy to Byzantium in the late fourteenth century. Nicoletta's agency and her historical traits, while only partially recognized in secondary accounts, are clearly indexed in the data embedded in the diptych.

If applied in a historical method, the notion of agency constructs a series of logical steps that can link objects to notable women, and women to contexts across the late medieval Mediterranean.<sup>31</sup> This approach has been occasionally adopted, for instance by Antony Eastmond<sup>32</sup> or Judith Herrin.<sup>33</sup>

### Isabelle de Lusignan and Maria d'Enghien-Brienne: Latin coats of arms and Greek inscriptions

To illustrate further the power of this approach, I will discuss a case study linked to a basilissa of the Morea, Isabelle de Lusignan (b. after 1330 – d. Cyprus 1382/7).<sup>34</sup>

Despite the lack of primary sources, the political and cultural agency of Isabelle de Lusignan can be established by examining a fractured architrave, now in the Museum of Mystras, and found in two pieces in the nineteenth century in the premises of Agios Demetrios, the metropolitan church of Lakedaimonia.<sup>35</sup> The two stone blocks were carved out of a larger grey marble block and are now displayed together in the museum. The original architrave has a front carved with decorations and a flat undecorated bottom, and the top shows marks indicating it was meant to be mounted along other stone components or, alternatively, mounted with metal graphs on a masonry structure.

The two fragments were found at different times within the metropolitan complex. According to Gabriel Millet, the first of the two stone blocks was found 'on the ground, near the inner wall of the Metropolis, towards the southwest corner, next to a large

31 Gell's approach could in principle link an index to any far away context based on abduction and vicinity that needs to be constantly evaluated by historical evidence. W. Davis, 'Abducting the agency of art', in *Art's Agency and Art History* (Hoboken 2008) 199–219, esp. 214–15.

32 A. Eastmond, *Tamta's World: the life and encounters of a medieval noblewoman from the Middle East to Mongolia* (Cambridge 2017). Eastmond reconstructs the life of Tamta, a noblewoman living in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries at the courts of Georgia, the Ayyubids, the Khwarazm, and the Mongols, by complementing textual sources with courtly artefacts, monuments, material culture, and construction practices. This set of evidence indexes Tamta's agency, and allows us to build up a picture of her life 'by situating her in the cultures in which she lives and understanding their concerns and expectations, and the positions and choices available to women in them' (15).

33 J. Herrin, *Ravenna: capital of empire, crucible of Europe* (London 2020), esp. 17–59.

34 The most extensive study on the primary sources related to Isabelle de Lusignan are D.A. Zakythenos, 'Une princesse française à la cour de Mistra au XIVe siècle. Isabelle de Lusignan Cantacuzène', *Revue des Études Grecques* 49.229 (1936) 62–76; A. Louvi-Kizi, 'La vie d'Isabelle de Lusignan, dite aussi Ζαμπέας ντε Λεζήνω ou Marie-Marguerite', in *La rencontre pacifique de deux mondes chrétiens* (Athens 2022) 9–24. See also D.M. Nicol, *The Byzantine family of Kantakouzenos (Cantacuzenus) ca. 1100–1460; a genealogical and prosopographical study* (Washington D.C. 1968), esp. nos. 25, 122–7.

35 See n. 4 above.

arcade'.<sup>36</sup> The second was found by a collaborator of Millet in 1905, while working in the same location on the masonry of the wall surrounding the metropolitan complex, inserted into the masonry as a re-used construction piece.<sup>37</sup> Based on the location of the finding and their trapezoid transversal section, the two blocks could have been conceived as a stone architrave topping either a portal or an entryway within the metropolitan complex,<sup>38</sup> meant for use but then discarded, and subsequently used as building material.<sup>39</sup>

The fully decorated front of the architrave consists of a long triple-lined thread, interlacing in four portions of the surface. The thread interlaces creating a decorative motif of a binding ribbon, sometimes described as *lemniskos*.<sup>40</sup> Similar decorative patterns can be found in many configurations, both on sculptural reliefs, mosaics and painted decorations.<sup>41</sup> The decorative pattern suggests that the ribbons are figuratively holding in place other decorative elements such as rosettes and crosses.<sup>42</sup> This interlaced pattern shows a sculptural treatment similar to those on architraves found in other areas of the Morea.<sup>43</sup> The rendition of the motif, especially on the details of curls of the free ends of the ribbons, resembles the interlaced motif decorating other monuments near Mystras, such as the decorative patterns of the carved screen in the

36 G. Millet, 'Inscriptions inédites de Mistra', *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* 30.1 (1906) 453-66 (453).

37 Millet, 'Inscriptions inédites de Mistra', 453-4.

38 The architrave might have been meant for the portal of the courtyard in front of the Metropolis or for one of the entrances to the *naos* of the church either on the ground floor from the door on the northeast wall, or on the upper level on the door on the northwest upper wall. The measured plans of the upper and lower levels of the church of Hagios Demetrios can be found in G. Marinou, *Άγιος Δημήτριος. Η μητρόπολη του Μυστρά* (Athens 2002), 74 σχέδ. 8, 104 σχέδ. 10.

39 In the secondary literature the two stone blocks are identified as part of a lintel from a *templon* screen for the *katholikon* of the Peribleptos monastery. See *The City of Mystras*, 183. On the attribution of the architrave to Peribleptos *templon*, see A. Louvi-Kizi, 'Τό γλυπτό «προσκυνητάρι» στο ναό του Αγίου Γεωργίου του Κάστρου στο Γεράκι', *Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας* 25 (2004) 111-26, 104 and 104 n. 15. The transverse section of the architrave is not consistent with the ones of other architrave *templa* in churches of Mystras such of Hagios Demetrios (G. Millet, *Monuments byzantins de Mistra: matériaux pour l'étude de l'architecture et de la peinture en Grèce aux XIVe et XVe siècles* (Paris 1910), pls. 45 nos. 1-4) or with the architrave in the *templon* of the Peribleptos (Millet, *Monuments byzantins de Mistra*, pls. 45 nos. 1-4. pl. 49 nos. 3-4). It also lacks the longitudinal rim holding a second *templon* stone tier, or the lower part of *templon* icons, see for comparison the architrave with the interlaced cross and military saints displayed outside the Mystras Museum with the inv. no. 1603.

40 L. Boura, *Ο γλυπτός διάκοσμος του ναού της Παναγίας στο μοναστήρι του Οσίου Λουκά* (Athens 1980), 107-8.

41 For a selection of these materials, see Millet, *Monuments byzantins de Mistra*, pl. 44 n. 18 and pls. 47-8, 50-1.

42 See for instance stone slabs and architraves in the Museum of Mystras: Millet, *Monuments byzantins de Mistra* pl. 50 nos. 1-3, 5, 10, 14.

43 See as a term of comparison the *lemniskos* decoration above the main entrance of the church of Hagios Sotiras, in Kato Gardenitsa, Mani: see N.B. Drandakis, 'Σχεδιάσμα καταλόγου των τοιχογραφημένων Βυζαντινών και Μεταβυζαντινών Ναών Λακωνίας', *Λακωνικά Σπουδαί* 13 (1996) 167-236, esp. 228 n. 407.



Church of St George in the Geraki castle,<sup>44</sup> or the carved ribbon decoration of a marble *proskynetarion* with an icon of Christ enthroned, originally from the church of the Peribleptos and now in the Museum of Mystras.<sup>45</sup>

The well-rendered decoration on the architrave also bears another distinctive feature. The binding ribbons stretching across the whole of the front function as a single device. The ribbons seem to be holding in place three roundels, one on the left portion of the architrave, one at its the centre, and one on its right. The two on the sides are well preserved; the one in the centre is broken along the middle vertical line. The left and right roundels delimit two monograms, while the one in the centre bears a coat of arms.

The letters in the first of the two monograms read ζαμπεα, and the second ντε λεζηναω. Together, as Millet suggests implying the repetition of the letter “ν”, they read as ζαμπεα ντε λεζηνανω, *zabea de lezinano*. This is Isabelle de Lusignan, whose name was transliterated into Greek in the monograms.<sup>46</sup>

The central roundel is divided into two portions, both bearing heraldic insignia. The left portion depicts a crowned rampant lion, while the right has the remains of the vertical and right arms of a cross, with two small crosses above and below the right arm. Recomposing the two parts allows us to decipher the coat of arms of the Lusignan families of Little Armenia and Cyprus: the rampant lion as a unifying visual emblem for the different branches of the dynasty, and the Jerusalem cross associated with the emblem of the King of Cyprus.<sup>47</sup>

Associating the name of a ruler, as Isabelle was, with a stone inscription usually implies an act of patronage or dedication of a building. The architrave, then, was prepared to commemorate a foundation act or an intervention on an existing building. Even if its exact position can only be suggested, the architrave with Isabelle de Lusignan’s monograms was commissioned to mark her patronage. In sponsoring the construction or restoration of a building she merged two traditions: Byzantine, by having two roundels with Greek transliteration of her name, and Latin, by having her coat of arms as an appropriating act. Associating a patron to a building, or to different

44 On the carved screen in the church of Hagios Demetrios in Geraki, see G. Dimitrokallis, *Γεράκι Οι τοιχογραφίες των ναών του Κάστρου* (Αθήνα 2001), esp. 75-83; Louvi-Kizi, ‘Τό γλυπτό «προσκυνητάρι» στο ναό του Αγίου Γεωργίου του Κάστρου στο Γεράκι’; S.E.J. Gerstel, ‘The Morea’, in A. Drandaki, D. Papanikola-Bakirtzi, and A. Tourta (eds), *Heaven and Earth. Art of Byzantium from Greek collections* (Athens 2013) I. 300–3, esp. 303.

45 The marble *proskynetarion* is dated to the second half of the fourteenth century. It was found on the south side narthex of the Peribleptos. It is now in the Museum of Mystras. Inv. No. 1166. See *The city of Mystras*, 178-80 cat. n. 27. The most recent discussion on this marble icon is on A. Drandaki, D. Papanikola-Bakirtzi, and A. Tourta (eds), *Heaven and Earth*, I. 313-14 cat. 163. This relief icon has been linked to Western influence.

46 Millet, ‘Inscriptions inédites de Mistra’, esp. 454.

47 See e.g. the obverse of the silver gros of Isabelle’s cousin Peter I de Lusignan (1359-1369) in G.F. Hill, *A History of Cyprus: the Frankish period, 1192–1432*, (4 vols, Cambridge 1948), II.308 fig. 6. Also see the Lusignan’s gold *besants*, and silver *gorsses* in J. Durand and D. Giovannoni (eds), *Chypre: entre Byzance et l’Occident, IVe - XVIe siècle* (Paris 2012), 190-3 cat. 73-7, 200-2 cat. 83-6.

artefacts, by means of visual insignia was frequent practice in the Latin/Catholic context of the time, while finding progressive affirmation in the late Byzantine Empire – especially with the double-headed eagle of the Palaiologan coat of arms. Due to this practice, by the second half of the fourteenth century, the coat of arms of different branches of the Lusignan dynasty were in use in different polities linked to the dynasty.

Henry II of Cyprus (1285-1324), for instance, used a combination of the rampant lion and the Jerusalem Cross in his *gros petits*.<sup>48</sup> The coat of arms on the architrave in the museum of Mystras can be linked to several coins related to the Lusignan of Cyprus, as well as to the coat of arms of other related families, such as the Durazzo of Naples. The two families were linked by the marriage of the king of Naples Ladislao I of Durazzo (1377-1414) and Mary de Lusignan (1381-1404). An example of the Durazzo's coat of arms features in the tempera *cassone* panel by Master of Charles of Durazzo in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Fig. 6).<sup>49</sup> The panel shows the conquest of the city of Naples in 1381 by Charles and includes depictions of the coat of arms combining the Durazzo and the Jerusalem Cross.<sup>50</sup> This combination has historical relevance since it shows that, in the decades when Isabelle was associating herself with the coat of arms of the King of Cyprus and Jerusalem, in Italy Charles of Durazzo, in promoting himself, was using a similar coat of arms, also bearing the Jerusalem Cross.<sup>51</sup>

Isabelle was engaged in a programme of appropriation, using a blended form of her insignia – the coat of arms and her name – to index to the communities residing in Mystras (the *patients* in Gell's theory) her political and social agency. The architrave shows the *basilissa* promoting her role through the most durable medium available. Similar acts of self-promotion through sculpted programmes were pursued by other Byzantine rulers in other contexts such as Arta and Trebizond.<sup>52</sup> Indices such as Isabelle's name, written in Greek monograms and associated with her coat of arms, were not unfamiliar to her Cypriot background. A similar coat of arms in a religious

48 D.M. Metcalf, 'The Gros grand and the Gros petit of Henry II of Cyprus: PART I', *The Numismatic Chronicle* 142 (1982) 83–100, 98 and pl. 23 no. 15: A/1.

49 On the cassone by the Master of Durazzo, see J. Pope-Hennessy and K. Christiansen, 'Secular painting in 15th-Century Tuscany: birth trays, cassone panels, and portraits', *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 38.1 (1980) 3–64, esp. 20–3; C.L. Baskins, *The Triumph of Marriage: painted cassoni of the Renaissance* (Boston 2008), esp. fig. 14a and catalogue entry by Virginia Brilliant; L. Mocchiola, 'La presa di Napoli di Carlo III di Durazzo nel pannello del Metropolitan Museum', in G. Abbamonte (ed.), *La battaglia nel Rinascimento meridionale: moduli narrativi tra parole e immagini* (Rome 2011), esp. 57–67.

50 G.L. Schlumberger, *Numismatique de l'Orient latin* (Paris 1878), pl. VI 17.

51 From June 1381, Charles had already been invested by Pope Urban VI as King of Sicily and Jerusalem, as well as King of Naples and Gonfalonier of the Church, see 'CARLO III d'Angiò Durazzo, re di Napoli, detto della Pace, o il Piccolo in "Dizionario Biografico"', [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-iii-d-angio-durazzo-re-di-napoli-detto-della-pace-o-il-piccolo\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-iii-d-angio-durazzo-re-di-napoli-detto-della-pace-o-il-piccolo_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/), accessed 5/16/2023. See also, D. Abulafia, 'The Italian South', in M. Jones (ed.), *New Cambridge Medieval History Vol. 6 c.1300-c.1415* (Cambridge 2000) 488–514, esp. 512–13.

52 Melvani, *Late Byzantine Sculpture*, esp. 151–4.



Fig. 6. Master of Charles of Durazzo, *The Conquest of Naples by Charles of Durazzo*, 1381–82, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (photograph by the author).

context appears in the wooden templon of the church of Hagios Ioannis Lampadistis, in Kalopanagiotis,<sup>53</sup> and it relates to other known female patronage acts associated with her large and influential family.

Particularly significant as act of self-promotion is the third case in this essay, that of Maria d'Enghien-Brienne (1369-1446),<sup>54</sup> countess of Lecce, who became queen of Naples after marrying, in 1407, the king of Naples Ladislao I of Durazzo (1377-1414), previously married to Isabelle's third cousin, Mary of Lusignan.<sup>55</sup> Maria d'Enghien-Brienne, while not directly linked to the Lusignan family, was part of a dynastic environment where the use of emblems was highly codified and broadly understood.<sup>56</sup> Her first husband, Raimondo (Raimondello) Orsini Del Balzo (1350/5-1406), prince of Taranto,<sup>57</sup> sponsored the construction of the church of St Catherine of Alexandria in Galatina, Apulia, in the last quarter of the fourteenth century.<sup>58</sup> Maria was at Raimondo side's while he was at war against King Ladislao

53 See M.G. Parani, 'Le royaume des Lusignan (1192-1489): la tradition byzantine', in J. Durand and D. Giovannoni (eds), *Chypre: entre Byzance et l'Occident, IVe - XVIe siècle* (Paris 2012) 293–301 (297 fig. 7).

54 A. Cutolo, *Maria d'Enghien* (Galatina 1977). See also n. 26 above.

55 Mary of Lusignan (1381-1404) was the daughter of James I de Lusignan (1334-98), King of Cyprus and titular King of Armenia Cilicia and Jerusalem (1382-98), and Isabelle's second cousin.

56 Cutolo, *Maria d'Enghien*, esp. 33-54; I. Ortega, *Les lignages nobiliaires dans la Morée latine (XIIIe - XVe siècle)*. *Permanences et mutations* (Turnhout 2012), esp. 594-97, 631.

57 K. Toomaspoeg, 'Orsini Del Balzo, Raimondo', in 'Orsini Del Balzo, Raimondo', *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 79 (Rome 2013) 732–5.

58 C.D. Poso, 'La fondazione di Santa Caterina: scelta devozionale e committenza artistica di Raimondo Orsini del Balzo', in A. Cassiano and B. Vetere (eds), *Dal Gilgio all'Orso: i Principi d'Angiò e Orsini del Balzo nel Salento* (Lecce 2006) 194–223; U. Ritzerfeld, 'Santa Caterina a Galatina: un monumento per la "latinizzazione" della Puglia greco-bizantina o per le ambizioni autonomistiche dei Del Balzo Orsini?', *Convivium* 5, 1 (2018) 142–57; R. Casciaro, *La Basilica di Santa Caterina d'Alessandria in Galatina* (Galatina 2019); G. Pollini, 'Santa Caterina d'Alessandria a Galatina: culto, pellegrinaggio ed economia

I. In 1406 Raimondo died, and Maria d'Enghien-Brienne married Ladislao so as to end the war. After becoming queen of Naples in 1407, she completed and decorated the church of St Catherine, and Raimondo's funerary monument was included in the apsidal area of the church. The marriage of Maria and Ladislao was signalled by two indices, which remain on the façade of the church, mirroring those used by Isabelle de Lusignan in her architrave in Mystras. First, Maria d'Enghien-Brienne used her coat of arms, merging her own emblems with those of the Durazzo, to decorate the glass roundel above the portal of the church, at the centre of the rose window decorating the main façade (Fig. 3). Second, a Greek inscription was carved above the right entrance to the church.<sup>59</sup> As was the case for Isabelle, Maria chose to communicate her role as ruler to the Greek-speaking Orthodox people of Galatina in Salento, the *patients* of her agency,<sup>60</sup> while identifying with them through their language in the inscription. At the same time, by combining her own title with that of Naples, she presented herself as responsible for bringing a resolution to the conflict.

Maria d'Enghien-Brienne also marked her presence inside the church, by inserting the arms of d'Angiò Durazzo and d'Enghien-Brienne in the frescoed decoration on the inside façade wall, below the rose window, above the central portal (Fig. 4). Other female members of her family did the same, such as her niece, Caterina Orsini Del Balzo, who used her arms on the decoration of an early fifteenth-century chalice now in the Museo Diocesano, in Bitonto, Apulia.<sup>61</sup>

Isabelle and Maria were certainly embracing a broader fashion of the period, in which heraldic images were associated with the general idea of the West, and were adopted by the Byzantine elite of Constantinople and other major centres of the Empire.<sup>62</sup> Examples of this fashion, specific to the use of the fleur-de-lis as a decorative sculpted motif rather than a specific statement, include fragments of reliefs from the churches of the Chora and Kyriotissa Monasteries in Constantinople, and the church of the Paregoretissa in Arta.<sup>63</sup> In the late thirteenth-century interior decoration of the latter, the use of such decorative motifs was accompanied by other sculpted

nel Salento dei del Balzo Orsini', in S. Beltramo and C. Tosco (eds), *Architettura medievale: il Trecento. Modelli, tecniche, materiali* (Sesto Fiorentino (Fi) 2022) 286–95.

59 The inscription reads '+Ενταυθα εστιν η καππελλα τ[ῆς] ... α[γίας] Κατ[ερίνας] / ... εντος και ... ρθ ...', 'Here is the chapel of Saint Catherine / ... inside and ...', in L. Safran, *The medieval Salento: art and identity in Southern Italy* (Philadelphia 2014), 275.

60 G.A. Loud, 'Latins, Greeks and non-Christians', in *The Latin Church in Norman Italy* (Cambridge 2007) 494–520, esp. 510–11.

61 C.T. Gallori, 'The Late Trecento in Santa Croce in Gerusalemme Napoleone and Nicola Orsini, the Carthusians, and the triptych of Saint Gregory', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 58.2 (2016) 156–87 (172 fig. 9).

62 R.G. Ousterhout, 'Byzantium between east and West and the origins of heraldry', in C. Hourihane (ed.), *Byzantine Art: recent studies* (Princeton 2009) 153–70, esp. 157–9.

63 For a discussion on the use of the fleur-de-lis as a decorative motif in Arta and Constantinople, see Melvani, *Late Byzantine Sculpture*, esp. 24.



decorations, on arches, column bases and slabs, representing mythical animals, human figures, beasts linked to the thirteenth-century art of Puglia and Athens.<sup>64</sup>

While we agree with Robert Ousterhout when he writes, of this fashion, that ‘we might describe the rampant lion as “heraldic”, for the Byzantine audience it connoted power and prestige only in a general way’,<sup>65</sup> in the case of Isabelle’s use of a crown rampant lion in Mystras, with or without a sword, it was not a generic act to associate her family with a patronage act, but a way of transferring the authority of her role at court into a signal of her power. Coming from a powerful foreigner at court, it must have had a stronger directness and specificity.

The use of the Lusignan coat of arms was not only a direct index of the association between a certain issuer and the family but a way to emphasize rulership and authority in an economic context where individuals from multiple social, linguistic and religious backgrounds interacted in regional trade. By transliterating her name into Greek and using the coat of arms of her family, Isabelle was presenting herself as a unifying ruler capable of bridging the Byzantine court of Mystras and the Latin Kingdom of Cyprus.

Her mark on the architrave – her Greek name – is the equivalent visual strategy her cousin Hugh IV used while impressing the family coat of arms on a metal bowl, now held at the L.A. Mayer Museum of Islamic Art in Jerusalem.<sup>66</sup> The bowl is made of a copper alloy, with silver inlays and engraving. It is a metal vessel decorated with floral motifs and an Arabic inscription and is decorated with the coat of arms of Hugh IV de Lusignan. A platter from the Musée du Louvre in copper alloy, with silver, gold, and black-paste inlays, also with heraldic device of the Lusignan, has an Arabic inscription of good wishes. Even though these objects were probably meant for the Western market, the use of a family mark on an object originating from the Arabic-speaking regions – both objects are from either Syria or Egypt – suggests that the family arms of the Lusignan indicated their intermediary role with the Mamluk elite and positioned the family as an international power.<sup>67</sup>

The *basilissa* of Morea Isabelle used the dynastic indices, her coat of arms, and her name in Greek, to index to the communities residing in Mystras her political and social agency with a formula also used by other members of Isabelle’s large and influential family network.

## Conclusion

Isabelle, in the Byzantine Morea, embraced the idea of a Greek-Latin cultural koine, as revealed by the discussion on agency and the cross-referencing of the three case studies

64 Melvani, *Late Byzantine Sculpture*, esp. 103-4.

65 Ousterhout, ‘Byzantium between east and West and the Origins of Heraldry’, 159.

66 B.D. Boehm and M. Holcomb (eds), *Jerusalem, 1000-1400: every people under heaven* (New York 2016), 48 cat. n.19b.

67 Boehm and Holcomb (eds), *Jerusalem, 1000-1400*, 48 cat. n.19a.

presented here.<sup>68</sup> This koine was not limited to the Peloponnese. It extended to other areas of the Mediterranean,<sup>69</sup> and was shared by others who belonged to families linked to hers, such as Maria d'Enghien-Brienne in Galatina. It was also indexed in the micro-mosaic that belonged to Nicoletta Grioni and that travelled between Constantinople, Venice, and Florence. By transliterating her name into Greek and using the coat of arms of her family, Isabelle presented herself as a unifying ruler, an authority capable of bridging the Byzantine court of Mystras and the Latin Kingdom of Cyprus, a leading figure of her time. By carefully reassessing and contextualizing artefacts like the architrave as a complex historical index, Isabelle, whom Zakythinos called the 'princesse française à la cour de Mistra', comes back into the history of the late medieval Mediterranean as a more rounded figure and as a prominent intercultural ambassador beyond written documents.

The 'art and agency' approach briefly described in this paper has enormous potential to reveal hitherto hidden female stories. However, it needs to be further developed and systematized so as to integrate what social history, archaeology, DNA research, and statistical analysis are doing to shake up history. As Janina Ramirez points out in *Femina*, this can contribute to emancipating history from texts that 'tend to favour the few' in favour of approaches that 'search for the many'.<sup>70</sup>

Leslie Brubaker's scholarship has been receptive of experiment. Her work has ventured to reach the frontiers of her field, integrating a critical reading of the authority of images as windows on social history. This is, as she points out in *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium*, to 'try to understand the socially constructed meaning of images for certain defined groups' and to articulate 'the ties that bind objects to their producers, context, and audience' through the 'assessment and comparison of recurring patterns in both verbal and visual communications'. Brubaker understands how art making, especially that of images/icons, is never a mere process of imitation. Rather it renders 'original holy figures as prototypes, and differed from them only in substance [...] being reproductions 'of the original, and inspired "from above"; if inspiration came from the artisan alone, the result would have been an idol, not an icon'. While commenting on Photios' sermon commemorating the completion of the mosaic icon of the Theotokos in Hagia Sophia, Brubaker points out that the author links image and prototype: 'for Photios, the mosaic is a window to a real woman, and he is exploring his reactions to her as mediated through the image'.<sup>71</sup> His reactions are what matter. Brubaker rightly points out that our contemporary

68 On the cultural environment of the Peloponnese during late Byzantium, see E. Jeffreys, 'The Morea through the prism of the past', in S.E.J. Gerstel (ed.), *Viewing the Morea: land and people in the late medieval Peloponnese* (Washington DC 2013) 9–21.

69 For a discussion of the visual cultural context, see M. Bacci, 'Some thoughts of Greco-Venetian artistic interactions in fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries', in A. Eastmond and L. James (eds), *Wonderful Things: Byzantium through its art* (2013) 203–27.

70 Ramirez, *Femina*, 18.

71 Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium*, 19–21.

response to Byzantine iconography is different than of Photios' own. However, it is our similarly gnoseological and performative response to current artistic production that makes Byzantine art so contemporary.

Byzantine images penetrate contemporary culture in many ways, from fashion to mainstream entertainment, as briefly discussed in reference to the 2018 *Heavenly Bodies* exhibition. But to be truly understood and read they need better contextualization. That is one crucial role for scholarship on Byzantium. Objects 'speak': we need to listen to them as a coordinated and stratified collection of agencies. It is through this coordinated, scientific research, which questions and listens to texts and objects, that the lives of women from the past, such as those of Nicoletta Grioni, Isabelle de Lusignan and Maria d'Enghien-Brienne, can rightly move from the margins of historical discourse to the core of late Byzantine studies.

## Appendix

It may be of interest to the reader that my research on the Latin *basilissai* originated in a performance titled *Cleophe – CM Lacerations*, a collaboration with the choreographer Sandhya Nagaraja, with a dramaturgical structure based on the life of Cleophe Malatesti (b. Pesato – d. Mystras, 1433) and inspired by the scholarship of Silvia Ronchey on the diplomatic alliances of the Palaiologan dynasty through interfaith marriages and on the painting known as *The Flagellation* by Piero della Francesca. See S. Ronchey, 'Malatesta - Paleologhi: un'alleanza dinastica per rifondare Bisanzio nel quindicesimo secolo', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 93 (2000) 521–67; S. Ronchey, *L'enigma di Piero: l'ultimo bizantino e la crociata fantasma nella rivelazione di un grande quadro*, 1. ed. (Milano 2006); S. Ronchey, 'L'enigma di Piero: Regesto Major', <http://mediaronchey.it/materiali/pdf/regesto.pdf>, accessed 5/16/2023; on interfaith marriages see recently P. Melichar, *Empresses of late Byzantium: foreign brides, mediators and pious women* (Berlin 2019). On the *Flagellation* by Piero della Francesca, see T. Gouma-Peterson, 'Piero della Francesca's Flagellation: an historical interpretation', *Storia dell'Arte* 28 (1976) 217–33; C. Ginzburg, *The enigma of Piero: Piero della Francesca: The baptism, The Arezzo cycle, The Flagellation* (London 1985); J. Pope-Hennessy, 'Whose Flagellation?', *Apollo* 124.295 (1986) 162–5; C. Pertusi, *La flagellazione di Piero della Francesca e le fonti letterarie sulla caduta di Costantinopoli* (Bologna 1994); C.Z. Laskaris, *L'enigma inesistente: lettura iconografica della Flagellazione di Piero della Francesca* (Alessandria 2021). The piece rehearsed in summer 2009 used elements derived from art historical scholarship on late Palaiologan visual culture, demonstrating just how far juxtaposition of art historical objects could be generative of new artistic inquiries. Cleophe's character was developed from Ronchey's studies and from her own words, using letters she wrote from Mystras to her sister Paola Malatesti Gonzaga in Mantua, see A. Falcioni (ed.), *Le donne di casa Malatesti* (2 vols, Rimini 2005), esp. vol II, 955–68. The costumes for the performance were based on the reconstruction of a fifteenth-century dress found in Mystras and

studied by Μπακούρου and Martiniani-Reber, see A. Bakourou and M. Martiniani-Reber (eds), *Parure d'une princesse byzantine: tissus archéologiques de Sainte-Sophie de Mistra. Το ένδυμα μιας βυζαντινής πριγκίπισσας: Αρχαιολογικά υφάσματα από την Αγία Σοφία του Μυστρά* (Geneva 2000) esp. 35–44. The choreography was partly inspired by Palaiologan court's standard elucidated by the Pseudo-Kodinos, see R.J. Macrides, J.A. Munitiz, and D. Angelov, *Pseudo-Kodinos and the Constantinopolitan court: offices and ceremonies* (Farnham 2013). As well as the iconography of Byzantine empresses like Helena Dragaš in the miniature at fol. 2r of the manuscript with works of Dionysios the Areopagite, at Musée du Louvre MR 416. The main stage prop used by the choreographer and dancer was inspired by Pisanello's rendition of the bow of a Venetian galea, the vessel that brought Cleophe to Byzantium, see Pisanello (Antonio di Puccio di Giovanni de Cereto), 'Coque d'un navire porté par un dragon, vus de profil, et esquisse du dragon, Musée du Louvre, INV 2289, Recto', <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl020003061>, accessed 9/5/2023. While the performance piece was not meant as academic research, it created a contemporary performative iconic tableaux vivant of a historical figure, and was intended as an intellectual inquiry steeped in art historical scholarship. This is a practice with a long tradition inspired by the work of Pier Paolo Pasolini, who drew on the scholarship of art historian Roberto Longhi when creating a tableaux vivant for his film *La Ricotta*, based on the *Deposition* by Rosso Fiorentino.

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