A BYZANTINE MONOGRAM OF A LADY ON A MARBLE CAPITAL FROM THE LOUVRE

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There is a marble capital with a monogram at the Musée du Louvre[1], which appeared in France in 1886 as a gift from Monsignor Gabriel, grand vicar of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople[2]. Sarah T. Brooks identified it as a Constantinopolitan piece and dated it to the late 13th or the 14th century (in my opinion a later date is possible as well)[3]. The capital has the following dimensions: 23 x 19 x 17 cm (**Fig. 1**). Its narrow design suggests the form of a simple and somehow primitive Corinthian capital, with volutes in its corners, flowering acanthus foliage on its reverse and two short sides, and the addition of two flower buds at the centre of the capital's listel (top moulding), as S. T. Brooks described it[4]. Most important here, however, is a cruciform monogram framed by a medallion and sculptured on the capital's front face, which is taken to read ΤΕΗΣΛΝ (?) by the above mentioned scholar and has to be unambiguously deciphered.

The decoration of architectural sculptures with the Saint's, ruler's or donor's name and titles, abbreviated in the shape of such monograms[5] or cryptographs[6], is a tradition that dates back to the Early Byzantine centuries; it continued well into the Late Byzantine period[7] and after the conquest of the Ottomans all over the Balkans. The absence of religious iconography from the capital's decoration leads S. T. Brooks to the conclusion that it is impossible to confirm whether the capital was displayed in a secular or an ecclesiastical building. The sparse decoration of the Louvre capital suggests several church contexts outside the temple, as for example in the decoration of the altar screen looking west; in a window or portico, as in the nave of the Chora Monastery with the painted monograms of Theodore Metochites (Constantinople), as well as in the window capitals of Mistra's Pantanassa Church, which bears the name of the church's founder John Phrangopoulos, etc[8]. In addition, S. T. Brooks correctly points out that such a capital could have been part of the sculptured frame for a niche tomb, as for example are the painted monograms of Manuel Laskaris Chatzikis, framed by medallions, at his tomb in Mistra's Pantanasa Church[9].

The exact reading of medieval monograms must to some extent remain a hypothesis, because the letters of a monogram are not written as in a regular word. There are often different solutions which could all be correct at the same time, just because none of them could be proved experimentally the way this is done in the "hard" sciences. The reading of the letters on the Louvre monogram offered above gives rise to bewilderment, mostly because it does not form an understandable word and because one could not be sure whether the top bar of the monogram simply belongs to the epsilon or whether it symbolizes a "T" in this tracery. On the other hand, the letter sequence "ΗΣ" on the right arm of the stylized cross suggests that it is an ending of a feminine proper noun. If so, the letters are: Τ(?) ΕΛΝΗΣ. To my mind we have here a monogram with the word "Τ(?)ΕΛΕΝΗΣ" ("of Helena") in the Genitive, where "Ε" has to be read at least twice. Only the existence of "T" or "TE" remains problematic, because the left top bar of "E" could have been drawn to the

Fig. 1 – Capital with monogram at the Musée du Louvre,
Department des antiquités grecques, étrusques et romaines, Paris, M.N.C. 1159 (MN 3055). Source: Internet.

Fig. 2 – Byzantine capital from the lapidarium of the Franciscan convent in Jerusalem.
Photo: Emmanuel Moutafov.

left only for aesthetical reasons, but I will return to this combination of letters later, assuming that "ΕΛΕΝΗC" is an acceptable reading for the major part of the monogram. A local parallel inscription in the Genitive can be found on the lower collar of a column on display in the garden of the Ayasofya Müzesi, where the word τοῦ ἐπάρχου ("of the eparch") probably means that this piece was assigned to a building sponsored by the prefect of the New Rome. Some capitals without religious motifs from the Holy Sepulchre church are displayed in the lapidarium of

the Franciscan convent in Jerusalem, on which one sees similar monograms linked with lines in the shape of a cross, probably of Byzantine patriarchs, also written in the Genitive as "ΜΑΡΚΟΥ" or "ΜΑΚΑΡΙΟΥ" (**Fig. 2**). Inscriptions indicating the destination of the sculptures are not uncommon in Byzantium, e.g. the seven capitals from the mid-5th century found in Kalenderhane Camii at Istanbul and labelled τοῦ Ἁγίου Παῦλου ("of Saint Paul"), but in these cases the inscription refers to the church where the marble had to be set up, rather than to the building's

patron[10] (**Fig. 3**). The capital does not have i.e. τῆς Ἁγίας Ἐλένης ("of Saint Helen") and this leads me to the hypothesis that Helena here was a donor of the building decorated with this marble piece. Furthermore, the existence of cruciform lines that link the letters of her name, which happens in the monograms of the donors in the Holy Sepulchre complex, probably means that the said Helena was, if not an empress, at least a member of the imperial family or a noble lady. In this respect, suffices to mention the monograms of Theodora, wife of Justinian, on the capitals of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (**Fig. 4**)[11]. Most probably the cruciform monograms (Kreuzmonogramme)[12] in architectural sculpture and church painting came from Byzantine magistrates' molybdobulla (seals) and rings that appeared in the Eastern Roman Empire as early as the 7th century[13] (**Fig. 5**). Female names in general do not appear frequently in Byzantine monograms on seals, and much more rarely on capitals[14], which means that for the period between the late 13th and the 14th centuries the chances to identify the noble donor of the Louvre capital are limited. On the other hand, we have to keep in mind that in later times many monograms are only partial ones, which need all the consonants (possibly except the ending), but that is not the case here.

Ἐλένη was, and probably still is, the most common Greek name after Maria, which complicates my search substantially, but the Helena in question was probably a member of the Byzantine royal court. Much earlier than the date of the marble capital under discussion lived Helena, daughter of Alypius and wife of Constantine VIII (976-1025). The second possible owner of the Louvre monogram is Helena Kantakouzene (1333 – 10 Dec. 1396), who was the Empress consort of John V Palaiologos. She was a daughter of John VI Kantakouzenos and Irene Asenina[15]. Another potential founder of the building where this capital was displayed is Helena Dragaš (1372-1450), who was the empress consort of Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaiologos. The list of noble ladies with the name of Helena in Byzantium is endless, but in order to narrow it down, I will return to the puzzling "T" or "TE" mentioned at the beginning of this paper and will propose three possible interpretations.

Fig. 3 – 5th-century capital from the lapidarium of Kalenderhane Camii, Istanbul. Photo: Emmanuel Moutafov.

Fig. 4 – Capital with the monogram of Theodora from Hagia Sophia, Istanbul. Photo: Emmanuel Moutafov.

Fig. 5 – Seal with monogram of Theodoros Notarios from the 7th century. Private collection. Source: Internet.

That letter, or most probably combination of letters, could be interpreted as Τ[έως] or Τέ[ως] ("before", "ex-", "former"), because this left top bar of "E" was certainly not a random artistic solution. Therefore, one could read Τέ[ως δέσποινας] Ἑλένης. Such an interpretation is logical in view of the historical context of the Late Byzantine Empire: when John V Palaiologos was restored to the throne, but died on 16 February 1391[16], his wife Helena Kantakouzene survived him[17]. She died there five years later, which could explain the abbreviated title "ex-[empress]" on the Louvre capital. That means that the capital could be dated between 1391 and 1396.

Nevertheless, we do not possess sources confirming any donor activities of Helena Kantakouzene after her retirement, and most of all, any sources confirming the fact that she became a nun in order to change her name and to sign as "former Helena". A similar generous donation from a former noble lady that later became a nun exists in the Chora Monastery, where the nun Melane – previously Maria Palaiologina – depicted in the Deesis mosaic in the esonarthex, is described in the inscription as "Lady of the Mongols, Melane monache".[18] Such an epigraphic parallel from 14th century Constantinople prompts me to read: Τ[ῆς δέσποινας] Ἑλένης. This wealthy lady could

be for instance the Byzantine empress by the name of Helena that became a nun was Helena Dragaš (1372-1450), known in historiography for her beauty, piety, wisdom, justice[19], and used the title δέσποινα[20]. A former emperor, her husband Manuel II, became a monk and adopted the name of Matthew (Ματθαῖος)[21]. He probably also had such a monogram made up of four cruciform letters: M N H Λ, which appear in a gold ring now housed in the British Museum[22] (**Fig. 6**). Although there is no alpha and "OY" among its constituent letters, O. M. Dalton resolved this monogram as 'Manuel' and attributed the ring to Manuel II Palaiologos[23], which is not entirely implausible given the abbreviated nature of Late Byzantine monograms. More recently, it has been suggested that this ring belonged to the despot of Morea, Manuel Kantakouzenos (1349-1380)[24], but as C. Entwistle writes, both interpretations should be treated with caution, because the ring lacks any reference to title or status, which would normally be expected[25]. That observation encourages me to think that the T/TE before the name of our Helena must be an indication of title or status, and not only a Genitive article "T[HC]", because "TE" is a letter *symplegma* just like "HC" here. The female titles that appear in Byzantium and start with "T" are as follows: 1. Secular titles and epithets: τζαούσινα, τοποτηρήτισσα, ταυρομάρχισσα, τριβούνισσα[26]; 2. Church titles: τραπεζαρία[27], and 3. Professional titles: ταβερναρία, ταριχοπράτισσα, ταρσικάρισσα, τζαγκαρίνα[28], which are mostly derived from the occupation and status of their husbands, but all are relatively low in the social, political and ecclesiastical hierarchy. Nevertheless, one of them, τζαούσινα, appears in reference to a lady named Maria; she is mentioned in the dedicatory inscription of a renovated church in Mani in 1337-1338 as a wife of the local governor Constantine Spanes[29]. Thus the Louvre monogram may be read as T[ζαούσινας] Ἑλένης. After Manuel II's death on 21 July 1425, Helena Dragaš became a nun with the name Ὑπομονῆ (Patience) at the capital's Monastery of Kyra Martha, and she is venerated as a saint with her monastic name by the Greeks and the Serbs. Russian travellers are our basic source of information about the location of the convent called "Kyra Martha", "Lady Martha" after its foundress, the nun Martha (born as Maria Palaiologina), sister of Emperor Michael VIII, whence, no doubt, came its appellation the "empress's convent"; it is located close to the Monastery of the Mother of God τοῦ Λιβός in the Lycus Valley[30]. So, after the death of her husband in 1425, Helena Dragaš was accommodated, as Palaiologian ladies usually were, in the empress's convent in Constantinople for 25 years, and then she donated funds for decorating an architectural construction of the nunnery. On the other hand, it is known that she helped to establish a home for old people called "Ἐλπίς τῶν ἀπηλπισμένων" ("The Hope of the Despaired"). This philanthropic institution was located at the Nunnery[31] of Saint John the Baptist in Petrion/ Petra (Πύλη τοῦ Πετρίου)[32], where the relics of St Patapios of Thebes are kept[33]. On her initiative, parts of this building on the Golden Horn could also have been marked with her monogram. This hypothesis seems more reasonable because of the poor quality and decorativeness of the Louvre capital, which could be dated to the first half of the 15th century as well. The location of St John the Baptist's convent is also more suitable for the history of this artefact because this building was located in the south-east area of the Fener suburb of Istanbul, populated in the 19th century mostly by Greeks, who possibly found it during works or demolition of buildings where it had been reused, and gave/sold it to the Patriarch's vicar Gabriel. There is also evidence that, in the 12th–13th century, the diakonia at the Petria/ Petrion monastery was called τὰ Ἑλένης[34]. Another charity hostel (xenon) was also known as τὰ Ἑλένης after the wife of Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos (905-959)[35], Helena Lakapene. But it remains hardly understandable why the names of these philanthropic institutions should be written in a cross-shaped monogram irrespective of the aristocratic background of their patrons. And is that possible in a marble monogram from Constantinople?

Fig. 6 – Gold ring with monogram of Manuel, British Museum. Source: Internet.

It cannot be ruled out that the marble capital now exhibited in the Louvre museum was part of a pair portico decoration at the entrance to the above mentioned home for old people in Petrion, where those entering would read Τ[ῆς δέσποινας] Ἑλένης (the most plausible interpretation) or Τ[ζαούσινας] Ἑλένης or Τέ[ως δέσποινας] Ἑλένης. In my opinion, it could be attributed to Helena Dragaš and dated between 1425 and 1450, but it remains a hypothesis though brave and fantastic. If correct, the capital should be dated somewhat later than suggested by S. T. Brooks[36] and originates from Petrion.

In conclusion, the only reading suggestion to date is Ἑλένης, who must have been a wealthy lady, perhaps related to the leading or even imperial circles before 1453. Researchers so far were mostly puzzled by the initial "T", which, in my view, could be read as "TE" as well. But we may not forget J. Durand's remark about "l'aspect inachevé de la pièce" and "les traces du ciseau", which "sont encore bien visible"[37]. Apparently this stone piece sponsored by some unknown Helena was never finished and displayed in a building and for that reason the stylistic analysis, the dating and the reading of the initial letters remain problematic.

Notes

[1] Musée du Louvre, Department des antiquités grecques, étrusques et romaines, Paris, M.N.C. 1159 (MN 3055). See *Department des antiquités grecques, étrusques et romaines, Catalogue sommaries des marbres antiques.* Compiled by Antoine-Marie Héron de Villefosse, Paris, 1896, No 3055; *Byzance: L'art byzantine dans les collections publiques françaises.* Paris, 1992-93, No 321, p. 432.

[2] *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261-1557).* Ed. by Helen C. Evans, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2004, p. 112.

[3] *Ibidem*.

[4] *Ibidem*.

[5] *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst.* VI, 1999, pp. 590-614.

[6] E. Moutafov, Novootkrit kriptograf ot čarkvata na Arbanaškija manastir *Uspenije Bogorodično*. – In: *Etropolskata knozhovna škola i balgarskiat XVII vek,* Sofia, 2011, pp. 281-285; E. Moutafov, P. Sabev, I. Tioutioundzhiev, *Nadpisat ot oltarnata apsida na Tarnovskata mitropolitska čarkva Sv. sv. Petar i Pavel.* – In: *Art Studies Quarterly, vol. 3, Sofia, 2011, pp. 32-42, etc.*

[7] *Byzantium*, cat. 56A, B, p. 111 with monograms of Alexios Apokaukos, παρακοιμόμενος (officer of the imperial bedchamber), discovered in the church of Selymbria, west of Istanbul, founded by the same Alexios in 1321-28. These capitals do not have motifs of religious iconography and the letters that spell out the name and the title of the donor are not linked with crossing lines.

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 112; G. Millet, Inscriptions byzantines de Mistra. – In: *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 23, 1899, pp. 137-138; Idem. Inscriptions inédites de Mistra. – In: *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 30, 1906, pp. 462-466; R. G. Ousterhout, *The Architecture of Kariye Camii in Istanbul.* Washington, 1987, fig. 54, 55.

[9] Millet 1899, pp. 138-139; S. T. Brooks, *Commemoration of the Dead: Late Byzantine Tomb Decoration.* (Ph. D. diss.), New York, 2002, p. 353-354.

[10] *The Sculptures of Ayasofya Müzesi in Istanbul. A Short Guide.* Ed. by Claudia Barsanti and Alessandra Guiglia, Istanbul, 2010, p. 117-118.

[11] Αι. Χριστοφιλοπούλου, *Βυζαντινή ιστορία* (324-610). Α΄ τόμος, Thessaloniki, 1992, σ. 378.

[12] R. Feind, *Byzantinische Monogramme und Eingennamen. Alphabetisiert Wörterbuch.* (Münzen & Sammeln) 2010, p. 312 (Although non-scientific, this publication contains some genuine useful material).

[13] K. M. Κωνσταντόπουλος, *Βυζαντινά Μολυβδόβουλλα του εν Αθήναις Εθνικού Νομισματικού Μουσείου.* Athens, 1917, αρ. 325ᵃ΄, σ. 315, αρ. 128ᵃ΄, σ. 291, αρ. 211, σ. 62-63, αρ. 8γ΄, σ. 282, etc.

[14] R. Feind, op. cit., p. 335, fig. 101A – ΘΕΟΔΩΡΑC.

[15] Duca Michæl Nepot, 5 and 10, p. 20 and 39.

[16] V. Laurent, La date de la mort d'Hélène Cantacuzène, femme de Jean V Paléologue. – In: *Revue des études byzantines*, vol. 13, 1955, pp. 135-138.

[17] D. M. Nicol, *The Last Centuries of Byzantium 1261-1453*. London, 1972, p. 305.

[18] E. Trapp, ed. *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit*, Vienna, 1976-96, vol. 9, No 21395; Talbot, A.-M. Building Activity in Constantinople under Andronikos II: The Role of Women Patrons in the Construction and Restoration of Monasteries. – In: *Byzantine Constantinople: Monuments, Topography and Everyday Life.* Ed. by Necipoğlu, N., Leiden, 2001, p. 334-36.

[19] *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit, erstellt von E. Trapp.* 9. Wien, 1989, № 21513.

[20] About the title δέσποινα used by Helena Dragaš. See *Actes de Lavra* (Des origins à 1204). Ed. by P. Lemerle, A. Guillou, N. Svoronos, avec la collaboration de Denise Papachrysanthou [Archives de l' Athos V], Paris, 1977, vol .III, No 169.6 (a. 1445), etc.

[21] Barker, *Manuel II Palaeologos (1391-1425).* New Jersey, 1969, etc.

[22] *Byzantium: Treasures of Byzantine Art and Culture from British Collections.* (Exh. Cat.). Ed. D. Buckton, London, 1994, No 215; *Byzantium 330-1453.* Ed. by R. Cormack and M. Vassilaki, London, 2008, No 151, p. 416-417.

[23] O. M. Dalton, *Catalogue of Early Christian Antiquities and Objects from the Christian East in the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography of the British Museum.* London, 1901, No 171, p. 27.

[24] *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, No 15, p. 45-46.

[25] *Byzantium 330-1453*, p. 417.

[26] E. Μαργάρου, *Τίτλοι και επαγγελματικά ονόματα γυναικών στο Βυζάντιο. Συμβολή στη μελέτη για τη θέση της γυναίκας στη Βυζαντινή κοινωνία.* Thessaloniki, 2000, σ. 135-137.

[27] *Ibidem,* σ. 197.

[28] *Ibidem,* σ. 254-255.

[29] J.-Cl. Cheynet – Cécille Morrisson – W. Seibt. *Sceaux byzantins de la collection Henri Seyrig.* Paris, 1991, No. 306 (p. 203).

[30] *Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries.* Ed. by G. J. Majeska, 1984, p. 309.

[31] *Alexiade*, II, 6; *Bibliotheca scriptorum graecorum et romanorum Teubneriana*, Leipzig, vol. I, p. 72; *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. Migne, Paris, CXXXL, 204 C-205 A.

[32] R. Janin, *La Geographie ecclesiastique de l'empire Byzantine.* Vol. III, Paris, 1969, p. 397.

[33] A. van. Millingen, *Byzantine Constantinople: The Walls of the City and Adjoining Historical Sites.* London, 1899, pp. 206-207.

[34] R. Janin, *Constantinople byzantine*, 2ⁿᵈ ed., pp. 407-408; Idem, *La Geographie ,* p. 556.

[35] *Ibidem*, p. 355, 407-408; Idem, *La Geographie,* p. 554.

[36] *Byzantium: Faith and Power,* p. 112.

[37] *Byzance*, ref. 321.