The Monument of a Palaiologina and the Monastery of Kyra-Martha in Constantinople

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PALAIOLOGINA ANITI VE İSTANBUL'DAKİ KYRA MARTHA MANASTIRI

Öz

İstanbul Arkeoloji Müzesi'nde korunan 4020T kodlu kabartma, Paleologos'lar devri sanatının bir şaheseridir. Üzerinde bulunan yazıta göre, adı Maria Palailogina olan ve portresi levhanın sol tarafına yontulmuş olan bir rahibenin mezar anıtından gelmiştir. Levhanın özgün yeri, bir arcosolium nişinin arka duvarı olmalıdır ve muhtemelen süslemesi yazıtın diğer yanında Kutsal Bakire'nin yontulmuş bir figürünü içermiştir. İsa'nın boyanmış bir kabartma figürü de bu kompozisyonda, muhtemelen mezarın üst kısmında bulunuyor olmalıdır. Levhanın üzerinde portresi bulunan rahibe tanımlanamamıştır, fakat bu kişinin İmparator Michael VIII Paleologos'un kız kardeşi olan ve rahibe olarak Konstantinopolis'teki Kyra-Martha Manastırı'nı kuran Maria Palaiologina olması olasılığı vardır. Bu durumda levha, manastırın içinde yer alan Maria'nın mezarına ait olabilir. Manastırdan günümüze hiçbir şey kalmamıştır, fakat Lips Manastırı'na yakın olduğu ve Palaiologos'lar devri Konstantinopolis'inin en önemli kadın manastırlarından biri olduğu kaynaklardan bilinmektedir.*

Anahtar Sözcükler: Bizans İstanbul, Genç Bizans Dönemi Plastiği, Bizans Epigrafi, Palaiologos Ailesi, İstanbul'un manastırları.

Abstract

The relief slab 4020T preserved in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum is a masterpiece of Palaiologan art. According to its inscription, it came from the tomb monument of a nun whose name was Maria Palaiologina and whose carved portrait occupies the left part of the slab. The original position of the slab must have been the back wall of an arcosolium niche and its decoration probably included a carved figure of the Virgin on the other side of the inscription. A painted or relief figure of Christ must have also been included in the composition, most likely on the upper part of the tomb. The nun portrayed on the slab has not been identified, but it is possible that she was Maria Palaiologina, sister of the emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos, who became a nun and founded the monastery of Kyra-Martha in Constantinople. In this case, the slab may have belonged to Maria's tomb, which was located in the monastery. Nothing remains of the monastery, but it is known from the sources that it was close to monastery of Lips and that it was one of the most important female monasteries of Palaiologan Constantinople.

Keywords: Constantinople, Palaiologan Sculpture, Byzantine Epigraphy, Palaiologos Family, Monasteries of Constantinople

Two marble fragments with relief decoration and an incised verse inscription preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul (Inventory Number 4020T) constitute a significant work of art well known to Byzantinists of several fields (Buckler 1924: 521-526; Fıratlı 1990: 67; Grabar 1976: 129): the relief decoration is considered a fine example of the so-called "Palaiologan Renaissance" in sculpture (Melvani 2013: 17-18, 233; Belting 1972: 65, 84, 86), as well as an



Fig. 1: Istanbul, Archaeological Museum: tomb slab of Maria Palaiologina.

instructive case of a funerary portrait, among the most important for the study of funerary iconography (Fig. 1) (Παπαμαστοράκης 1996-97: 300-302; Evans 2003: 104). The accompanying inscription, a refined work of Late Byzantine epigraphic script, preserves the text of a funerary epigram characteristic of Palaiologan court culture and literary style (Mango 1951: 64; Mango 1995: 106-107; Rhoby 2014: 628-632). However, despite the frequent appearance of the monument in monographs and articles dealing with various topics of Late Byzantine culture, fundamental aspects of its meaning and function remain unexplored and virtually unknown. The nun Maria Palaiologina who is mentioned in the inscription and to whose tomb the slab belonged remains a mystery and identification of its original setting rests on highly hypothetical grounds. The present article will attempt to address these questions and propose some possible solutions by revisiting the relief and its inscription and by combining the available historical and archaeological data.

The two fragments were discovered in 1917 by a Greek inhabitant of Istanbul and later sold to the Istanbul Archaeological Museum through an antiquities dealer. It immediately caught the attention of William Buckler who was the first scholar to study it and publish it in 1924 as the "Monument of a Palaiologina", together with an edition of its inscription. Buckler dated the work to the early Palaiologan period, roughly between 1275 and 1325, based on the inclusion of the name Palaiologina and on similarities he noted between the script of the inscription and that of early Palaiologan manuscripts. The short article included a post script by Hippolyte Delehaye who complemented Buckler's comments and added, in agreement with the American scholar, that it was impossible to identify the personage mentioned in the epigram (Buckler 1924: 525-526).

At around the same time, Theodore Macridy, vice director of the Museum, conducted research into the building complex of the Lips monastery (now known as Fenari Isa Camii). In his report, published only decades later, Macridy attributed the slab in question to a tomb that would have been located within that monastery, without any explanations[1]. Presumably, he based his attribution on the proximity of the relief's finding place to the Lips monastery and on the well-known fact that the monastery had been the main nunnery and burial church of female members of the Palaiologos family. In fact, Macridy concluded that the Maria Palaiologina of the epigram was a descendant of the empress Theodora Palaiologina, the Palaiologan restorer of the Lips monastery, and that she must have been a nun in the convent. Since Macridy's study, this attribution has been accepted and is reproduced in subsequent scholarship[2].

The image and the text on the slab continued to attract scholarly attention in subsequent decades. In the 1990s Cyril Mango and Titos Papamastorakis established that the extant figure is a funerary portrait of the Maria Palaiologina mentioned in the accompanying inscription, without however attempting to identify the personage. The most recent treatment of the work is by Andreas Rhoby in 2014 (Rhoby 2014: 628-632), who has produced the most complete edition and philological analysis of the epigram. Rhoby repeats the attribution to the Lips monastery (albeit not with certainty) and, in agreement with previous efforts in this direction, ascribes the poem to the prolific court poet Manuel Philes.



Fig. 2: Detail of fig. 1: the relief portrait.



Fig. 3: Detail of fig. 1: the incised inscription.

The monument consists of two marble fragments of uneven size. The larger piece preserves the lower part of a human figure (obviously female) in relief on the left side (Fig. 2), whereas the right side, as well as the smaller fragment are occupied by an incised inscription (Fig. 3). According to the accepted reconstruction, the position of the smaller piece must have originally been slightly above the larger one, although they do not match exactly. They are currently built together and displayed as a single monument in the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul. It is clear that a considerable part of both the inscription and the relief composition is missing.

The inscribed text occupies a significant portion of the slab. Since it is unknown how much of the monument is not preserved, it is impossible to tell whether the surviving text corresponds to the entire funerary epigram or if it included more verses, either directly to the right, on the other side of the portrait, to the left (in which cases it may have included up to 28 verses)[3], or even above the surviving fragments. In the reconstruction proposed by Papamastorakis, it occupies the center of the relief composition, between the deceased and the Virgin. In its present form it consists of 14 verses, each line of the inscription corresponding to one verse of the epigram. Thus, the layout of the inscription adheres to the poetic form of its text, emphasizes it, and informs the viewer that he/she is faced with a text in verse. The text of the inscription runs as follows (after Andreas Rhoby):

[..... τοῦ] νυμφῶνος ἔξιν σκέπε
[.....]κτὸν ἐμβαλὼν τῷ νυμφίῳ·
[έντε]ῦθεν ἔσχον καὶ πρὸ τοῦ τάφου τάφ[(ον)
τ]άφον τὸ πένθο(ς) τὴν πικρὰν κατοικίαν
[βρέχουσα νυ]κτὸς τὴν κλίνην ἐκ δακρύων·
ὡς ἄρτον ἐσθ[ίουσα τὴν σποδὸν .....]
ἔμιξα κλαυθμῷ τὴν κα[.....]·
ὡραῖε προσλαβοῦ με Χ(ριστ)ὲ νυμφίε
τὴν μητρικὴν ἔντευξιν εἰσδεδεγμένο(ς)·
ἄνοιξ(ον) ἡμῖν τὴν νοητὴν παστάδα
ἔνδυσον ἡμᾶς ἄμφιον θείου γάμου
καὶ τάξον εἰς τὸ τάγμα τῶν δαιτυμόν(ων)·
Παλαιολόγου ταῦτα θυγάτηρ γράφω
πιστὴ σεβαστὴ καὶ μοναχὴ Μαρία.



Fig. 4: Detail of fig. 1: detail of the script.



Fig. 5: Istanbul, Archaeological Museum: fragment of sarcophagus from Lips monastery.



Fig. 6: Istanbul, Archaeological Museum: funerary archivolt from Lips monastery.

The length of the inscription is in accordance with the monumental character of the script (Fig. 4): the letters are predominantly uncial, but accents and breathings are also indicated. Ligatures and curly lines on serifs and bars imbue the inscription with a highly decorative character, which is countered by a strong sense of organized layout and symmetrical adherence to the ruling. The ligatures include up to three letters grouped together (for example NHN, THN, CTH), whereas in some cases smaller letters are placed above or below others (a characteristic example is the word ΘΥΓΑΤΗΡ, where the horizontal bar of the *gamma* is extended to reach the *tau*, thus sheltering the *alpha* beneath it), without disrupting the overall symmetrical layout. The absence of minuscule letters and other borrowings of cursive script render the text a characteristic example of epigraphic script, clearly legible, albeit with elaborate visual aspects (Rhoby 2010: 629). This type of clear, well-composed script is encountered in other inscriptions of the Palaiologan period, especially on funerary monuments: some preserved fragments of a sarcophagus from the monastery of Lips (Fig. 5), as well as the lengthy epigram adorning the arcosolium of Michael Tornikes in the *parekklesion* of the Chora monastery, display similar traits, mainly the predominance of uncial letters and the preference for clear and legible results (Fig. 8) (Underwood 1966: 276-277; Macridy 1964: 268-269). However, the Palaiologina inscription with its ligatures is characterized by a greater tendency towards decorative effects.

The epitaph follows the well-established norms of the genre, mainly the characteristic 12-syllable iambic meter of Byzantine poetry without any violations of the rules of prosody, rhythm, and stress (with only one exception). Its erudite language agrees with the literary climate of early Palaiologan Constantinople. The style of the poem has prompted most scholars, including Andreas Rhoby most recently, to ascribe its composition to the prolific court poet Manuel Philes, on the basis of motifs common in Philes's oeuvre (for example, the use of the word παστάδα to denote the bridal chamber as a metaphor for earthly life)[4]. Philes was commissioned to compose numerous epigrams of this sort, including the funerary epigram inscribed in the chapel of the Pammakaristos monastery in Constantinople[5].

As is often the case with these poems, there is little actual information and plenty of figurative language, especially praises and epithets for the deceased. It is written in the first person, therefore the information it contains is formulated in autobiographical terms: the narrator is the deceased, who, at the end, informs the reader that she was a nun (most probably, the nun depicted in relief), her name was Maria, and that she was the daughter of a Palaiologos – her full name should thus have been Maria Palaiologina. The use of the

adjective σεβαστή (the feminine form of *sebastos*) is not very helpful, since in Palaiologan times it was not borne by important aristocrats, as it had been in the Komnenian period, when it was conferred on close relatives of the emperor and their wives[6]. However, its use in a poetic text may preserve reminiscences of the term's 12th-century meaning, especially in combination with the Palaiologos family name. Throughout the poem Maria describes her grief during her life on earth (with the continuous use of words such as πένθος, κλαυθμός) and by likening her life to a residence within a tomb (πρὸ τοῦ τάφου τάφον). In the final verses she implores Christ to receive her in paradise as his bride (προσλαβοῦ με Χ(ριστ)ὲ νυμφίε, ἔνδυσον ἡμᾶς ἄμφιον θείου γάμου). The phrasing and vocabulary, especially the repetition of the word νυμφίος (brides-groom) in the opening verses, indicate that the reason for her mourning was the death of her husband (or fiancé) before her own death. Dates and other concrete information are lacking.

The content of the epigram makes it evident that the monument in question is a funerary slab and that the relief should be approached from the point of view of funerary iconography. Although earlier studies identified the iconographic theme as the lower part of a frontal Virgin and Child[7], Cyril Mango and Titos Papamastorakis demonstrated that the person depicted is a nun dressed in monastic garb and that the image is a funerary portrait of Maria Palaiologina, the narrator of the epigram. According to this identification, the nun, represented in three quarters, had her arms extended in supplication towards the Virgin and Child, who would have been represented on the other side of the inscription, but are no longer preserved. The nun Maria is wearing a mantle which falls over her tunic; her shoes are also discernible.

The fragmentary condition of the slab makes it difficult to reconstruct the architectural form of the monument it came from. According to Cyril Mango and Titos Papamastorakis, the slab was embedded into the back wall of an arcosolium niche, marking the location of the burial below (Mango 1995: 106; Παπαμαστοράκης 1995-96: 301-302). The most common tomb type for aristocratic burials in Palaiologan Constantinople (it may in fact be easily inferred that the tomb in question belonged to an aristocratic lady) was indeed the arcosolium tomb, i.e. an arched niche with a sarcophagus front (a pseudosarcophagus) blocking the lower part, which was covered by a lid (Brooks 2003a: 95-103; Melvani 2013: 55-58; Παζαράς 1988: 70-81). Tomb niches of this type were often decorated with reliefs in two possible positions: arched facings of the upper part (tombs A and D in the parekklesion of the Chora monastery are the best preserved examples) and decorated sarcophagi or/and lids at the lower part. The former configuration does not appear likely for our slab, even though Tomb D at the Chora also features the combination of reliefs with inscribed verses (Fig. 7): due to its shallow incisions, the text on the Palaiologina slab would not have been legible when placed high at a distance from the viewer's eye level (by contrast, the inscription on the tomb in the Chora was highlighted with inlaid material that would have enhanced its appearance and facilitated its reading). Moreover this position was reserved for Christ and/or angels and was never occupied by funerary portraits. Identification with a lid or a sarcophagus front is also unlikely, because of the slab's large size.



Fig. 7: Istanbul, Chora Museum, Parekklesion, south wall: general view of the Tomb of Tornikes ("Tomb D").



Fig. 8: Detail of fig. 7: the inscription on the tomb of Tornikes.

Therefore, the inscription must have been located near the viewers' eye-level and possibly illuminated with the help of candles. The back wall of an arcosolium niche, i.e. above the sarcophagus, is the best solution to the problem. Indeed, most painted and mosaic funerary portraits of the Palaiologan period adorn the back walls of arcosolium niches (Brooks 2003b: 68-108). The size and shape of our slab permit such a hypothesis. Besides, traces of inscriptions on the walls of arcosolia niches in Constantinopolitan monuments indicate that inscribed epigrams were not uncommon in this position[8]. Ursula Weißbrod's argument that an arcosolium niche could not accommodate a rectilinear slab does not appear convincing: these niches often featured rectangular painted panels in the area between the sarcophagus front and the springing of the arch (Weißbrod 2003: 70-71). A relief slab of similar size and shape is thus also possible.

Establishing the form of the tomb is vital for approaching the slab's funerary setting as a three-dimensional space and for reconstructing its iconography within a broader context, which includes the immediate surroundings as well. It is clear that the image and the text are closely interrelated and that they are employed in a complementary manner in order to convey the main message. Indeed, the key to the iconographic layout is found in verses 8 and 9 of the inscribed epigram: the nun pleads to Christ to receive her through the mediation of the Virgin. Evidently, the supplication is addressed to Christ as the main recipient of the nun's prayer and not to the Virgin who is invoked mainly as an intercessor. Thus, it seems that Christ held a more prominent position in the overall decoration of the tomb than that assigned to Christ as a child in the arms of the Virgin. On the other hand, the presence of the Virgin is clearly advertised and it is likely that she was depicted on the part of the slab that is lost, in direct relation to the extended arms of the nun. It is appropriate to visualize the presence of a separate representation of Christ: admittedly there would not be enough room for an additional figure on the slab, but it is not difficult to place him on other parts of the arcosolium structure, preferably at the summit of the niche, receiving the Virgin's intercession, where he is frequently represented, whether in painting on the soffits or carved on marble facings. This agrees with the organization of sacred space within the arcosolium tomb, as analyzed by Sarah Brooks[9]: the deceased would have been placed at the medium level with the Virgin, leaving the upper zone to Christ.

The relief is a typical example of the style of the Early Palaiologan Renaissance and exhibits a mixture of conservative and progressive features. Stylistic elements reminiscent of Middle Byzantine sculpture, namely the parallel angular V-shaped drapery incisions at the lower part of the tunic in the area of the legs, are combined with signs of an advanced style: the distribution of the robe's folds at different overlapping levels creates a sense of volume unknown before the 13th century. This advanced rendering of volumes is in accordance with other works in Constantinople, for example the reliefs from the monasteries of Lips (an archivolt with the busts of Christ and the twelve apostles: Fig. 6) (Melvani 2013: 88-80, 191; Fıratlı 1990: 192-193; Macridy 1964: 262-268). and the Pammakaristos (an architrave with a bust of an apostle: Fig. 9) (Melvani 2013: 89; Belting 1972: 70-71; Mango and Hawkins



Fig. 9: Istanbul, Archaeological Museum: fragment of architrave from Pammakaristos monastery.

1964b: 332), both of which date from the late 13th and early 14th centuries. Thus, the co-existence of older survivals and new stylistic trends indicates a date for the Palaiologina slab around the last quarter of the 13th century[10].

To summarize the above, the style and quality of the carving with the elaborately incised literary text would have contributed to a spectacular funerary monument, most probably within an arcosolium niche in a monastic church, either in a chapel or a narthex. The text and the images complemented each other in order to convey the nun's prayer for salvation and invited the viewer (and reader of the epigram) to participate in the act: thus, the sculpture illustrated the poem, but both media played an equal part in the iconography and its message, as well as in the commemorative services for Maria. It is very possible that the original tomb was enhanced by other decorative elements in the niche or the arch, such as reliefs, paintings, or additional inscriptions, which would have enriched the overall appearance of the arcosolium. In any case, it was certainly a costly work of the highest quality, in accordance with the scholarly and artistic climate of the so-called "Palaiologan Renaissance" and with the interests and aspirations of the Palaiologan aristocracy of Constantinople.

The figurative language of the epitaph allows little room for identifying the deceased nun Maria Palaiologina. The only information that could provide the key is found in the last verse, which gives her name: the deceased commissioned the epigram; her first name was Maria and she was the daughter of a Palaiologos, therefore her family name was Palaiologina. When Buckler first published the monument, he acknowledged that any hypothesis on Maria Palaiologina's identity would be futile, since the first name is common and was used too frequently by the Palaiologos family to allow any speculation[11]. His only suggestion was that the opening lines imply that Maria became a nun against her will. Subsequent bibliography on the monument has refrained from identifying Maria and is content with stating that she must have been a member of the imperial family[12]. It has also been ascertained that the laments in the first five verses are mainly a literary *topos* and that they should not be interpreted as an indication that Maria spent her life in torment. Since the phrasing of the epigram does not offer much for historical considerations, attempts to identify Maria have been abandoned.

It is usually assumed that Maria was the monastic name of the nun in question. However, the name Maria is not a common name for a nun and it may be possible that Maria Palaiologina was in fact her secular name. On one hand the epigram clearly refers to her monastic identity, but on the other it emphasizes her family name, thus alluding to her social status and by extension to her secular life. Such a mixture is not uncommon in epigrams: the epitaph of Tornikes also contains references to both his monastic and military virtues. Therefore, the context of the poem alone cannot determine whether this was a monastic or a secular name; statistically, however, it is more likely that Maria was her name before she took to the veil and that the epigram, at least its surviving part, has not preserved her monastic name. In order to identify her, it is necessary to look for female members of the Palaiologos family (from their fathers' side: "Παλαιολόγου θυγάτηρ") with the name Maria who died in Constantinople or, at least, are known to have been active in the city.

Maria Palaiologina, wife of the Serbian King Stephen III Uroš Dečanski was the daughter of the *kaisar* John Palaiologos (a grandson of emperor Michael VIII) and she did indeed become a nun, but it is known that she was buried in Skopje; it is therefore difficult to imagine her tomb slab in Constantinople (*PLP,* no. 21391). Likewise, Maria Palaiologina, queen of Epirus during the second half of the 14th century had nothing to do with the Byzantine capital (*PLP,* no. 21393). Maria Doukaina Komnene Palaiologina and Maria Kantakouzene Komnene Palaiologina were not daughters of male members of the Palaiologos family and are not attested in Constantinople at all (*PLP,* nos. 21394, 21397); they should therefore be excluded from the discussion.

Three Marias appear as more likely candidates. Maria Palaiologina, sister of the emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos (and therefore daughter of the prominent aristocrat Andronikos

Palaiologos) took monastic vows and the monastic name Martha in 1267. She retired to the monastery she founded and probably died there (*PLP,* no. 21389). Maria Palaiologina, illegitimate daughter of Michael VIII, was one of the capital's most famous nuns: she took the monastic name Melane and probably died in the monastery she restored, known as the Virgin Mouchliotissa, shortly after 1307[13]. Maria Komnene Branaina Laskarina Doukaina Tornikina was the daughter of Constantine Doukas Angelos Komnenos Palaiologos, half-brother of Michael VIII. She was also tonsured a nun with the name Mariamne, although it is unknown in which convent and whether this occurred in a Constantinopolitan foundation at all (*PLP,* no. 21396). It is difficult to decide which Maria could fit the requirements to be identified with the nun of our slab, but some observations on the wider context and topography of female monasticism in Constantinople can be helpful.

The problem of Maria Palaiologina's identity may have something to do with the original location of her tombstone. It is generally assumed that it originated in one of the arcosolia known to have existed in the monastery of Lips, the 10th-century institution that was restored in the late 13th century by the empress Theodora Palaiologina, widow of Michael VIII Palaiologos. Throughout the Palaiologan period the Lips monastery, known as the Fenari Isa Camii since Ottoman times, indeed functioned as a family monastery of the ruling dynasty and its various branches, as well as the burial place for several of its members, especially female members that spent their final years in the convent (Macridy 1964: 269-271; Marinis 2009: 161-165). According to Theodore Macridy, the slab had been recovered in the area of the Et Meydanı in Istanbul, which is in fact not far from the site of the Lips monastery. Macridy hypothesized that the slab was "probably from the Fenari Isa Camii", without providing any justification; since then this unsupported assumption has not been challenged. It has often been taken for granted that the Maria Palaiologina of the tomb slab was one of several Palaiologan women that were interred in the family nunnery, according to the sources, although none of those mentioned in the texts bore the name Maria. Apart from the fact that the Lips monastery is indeed in the same area as the Et Meydanı (=meat square, which is to be identified with the area around Aksaray) (Mango 1990: 25-26, 43-45; Sakaoğlu 1993-1994: 224), there is nothing else connecting the relief with the site of the Fenari Isa Camii.

It should, however, be recalled that there was at least one more major female monastery where women of the imperial family were tonsured and buried, although its exact location is not known and is in general much less studied compared to the famous Lips monastery: the monastery of Kyra-Martha, founded by Maria Palaiologina, sister of Michael VIII[14]. All that is known about its location is based on the testimony of the Russian pilgrims to Constantinople in the 14th and 15th centuries: their descriptions are vague and often inaccurate, but Kyra-Marthas is normally mentioned together with the monastery of Lips as being situated to the south of the church of the Holy Apostles. Its site has not been identified, but the evidence suggests that it was in fact not far from the Lips complex and that its location also corresponds roughly to the slab's finding place.

Of course, it is impossible to prove that the marble relief actually remained close to its original location for so many centuries, in order to determine its provenance based on where it was found. However, the monastery's founder, Maria Palaiologina, later renamed Martha, would be a suitable candidate for the portrait in question. Even though she is not mentioned by her monastic name in the accompanying inscription, it is conceivable that it was included in other parts of the text that have not survived or on other surfaces of the tomb monument that are not extant; emphasis on the transition and contrast between monastic and secular life was not an uncommon theme in epigrams of this sort. The last extant verse, which also includes her family name, evidently belongs to the part about her secular life, which justifies the use of the name Maria. The clear mention of the Palaiologos family name borne by the nun is in accordance with aristocratic practices for a private religious foundation and an integral part of family identity.

It is therefore useful to recall the known facts about Maria Palaiologina's life (*PLP,* no. 21389; Papadopoulos 1938: 13-14). Maria was the daughter of the *Megas Domestikos* Andronikos Palaiologos. She was born approximately between 1214 and 1216, probably in Nicaea, during the period of the Empire of Nicaea. Around 1237 she married the Megas Domestikos Nikephoros Tarchaneiotes, with whom she had three sons (the *megas kontostaulos* Andronikos Tarchaneiotes, the megas domestikos Michael Tarchaneiotes, and John Tarchaneiotes) and one daughter (Theodora Tarchaneiotissa)[15]. In 1258, evidently an honorable lady of the court, she came into open conflict with the reigning emperor Theodore II Laskaris over the latter's treatment of her daughter Theodora.

Maria apparently followed the Byzantine aristocracy that relocated to Constantinople in 1261 after the city was recovered from the Latins. However, she soon came into conflict with her brother, emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos, and his policy concerning the Union of the Churches. Shortly before 1266 she founded a nunnery where she retired later, taking the monastic name Martha. Her house and probably her monastery, which became widely known as the monastery of Kyra-Martha, became the base of the pro-Arsenite party during the Arsenite schism that shook the empire and the Church after the deposition of patriarch Arsenios Autoreianos in 1265. Maria-Martha's son John was one of the leaders of the Arsenites and it is evident that his mother was one of the most powerful supporters of the movement[16]. Martha disappears from the sources after 1267, when she is last recorded[17]; therefore the exact year of her death is unknown. It is possible that she was dead by 1282 when her nephew Andronikos II Palaiologos ascended the throne and revoked the Union of the Churches; the sources would probably not have failed to mention her in the context of the final chapter of the Arsenite schism.

In sum, it appears that Maria-Martha held an important position in the public life and in court politics in both Nicaea and Constantinople. In fact, her involvement with major issues of the time and her clashes with two emperors (one of them her own brother) must have caused her extended periods of distress, which is compatible with the turmoil expressed in the opening lines of our epigram. In this case, the use of σεβαστή in the final verse may refer to the respect she enjoyed, especially among monastic circles.

However, it is extremely difficult to reconcile the evidence with the facts known about the poet Philes, who is considered the author of our epigram and lived from ca. 1270 to ca. 1345. Two solutions can be proposed for this inconsistency: one explanation could be that Maria survived until the last decade of the 13th century and remained unrecorded in the main sources of the time, in which case Philes would have composed the epigram in his twenties, early in his career. The other solution to the problem would be to dissociate Philes from the poem: the metaphors and expressions employed may in fact have belonged to the general repertoire of early Palaiologan poetry and not necessarily restricted to Philes[18]. In any case, an early date (i.e. before 1300) is preferable for the figural relief, since the main stylistic traits apply to Late Byzantine sculpture of the last quarter of the 13th century in general. In fact, a date closer to the 1270s (i.e. only a few years after the last mention of Maria in 1267) might account better for the conservative rendering of the drapery.

The monastery known in the sources as the convent of "Kyra-Martha" is first mentioned in the year 1266. Its foundation was probably part of the Byzantine restoration of Constantinople after the recapture of the city from the Latins; it was therefore founded between 1261 and 1266 (Kidonopoulos 1994: 52). Although it is possible that it occupied the site of a pre-existing religious foundation, nothing relevant is mentioned in the sources. During the Arsenite controversy that dominated Constantinopolitan politics until the death of emperor Michael VIII in 1282, the monastery functioned as the center of the pro-Arsenite faction and of the opposition to Michael's policy concerning the negotiations between the Churches of Rome and Constantinople that led to the Union of Lyons in 1274. Indeed, the monk Hyakinthos, one of the leaders of the Arsenites, and his followers frequently convened at the House (Oikos) of the Tarchaneiotes family in the presence of Maria's son John

Tarchaneiotes, himself a staunch supporter of the movement. Since the monastery was probably in the vicinity of the Tarchaneiotes family estate[19], it was situated at the heart of the intense political and ecclesiastical activity of the 1260s and 1270s. Martha's tomb - with our tomb slab - must have been situated within the monastery, most likely in its main church.

The sources are silent about the convent for the following 70 years. It reappears only in 1342, when Theodora Kantakouzene, mother of the emperor John VI Kantakouzenos (1347-1354), died and was buried at Kyra-Marthas[20]. Theodora was descended from the Tarchaneiotai and was therefore a relation of Maria-Martha Palaiologina through a series of intermarriages. This might explain Theodora's burial within the convent: it was probably functioning as the family monastery of the Tarchaneiotai and was thus passed on to the Kantakouzenoi (Tinnefeld 1995: 201-208). At this point however, the monastery entered a quasi-imperial status, since the family of John VI was clearly one step above the other aristocratic lineages. In 1355 three female members of John Kantakouzenos' immediate family decided to take monastic vows at the same time and they all withdrew to the monastery: John' wife, Eirene, their daughter Maria, as well as their grand-daughter Theodora[21].

By the time the Russian pilgrims visited the convent in the second half of the 14th and the first half of the 15th centuries, it was considered an imperial foundation, probably thanks to its double connection with the Kantakouzenoi and the Palaiologoi, having been founded by a member of the latter, enjoying the patronage of the former and housing the tombs of female members of both. Thus, it was treated together with the monastery of Lips, not only because of their topographical proximity, but also because of their status as first-class female monasteries directly connected with the imperial family. The Russian travelers emphasize the importance of the monastery of Kyra-Martha as the home of venerable relics, which were probably donated to it around the time of its foundation by Maria-Martha: the texts mention the relics of Saint John the Almoner, Saint Maria Cleophas, and Saint Theodosia (Majeska 1984: 307-309; Majeska 2004: 186-188; Kotzabassi 2009: 15-18).

The site of the monastery has not been identified and the sources offer very little information that could help determine its location. The only texts that mention the monastery with any degree of topographic indications are the Russian travellers' accounts, but their information is vague: they only mention its location south of the church of the Holy Apostles, near the monastery of Lips, and within the wider Lykos area (Majeska 1984: 307). The Ottoman survey of 1455 agrees with the Russian descriptions, since it mentions the monastery and quarter of "Kir Martas" directly after the entry for the Lips monastery[22]. The detail that the Russians ascended a flight of stairs in order to venerate the relics has led scholars to locate it on a terrace or a sloping area; the south slope of the city's fourth hill, north of the Fenari Isa Camii (the site of the Lips monastery), has been proposed as a suitable site (Effenberger 2006: 256; Majeska 1984: 307). However, this is not necessarily the case: the Russians state that they went up the stairs in order to visit the relics, not to enter the convent. This probably signifies that the relics were preserved in a chapel within a tall structure, perhaps a bell tower, a configuration reminiscent of what the early 15th-century Spanish visitor Clavijo says about the relics housed in the monastery of Saint John the Forerunner known as Petra: Clavijo explicitly mentions going up a staircase to venerate the relics that were kept in a chapel situated within a tower[23]. Therefore, the only thing that can be said about the location of Kyra-Marthas is that it was situated in the wider area of the Lykos Valley, not far away from the Lips monastery.

Previous attempts to identify the monastery with surviving monuments in Istanbul or with other documented remains have all been unsuccessful. The Manastir Mescidi (in the area of the Topkapı gate in the western periphery of the Byzantine city) and the Sekbanbaşı Mescidi (destroyed when Atatűrk avenue was constructed) have been dismissed for obvious reasons – their locations don't correspond with the textual evidence[24]. Curiously, some copies of Cristoforo Buondelmonti's 15th-century description of Constantinople, that are illustrated with a map of the city marking the locations of important monuments, place

Kyra-Marthas in the western periphery of the city[25]. However, the textual evidence from the Russian accounts and the Ottoman survey of 1455 is too strong to be dismissed on the basis of the Buondelmonti maps. Thus, the location of our convent on the maps should be regarded as a mistake on behalf of the scribes and illustrators, perhaps arising from the multiple bird's eye's views employed in each case[26]. Thus, there is no need to look so far west for Kyra-Marthas, as Neslihan Asutay-Effenberger, who has proposed identification with the obscure Arabacılar Camii (Asutay-Effenberger 2007: 211-212). To summarize, the monastery of Kyra Marthas was close to the monastery of Lips and together the two foundations were the primary imperial convents of Palaiologan Constantinople; hence, they are often mentioned together or in similar contexts. It is conceivable that the two foundations shared other common characteristics as well, such as decoration layout and form and quality of tomb monuments.

Any attempts to draw conclusions regarding the appearance and layout of the monastery or its main church, based on its depiction on the Buondelmonti maps, are futile, since it is represented simply as a centralized domed structure within an enclosure, a generic form used for almost all monasteries included in the chartographic illustrations (Barsanti 2001: 219-229). Thus, very little can be said, except for the fact that the church must have resembled other churches built or remodelled in the Palaiologan period[27]. As mentioned above, it appears that the monastery also had a tower (a bell-tower?) with a chapel which housed its relics. A patriarchal document dated 1400 mentions a house within the monastic enclosure, as well as a church dedicated to saint George (Miklosich and Müller 1862: 441). It is not clear whether this was the main church (the monastery's dedication is unknown). The Ottoman survey of 1455 mentions two churches in the convent; thus, Saint George was not necessarily the *katholikon.* The Ottoman survey gives a detailed account of the complex, as it stood shortly after the Conquest, and confirms the existence of several houses (more than 50, including two-storey buildings) around the courtyard (İnalcık 2012: 322-324). The survey also mentions two vineyards, gardens, and the refectory. The overall impression gained by the text is that of a conglomeration of buildings and building clusters grouped around a courtyard. Kyra-Marthas was clearly a vast complex covering a large plot of land and was certainly one of the city's greatest Palaiologan religious foundations.

The monastery of Kyra-Marthas met with the same fate as most imperial foundations after the Ottoman conquest of 1453. It was soon abandoned and its site was used for residential purposes. In fact, the Ottoman survey of 1455 mentions that the buildings and the courtyard of the monastery were occupied by various Turkish inhabitants and confirms that its churches were abandoned, whereas some of its buildings had been assigned to the imperial treasury; it is therefore clear that it was no longer functioning as a Christian religious foundation (İnalcık 2012: 322-324). It is very difficult to speculate on its subsequent fate: the *mahalle* of Kir Martas, which is present in the 1455 survey, disappears thereafter from the Ottoman archival sources. A meticulous study of the Islamic religious foundations of the wider Lykos area based on the archival material and the topography and demography of the region might yield traces of the Byzantine monastery's afterlife and help clarify its absorption by the institutions of Ottoman Istanbul.

To conclude, it must be admitted that the identification of the nun Maria Palaiologina mentioned in the funerary epigram and depicted on the relief with Maria-Martha Palaiologina, sister of Michael VIII Palaiologos, rests mainly on speculative arguments. However, she appears to be the most likely candidate among the known female members of the Palaiologos family and it is unlikely that such a prominent tomb monument belonged to an obscure personage that has passed unrecorded in the available textual sources. Admittedly, there is no way of confirming whether the finding spot of the slab corresponds to its location in Byzantine times. Yet, in case the slab actually came from the area of the Lykos valley, it possibly represents all that is left of the great convent of Kyra Martha, one of the most important religious foundations of Late Byzantine Constantinople.

NOTES

* The Turkish abstract of the paper translated by Figen Kıvılcım Çorakbaş.

1. Macridy 1964: 271: "We are convinced that this tombstone came from Theodora's mausoleum [=the south church of the Lips monastery]".

2. Including, most recently, Melvani 2013: 233. See also the works cited above (notes 1-4).

3. Buckler and Mango believe that there were 14 more verses on the other side of the relief portrait. See the discussion in Rhoby 2014: 632.

4. For the meter, language, style, as well as authorship of the epitaph, see Rhoby 2014: 631-632.

5. For Philes's funerary epigrams see Papadogiannakis 1984. For the Pammakaristos epigram, see Rhoby 2009: 307-310, Mango 1978: 20.

6. Palaiologan sebastoi tended to be rather low-ranking aristocrats. See Kyritses 1997: 22-28. See also Macrides et al. 2013: 298-299, Μαργάρου 2000: 115-125; Oikonomides 1976: 126-127.

7. For example, Belting 1972: 84-86; Grabar 1976: 129; and Talbot 1999: 80-81.

8. See for example, Mango and Hawkins 1964a: 301-303.

9. Brooks 2003b: 108-112. The arcosolia in the Chora monastery are the best examples. Of course, other versions of this or similar schemes are possible, since the surviving examples exhibit a considerable degree of variation.

10. Melvani 2013: 89; Belting 1972. Andreas Rhoby (Rhoby 2014: 629) dates the slab to the early 14th century based on the form and content of the inscription.

11. Buckler 1924: 526. An appended note by the Bollandist Hippolyte Delehaye at the end of Buckler's article confirms his conclusion.

12. The *PLP* has a separate entry for this Palaiologina: *PLP,* no. 12064. See also Rhoby 2014: 631.

13. For Maria-Melane, see Teteriatnikov 1995: 163-180.

14. On the monastery see Laurent 1939: 296-320; Effenberger 2006: 255-293; Kidonopoulos 1994: 51-52; Janin 1953: 324-326.

15. For the members of her family, see Leontiades 1998: 61-69.

16. Γουναρίδης,1999: 65-69, 73. For the so-called Arsenite schism, see also: Tinnefeld 2012: 143-165; Puech 2012: 45-54.

17. Pachymeres 1984: 381, 385. Maria-Martha is mentioned within the context of events shortly before the deposition of patriarch Germanos III (1265-1266).

18. See Rhoby 2014: 631 and the apparatus to the edition of the epigram's text (*ibid.*: 629) for the arguments (basically stylistic) in favor of the attribution of the epigram to Philes.

19. In accordance with Byzantine aristocratic practices: Magdalino 1982: 95-98.

20. Kantakouzenos (Schopen 1832): vol. 2, 223, vol. 3, 106; Heisenberg 1920: 11.

21. Kantakouzenos (Schopen 1832): vol. 2, 106; Nicol 1968: 336-338.

22. İnalcık 2012: 322-324. See also Ayverdi 1958: 33, 62.

23. Clavijo (Estrada López 1999): 117, 135-136; Cirac 1961: 358-382. This tower (elsewhere mentioned as a bell-tower) has been identified by Neslihan Asutay-Effenberger with the small building known as the Kasım Ağa Camii (Asutay-Effenberger 2008: 299-326).

24. The identification with Sekbanbaşı had been proposed by Alfons Maria Schneider: Schneider 1936: 61. The location of the building does not correspond to the indications in the sources, as shown by Laurent (Laurent 1939). For the monument, see Müller-Wiener 1977: 196-197. Semavi Eyice's identification of the Manastir Mescidi (Eyice 1955: 139-168) was rejected by Pasadaios (Πασαδαίος 1965: 56-101).

25. Barsanti 2001: 224. A sanctuary named "Santa Marta" is depicted in the area of the land walls, close to the Romanos gate (today's Topkapı). Since there is no known church or monastery dedicated to Saint Martha in Constantinople (Saint Martha's relics were preserved in the monastery of Saint Lazarus, to the east of the Haghia Sophia), it is reasonable to assume that this is a reference to the convent of Kyra-Martha.

26. Manners 1997: 72-102. This has resulted in numerous inaccurate renderings and awkward juxtapositions of monuments, besides our monastery. The placement of Martha's convent near the walls should be viewed as one of these inaccuracies.

27. For Palaiologan architecture in Constantinople based on the surviving evidence, see Ousterhout 2000: 241-250 and Ousterhout 1991: 77-80.

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