Art and Political Ideology in the State of Epiros during the Reign of Theodore Doukas (r. 1215-1230)

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The artistic production of the Despotate of Epiros under its first two rulers, Michael I (r. 1204-1215) and his brother, Theodore Komnenos Doukas (r. 1215-1230), is still poorly understood. Only a few monuments can be ascribed to the first three decades of the thirteenth century, but neither their exact date, nor the identity of their founders are known. Textual sources from this period, however, shed more light on the circumstances of artistic production. Thus one occasionally comes across references to the foundation or renovation of churches sponsored by members of the ruling Komnenos-Doukas family or by renowned Epirote clergymen and monks. This was, for instance, the case with the monastery of Varnakova, Episkope Mastrou, or

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1. S. Kissas was the first to attempt a reconstruction of the artistic production in the Principality of Epiros during the first thirty years of the thirteenth century: S. Kissas, Umetnost u Solunu početkom XIII veka i mileševsko slikarstvo, in: Mileševa dans l’histoire du people serbe, Colloque scientifique international à l’occasion de 750 ans de son existence, ed. V. J. Đurić, Belgrade 1987, 37-49.


3. A three-aisled, timber-roofed basilica with a single apse, known as Episkope Mastrou,
the Blacherna monastery near Arta⁴, all of which are still standing. On the other hand, many castles, monasteries, and churches mentioned by Epirote writers have ceased to exist. Examples include an unknown monastery in Chimara⁵, the cathedral church of the Panagia Panymnetos in Naupaktos⁶, the Peribleptos monastery in Arta⁷, the Eleousa church in Beroia⁸, St Nicholas church in the village of Mastro in Aitolia. During the existence of the State of Epiros, this church was the seat of the bishops of Achelos. A fragmentary inscription in the conch of the sanctuary apse mentions Theodore and his brother Constantine: P. VokotoPouLoS, Μάστρου, Ἐπισκοπὴ, ΑΔ 22 (1967) Χρονικά, 328–330; IDEM, ΑΔ 24 (1969) Β’ 2, Χρονικά, 241, fig. 240, 241a; IDEM, ΑΔ 25 (1970) Β’ 2, Χρονικά, 299–300, fig. 257–259; V. Katsaros, Η θέση της επισκοπης Αχελού και η σχέση της με τη "βυζαντινή Πόλη" γιά το λόιμο "Επισκοπή" περί το στο χωριό "Μάστρου" της Αιτωλίας. Ιστορικογεωγραφικά 2 (1988) 198–201; KATSAROS, Λόγια στους ειδικούς, 531–533. A. Palouras, Βυζαντινή Αιτωλοακαρνανία. Συμβολή στη βυζαντινή και μεταβυζαντινή μνημειακή τέχνη, Athens 2004, 75–76, 197–200, εικ. 47.


6. We know about the church of the Panagia Panymnetos and its sculptural and fresco decoration from the letters of John Apokaukos, metropolitan of Naupaktos, written between 1218/9 and 1222. The learned prelate mentions the painters and sculptors engaged in the decoration of the church: Apokaukos (Bees), no. 27, 86, 38-41, no. 58, 115, 25-27, no. 103, 153, 16-18, 185, 236.

7. The location of this monastery is still unknown, but its existence is attested by the letters of John Apokaukos from 1222 and 1223, written during his sojourn in this monastery: Καὶ αὐτὸς ἔζη κατακείμενος ἐν τῇ μονῇ τῆς Περιβλέπτου, καθὼς με ἀφῆκε, πλὴν χωρίς πόνων οὐτού γὰρ ἔλεησαν ἀργεῖ δὲ ἡ κίνησις διὰ τῆς τῶν γονάτων νάρκου... Papadopoulos-Kerameus, Συνοδικά χρόνιμα, 22, No 7. See also: Εὐθεθέντων ἤμων τῆς σήμερον ἐν τῇ κατά τὴν Ἑρατην σεβεμένη μονή τῆς ἐπερχαίας δεσποίνης ἤμων Θεοτόκου τῆς Περιβλέπτου... Apokaukos (Bees), 84. V. Katsaros, Πνευματικός Β’ καὶ Πολιτισμός τῆς Βυζαντινῆς Αρταίας, in: Πρακτικά Β’ Διεθνούς Αρχαιολογικού και Ιστορικού συνεδρίου “Ἡ Βυζαντινὴ Ἀρτα και η περιοχή της”, Arta 2008, 25–42. V. Papadopoulos, Η Βυζαντινή μονή τῆς Παναγίας Περιβλέπτου. Συμβολή στη μνημειακή τοπογράφια της Βυζαντινής Αρταίας, ΔΧΑΕ 26 (2005), 283–302, based on some sculptural remains, has suggested that the Peribleptos monastery was located on the spot where the post-Byzantine church dedicated to the Presentation of the Virgin and St Merkourios is still standing.

village Tzermenikon in the metropolis of Bothrotos, and a church “founded at court (αὐλή)” in Skopje.

The aim of this paper is not to examine the aforementioned monuments, nor is it to present new archaeological finds dating from the first three decades of the thirteenth century. Instead, the paper sets out to reconstruct the political context of art-making in the State of Epiros, paying particular attention to two aspects: first, the ways in which art reflected and articulated political ideology; and second, the role played by works of art in the formation of a Byzantine imperial identity in exile. In what follows, I will examine a diverse set of evidence, ranging from church dedications to frescoes, coins, and inscriptions.

In the State of Epiros, the fundamental principles of Byzantine political ideology were maintained. Beginning with Michael I, the Epirote rulers stressed that they were connected by blood to the Komnenian family, and accordingly, that they were legal successors of the imperial throne. Michael I (1204-1215) signed his name as Michael Doukas or Michael Komnenos. Besides the sources commonly refer to him as son of the sebastokrator John Doukas, or as cousin of the Emperor Alexios III and uncle of Alexios IV. Michael’s successor Theodore, reiterated the same claims. This is evident, for instance, from the dedicatory inscription at Episkope Mastrou (fig. 1):

+ Τὸ.............................................................ἀδελφοὺς
.............................................................στεφάνους
.............................................................ηφόρους
.............................................................ηφορ... ε.......................ν πρὸς θρόνο
<ϕ[ακ]λεῖας [έσ]χατης (;)>13

11. For the ideological basis of this claim, see a detailed discussion in A. Stauridou-Zafraka, Νίκαια και Ήπειρος τον 13ο αιώνα. Ιδεολογική αντιπαράθεση στην προσπάθεια τους να ανακτήσουν την αυτοκρατορία, Thessaloniki 1990, esp. 117-146;
An inscription set at the behest of Theodore on a tower near Dyrrachium provides another example:

... Παῖς οὗτος ἄνδρὸς εὐτυχοῦς Ἰω(άννου), σεβαστοκρατοροῦντος, ἄνθους πορφύρας, Θεόδωρος μέγιστος ἐν στρατηγίαις, Δούκας Κομνηνός, εὐσθενής, βριαρόχειρ ... 14

This child of that happy man John, the sebastokrator, the flower of the [imperial] purple, Theodore supreme in military command, Doukas Komnenos, firm, strong-handed ... 15

The political and military accomplishments of Michael I and especially of his brother, Theodore, justified their ideological claims and aspirations to assume the leading political role as legitimate successors of the former Byzantine emperors and, ultimately, to recover Constantinople. As a result of the conquest of Thessalonike by Theodore in 1224/1225, Epiros became an empire in 122716, while Theodore assumed a new title: πιστὸς βασιλεὺς καὶ αὐτοκράτωρ Ρωμαίων. His signatures on legal acts proclaimed him as ὁ Θεόδωρος ἐν Χριστῷ τῷ Θεῷ πιστὸς βασιλεὺς καὶ αὐτοκράτωρ Ρωμαίων Κομνηνὸς ὁ Δούκας17. Theodore’s claim to the imperial succession was supported by members of the clergy, as attested by letters of the metropolitans John Apokaukos and George Bardanes, as well as by a

14. KATSAROS, Λόγια στοιχεία, 525-526.
series of legal acts issued by Demetrios Chomatenos, archbishop of Ohrid.\(^{18}\)

Textual sources are not alone in documenting the political ambition of the Epirote rulers and their attempt to assume the leadership amongst the Byzantine successor states that emerged after 1204. Such aspirations are also reflected in their artistic patronage, that is, in the foundation and renovation of churches and monasteries and their pictorial decoration. Expressions of the official Epirote political ideology and propaganda can be further detected in coins, church dedications, inscriptions, and in some monumental pictorial programs.

Marcus Rautman wrote that, during the thirteenth century, in Western Greece, “around Arta in lower Epiros (...) monastic patronage was motivated by the universally felt needs of piety, contrition, thanks and salvation”\(^{19}\). Aside from such perennial concerns, which undoubtedly preoccupied royal patrons across the Byzantine world, I would argue that the patronage of the Epirote rulers was to a large extent informed by a nostalgia for the lost “Queen of Cities”. Indeed, I wish to propose that they consciously sought to model their capital Arta in the image of Constantinople. In this way, they preserved the memory of the imperial capital, while the carefully maintained link with Constantinople served as an ideological basis in their attempts to restore the former Empire. The metropolitan John Apokaukos, one of the ecclesiastical and intellectual luminaries of the Epiros state, was particularly influential in the formation of this ideological program. For Apokaukos, who had spent his youth in Constantinople, the former capital was an undisputed ideal. As Michael Angold has observed, “the loss of the city to the Latins must have intensified his attachment to Constantinople and nostalgia must have clouded the reality of the Constantinople of his youth”\(^{20}\).

One of the ways in which this nostalgia was manifested was through the memory of Constantinopolitan shrines. Probably the best example is the Blacherna monastery near Arta (Fig. 2), one of the most important monastic foundations in Epiros\(^{21}\). The transformation of the church from a

\(^{18}\) APOKAUKOS (BEE) no. 69, 128, 70–72; VASILJEVSKI, Epirotica saeculi XIII, 233–299.

\(^{19}\) M. L. RAUTMAN, Patrons and Buildings in Late Byzantine Thessaloniki, JOB 39 (1989), 308.


\(^{21}\) A. PALIOURAS, Οἱ Βλαχέρνες τῆς Ἄρτας καὶ τὸ πρότυπό τους, in: Πρακτικά Διεθνούς Συμποσίου Το «Δεσποτάτο της Ηπείρου», 163-177.
timber-roofed basilica to a vaulted structure could be placed in the period of Theodore Dukas’s rule. The earliest reference to this church comes from a synodal decree issued by Apokaukos concerning the conversion of the monastery from a male monastic house into a nunnery at the order of the wife of Theodore Komnenos-Doukas. Judging by this source, the conversion took place between 1225 and 1230. As has been convincingly argued, the change of the monastic community was most likely prompted by the need to provide shelter for a group of refugee nuns from Constantinople. As Apokaukos’ decree clearly demonstrates, the ruling family of Epiros was closely associated with the Blacherna monastery. The significance of the monastery for the Epirote rulers is perhaps most evident from the fact that its church functioned as their mausoleum. Two sarcophagi bearing funerary inscriptions are still preserved in the naos of the church. Judging by these inscriptions, the south sarcophagus may have belonged to Michael II, while the north one was probably intended for his two sons.

The dedication of the monastery to the Virgin of the Blachernai undoubtedly pointed to Constantinople. One should bear in mind the


23. Papadopoulou-Kerameus, *Συνοδικὰ γράμματα,* 14, no. 3.


26. Achaimostou-Potamianou, *Ἡ Βλαχέρνα,* 44.

pivotal role that the Blachernai played in the consciousness of the Komnenoi. This northwestern quarter of Constantinople was home to the eponymous basilica dedicated to the Mother of God, which was arguably the most important Marian shrine in the city. Under the rule of the Komnenian dynasty, from the late eleventh century onward, the Blachernai became the political and religious center of Constantinople. The Emperor Alexios I (r. 1081-1118) built a new imperial palace in this locale and made it his permanent residence. The shrine at the Blachernai, on the other hand, came to be increasingly identified with the Virgin’s role as the guarantor of imperial victory. The choice of the Blacherna monastery in Arta for the mausoleum of the Komnenos-Doukas family of Epiros clearly demonstrates the desire of this dynasty to stress their Constantinopolitan ancestry, and more specifically, their relation to the imperial family of the Komnenoi. The Blachernai basilica was one of the most important churches in Constantinople. A homily ascribed to the early seventh-century author Theodore Synkellos states that, among the Marian churches of the capital, the one at the Blachernai shrine was “the head, the metropolis, the Virgin’s most divine dwelling”.

Besides, among the great charismatic icons venerated in Constantinople, the Blachernitissa held a special place as a symbol of the protection of the city. Numerous sources inform us that in moments of crisis Byzantine emperors turned to icons of the Theotokos, and especially to the

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Blachernitissa. According to Michael Attaleiates, Romanos IV Diogenes took an icon of the Blachernitissa (ἣς εἰώθει τοῖς πιστοῖς βασιλεῦσιν ἐν ἐκστρατεύσεσθαι ὡς ἀπροσμέχοντα δόλον συνεκστρατεύσθαι) with him in the battle of Manzikert in 1071.

A special link between Constantinople and the Mother of God had already been established by the early seventh century. Dedicated to the Theotokos, the capital of the Byzantine Empire came to be known as “Theotokoupolis.” No fewer than 136 churches dedicated to the Virgin with different epithets are attested in Constantinople before the end of the thirteenth century. It is highly significant that, while the Marian epithets used in the dedications of these Constantinopolitan churches are rarely encountered in other parts of the Byzantine world, they were very prominent throughout thirteenth-century Epiros. Examples include Peribleptos and Blacherna at Arta; Pantanassa at Philippiada; and Panymnetos at Naupaktos. The church of the Panagia Vellas (Red Church) near Vulgareli was also known by the name of Panymnetos. A church dedicated to the


37. See above, n. 6.

38. This is evident from the dedicatory inscription written on the west wall of the church: εἰς κλήσιν συνημμοῦν τῆς Πανυμνήτου (A. Rihoy, *Byzantinische Epigramme auf Fresken und Mosaiken*, Wien 2009, 146–147. The Constantinopolitan church of the Virgin Panymnetos has not survived. The only reference to its existence turns up in a letter of the Pope Innocent III from 1206: G. DimitrokaLLi, Παναγία ἡ Πανύμνητος, Ἐπετηρὶς Ἑταιρείας Στερεοελλαδίκων
Panagia Paramythia is still preserved in Thesprotia\(^{39}\), while the church at Preventza in Aitolakarnania\(^{40}\) bore the name of the Panagia Kyriotissa\(^{41}\).

One should also recall that, after 1227, Theodore of Epiros chose the epithet \textit{Hagiosoritissa}, another Marian appellation of Constantinopolitan origin, for an emission of his coins (fig. 3), thereby promoting in yet another way his privileged relationship with the former Byzantine capital\(^{42}\). The reverse of these coins shows a standing figure of the Mother of God, with her hands outstretched in a gesture of supplication, and a medallion with the Christ Child hovering on her chest. Around her figure is the inscription:

\textit{Μελετών 5} (1974–1975), 54; The cult of the \textit{Panymnetos} was widespread. Icons of and churches dedicated to the Virgin \textit{Panymnetos} have survived in different cities and regions such as Beroia, the Peloponnese, FYROM, and Bulgaria: S. KISSAS, \textit{Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century Art in Ohrid and in the Areas under its Influence}, \textit{Cyrillomethodianum VIII–IX} (1984–1985), 363; TH. PAPAZOTOS, \textit{Ἡ Βέροια καὶ οἱ ναοί της (11ος-18ος αἰ.),} Athens 1994, 95, 162–163, 216.


ΑΓΙΟΣΩΡΗΤΗΣΑ. The obverse shows Theodore in the company of St Demetrios. The ruler is clad in imperial regalia and holds a model of the city Thessalonike. Due to its official character, Byzantine coinage was a potent vehicle of imperial ideology and propaganda. The criteria for the selection of a particular holy figure to accompany an emperor on his coins were manifold, ranging from personal devotional preferences to dynastic traditions and current political concerns.

It is generally assumed that the epithet Hagiosoritissa designates an icon of the Virgin venerated at a reliquary shrine, or soros, either at the Chalkoprateia or at the Blachernai in Constantinople. Both of these shrines housed caskets containing Marian relics. The frontal full-length orans figure of the Theotokos, seen on Theodore's coins, differs from the majority of the Byzantine depictions of Mary accompanied by the epithet.


44. Theodore’s claims regarding the throne of Constantinople are reflected in his coinage most evidently in the presence of his imperial titles. See Protonotariou, Η νομισματοκοπία του Βυζαντινού κράτους της Ήπειρου, 134–140, note 54. More for the coinage and imperial propaganda see V. Penna, Το Βυζαντινό νόμισμα. Μέσο συναλλαγής και έκφραση αυτοκρατορικής προπαγάνδας, Nicosia 2002, 48–63, 125–138.

45. Penna, Η απεικόνιση της Θεοτόκου, 59.

Hagiosoritissa. Comparable specimens are extremely rare^47. The more common iconography of the Hagiosoritissa features the Virgin depicted in a three-quarter or profile view, with her hands raised in prayer^48, as witnessed by numerous examples on coins^49, seals^50 and icons^51, beginning with the tenth and especially during the eleventh century. Epithets attached to images of holy figures in Byzantium were not always wedded to one particular iconographic type. The Hagiosoritissa is a case in point^52. The epithet on Theodore’s coinage does not seem to invoke a specific Marian icon, but a Constantinopolitan shrine dedicated to the Theotokos^53. The choice of this epithet for the coins issued by the Epirote ruler provides yet another piece of evidence demonstrating the great prestige that the famed Constantinopolitan

^47. T. Bertele, La Vergine aghiosoritissa nella numismatica Bizantina, REB 16 (1958), 233–234. Hendy, Coinage, 196, pl. 27.8–9.


^49. T. Bertele, La Vergine aghiosoritissa 233-234; Hendy, Coinage, 196, 268, pl. 27.8–9, 37, 3–4.; G. Touratsoglou, Ἐγκόλπιο Στεατίτη από τη Βέροια, Εισφρόσυνον, v. 2, 604–605, compiled a catalogue of coins and seals with depictions of the Hagiosoritissa. See also Penna, Η απεικόνιση της Θεοτόκου, 212, pl. 149.


^53. A comparable example is the fresco-icon of the Virgin Pammakaristos in the church of Hagia Sophia at Ohrid. In relation to this image, KiSSAS, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century Art in Ohrid, 362, states that its iconographic type was not dependent on the Constantinopolitan prototype of the Pammakaristos.

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shrines enjoyed in Epiros\textsuperscript{54}. The presence of the appellation \textit{Hagiosoritissa} on Theodore’s coins further demonstrated and strengthened his links with Constantinople\textsuperscript{55}.

The choice of an orans figure of the Virgin on this monetary issue may also be connected with the cult of the Virgin with the epithet \textit{Acheiropoietos} in Thessalonike. Since the thirteenth century, the iconographic type showing a full-length figure of the Mother of God with her hands outstretched in prayer, accompanied by the epithet \textit{Acheiropoietos}, was particularly venerated in Thessalonike and the areas under its artistic influence\textsuperscript{56}. As we learn from several written sources, in the tenth century a miraculous icon of the Virgin \textit{Acheiropoietos} was housed in the monastery of the Abrahamites in Constantinople, a fact that has led some scholars to associate it with the shrine of the \textit{Acheiropoietos} in Thessalonike\textsuperscript{57}. The famous basilica of the \textit{Acheiropoietos} in Thessalonike was built in the second half of the fifth century, and initially it was known as the church of the Panagia Theotokos or the “Great Church” of the Theotokos\textsuperscript{58}. It is not clear when exactly the basilica changed its dedication

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{54} Kissas, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century Art in Ohrid, 363.
\item \textsuperscript{55} The epithet \textit{Hagiosoritissa} is present on coins of Manuel I Komnenos (1118-1180) (Hendy, \textit{Coinage}, 119-120, pl. 17. 7-8); Alexios III Angelos (1195-1203) (Hendy, \textit{Coinage}, 119, pl. 17.7-8); and John III Doukas Vatatzes, Emperor of Nicea (1221-1254) (Hendy, \textit{Coinage}, 245, pl. 34.8).
\item \textsuperscript{56} The standing Virgin orans with the epithet \textit{Acheiropoietos} also appears in the sanctuary apses of churches located in the wider area of Byzantine Macedonia, for instance, at Kastoria, Beroia, Prilep, and elsewhere. See A. Tsitouridou, \textit{Ο Ζωγραφικός διάκοσμος του Αγίου Νικολάου Ορθανόν στη Θεσσαλονίκη συμβολή στη μελέτη της Παλαιολόγιας Ζωγραφικής κατά τον πρώιμο 14ο αιώνα}, Thessaloniki 1986, 63–65, πίν. 1, 2; D. Koco – P. Miljković Pepek, \textit{Manastir}, Skopje 1958, 43, 50, εικ. 42; S. E. J. Gerstel, \textit{Beholding the Sacred Mysteries. Programs of the Byzantine Sanctuary}, Washington, 1999, fig 1, 31, 36; In monumental painting, coins and seals the epithet \textit{Ἀχειροποίητος} accompanies different iconographic types of the Virgin. See Miljković, Hilandarska ikona, 332, note 69, with a selection of relevant examples.
\item \textsuperscript{57} A. Xygoopoulos, Αἱ περὶ τοῦ ναοῦ τῆς Ἀχειροποιήτου Θεοσαλονίκης εἰδήσεις τοῦ Κωνσταντίνου Ἀρμενοπούλου, ἱν.: \textit{Επιστημονικὴ Επετηρίς Σχολῆς Νομικῶν καὶ Οἰκονομικῶν Ἐπιστημῶν ΑΠΘ} [tόμος Κωνσταντίνου Ἀρμενοπούλου] 6 (1952), 11.
\end{itemize}
to the *Acheiropoietos*. Xyngopoulos has suggested that the change took place after 1204, when monks from the monastery of the Abrahamites were forced to move from Constantinople to the region of Thessalonike, following the Latin conquest of the capital, and that they transferred with them the cult of the *Acheiropoietos*\(^59\). The sources, however, do not allow us to ascertain whether the change of the dedication was connected to the refugee monks\(^60\). It is equally possible that the basilica acquired a new name in the course of the thirteenth\(^61\) or early fourteenth century, again, under the influence of the Constantinopolitan cult of the *Acheiropoietos*\(^62\). Whatever the circumstances under which the basilica changed its dedication, the fact that the Virgin orans was especially popular in Thessalonike and the surrounding areas makes plausible the connection between the unusual iconography of the *Hagiosoritissa* on Theodore’s coins and the cult of the Thessalonian *Acheiropoietos*.

The idea that Theodore’s newly assumed imperial dignity was approved and sanctioned by God was expressed in different ways in his monetary issues. Theodore is portrayed with the traditional symbols of imperial power, Theodore appears with Christ or the Hand of God crowning him, or in the presence of St Demetrios on his coins\(^63\). As mentioned above, on the reverse of the issue featuring the *Hagiosoritissa*, the Epirote ruler is depicted in the company of St Demetrios, who hands him over a model of the city of Thessalonike (Fig. 3). As the patron saint of Thessalonike, St Demetrios grants him protection, welcomes him, and entrusts him with governing the city. The special relationship of this saint with Thessalonike was undoubtedly the principal reason for the inclusion of his figure on these numismatic types. Besides, one should also bear in mind that the Komnenian emperors were the first to place military saints, and St Demetrios in particular, on their seals and coins. Alexios I venerated St Demetrios as his personal protector, placing the great martyr for his

\(^{59}\) Xyngopoulos, *Αἱ περὶ τοῦ ναοῦ τῆς Ἀχειροποιήτου Θεσσαλονίκης εἰδήσεις*, 14–19.


\(^{63}\) Hendy, *Coinage*, 268–271, pl. 37/3–4, 5–6 38/3–4, 5; C. Morrison, *The Emperor, the Saint, and the City: Coinage and Money in Thessalonike from the Thirteenth to the Fifteenth Century*, DOP 57 (2003), 177, 181, ill. 8–10; V. Ivanšević, *Ostava* (as in n. 43), sl. 1.
seals. Following the demise of the Komnenian dynasty, St Demetrios had disappeared from coinage until Theodore reintroduced the saint’s image on his coins in 1224. Indeed, Theodore’s emissions are marked by a plethora of different iconographic types of St Demetrios. Theodore’s special devotion to the patron saint of Thessalonike, his new imperial capital, must be seen as an important element of his broader ideological program.

Theodore’s military successes, and especially his reconquest of Thessalonike, brought him closer to Constantinople. The desire of the Epirote elite for the liberation of the former imperial capital was expressed perhaps most eloquently by the metropolitan of Naupaktos in his letters to Theodore and his wife dating from the period before and after Theodore’s coronation. The metropolitan characteristically declares his wish to see Theodore on the imperial throne of Constantinople. In his study of the iconographic program of the dome in the church of St Demetrios Katsouris (Fig. 4), Titos Papamastorakis has demonstrated that the inscriptions on the scrolls held by the prophets constitute a potent statement articulating a vision of the recapture of Constantinople and the union of the entire οἰκουμένη under the Byzantine rule. As is well known, Byzantine literati often celebrated Constantinople as


65. Another piece of evidence indicating the importance of the cult of St Demetrios during Theodore’s rule comes from monumental painting. In the basilica of St Demetrios in Thessalonike, on the eastern side of the southeast pier of the bema, next to the early Byzantine mosaic of St Demetrios with a deacon, there is a fresco showing the standing figure of a youthful male saint in patrician garb. The fresco can be dated to the period of Theodore’s short rule over Thessalonike, since its stylistic features correspond with the broader artistic trends of the first decades of thirteenth century. On the basis of its iconography, the depicted figure can be identified with St Demetrios. See E. Tsigaridas, Τοιχογραφία του αγίου Δημητρίου στον ναό του Αγίου Δημητρίου Θεσσαλονίκης, in: Δόρων, Τιμητικός τόμος στον καθηγητή Νίκο Νικονάνο, Thessaloniki 2006, 209–212.


67. Apokaukos (Bees) no. 69, 70–72; Dzelevzic, Pisma Jovana Apokavka, 137–138.

68. T. Papamastorakis, Άγιος Δημήτριος του Κατσούρη: Το εικονογραφικό πρόγραμμα του τρούλου, in: Πρακτικά Διεθνούς Συμποσίου για το Δεσποτάτο της Ηπείρου, 436.
the New Sion and identified the subjects of the Empire with the New Israel. Authors writing after the catastrophe of 1204 drew a parallel between the exile of the Old Israel to Babylon and the exile of the New Israel to the newly established Greek states of Nicaea and Epiros. Just as the Old Israel expected a Saviour from the Davidic race, who would lead them back to Jerusalem, so did the New Israel eagerly await the time of their return to the New Sion, i.e. Constantinople, under the leadership of an Orthodox monarch. Comparisons between the Byzantine emperors and the Old Testament leaders of the Israelites are occasionally encountered in the writings of Epirote clergymen, including Apokaukos, Bardanes, and Chomatenos. Such comparisons, however, received particular elaboration in the works of Nicaean authors. Niketas Choniates in his encomiastic speeches delivered between 1206 and 1216 to the emperor Theodore Laskaris of Nicaea refers to his imperial pedigree and invites him to become a new Moses and a new Zorobabel who will lead the chosen people to Jerusalem, i.e. Constantinople, which the Babylonians, i.e. the Crusaders, have destroyed. According to Papamastorakis, the iconographic program of the dome of St Demetrios Katsouris “reflects a vision of the political and ecclesiastical authority of the Epirotes in this period”. In the zone immediately below the figure of Christ Pantokrator, seven angels are depicted in attitudes of adoration. Underneath are fourteen prophets holding inscribed scrolls, arranged in pairs. The prophets are depicted as if engaged in conversation, and the quotations written on their scrolls are carefully selected. Many of these inscriptions feature the theme of the liberation of Israel from...
captivity and their return from Babylon to Jerusalem. The scrolls held by Naum, Sophonias (Fig. 4), Joel (Fig. 4), Habbakkuk, and Abdias directly refer to the trials and tribulations of Israel’s exile and return. The main means of Israel’s salvation, according to the scrolls of Ezekiel, Zachariah, Malachias, Moses, and Jeremiah, is the word of God, that is, Orthodoxy. It is beyond doubt that there references to the history of Israel should be related to the historical circumstances following the capture of the Byzantine capital by the Latins. The creator of the iconographic program in the dome of St Demetrios Katsouris must have been a learned representative of the Epirote elite. As Papamastorakis has suggested, he is likely to be identified with John Apokaukos.

The mural paintings of the Old Metropolis of Beroia, dated by Papazotos to the second or third decade of the thirteenth century, that is, to the period when the town belong to the State of Epiros, could articulate political messages similar to those advanced in the mural decoration of St Demetrios Katsouris. In the second zone of the north wall of the nave of the Old Metropolis (fig. 5) underneath a series of scenes from the Passion cycle, there are eight prophets holding unfolded scrolls with inscriptions. Counting westwards, they include a figure most likely depicting Moses, Aaron, Isaiah, Habbakkuk, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zachariah or Sophonias. The prophets are engaged in conversation, just like those in the church of St Demetrios Katsouris. The inscriptions on their scrolls are carefully selected interrelated, formulating a unified message that, I would argue, addresses the political concerns of the time. The quotations on the scrolls have not been identified in previous scholarship. The figures carry scrolls with inscriptions taken from: Deuteronomy [28:66: ΩΨΕ /ΣΘΑΙ /ΤΗΝ ΖΩ /ΗΝ ΗΜ /ΜΟΥ /ΚΡΕΜΑ (ΜΕΝΗΝ)] (draw 1), Isaiah (52:13: ΙΔΟΥ ΣΥ/ΝΙΣΕΙ Ο /ΠΕΣ ΜΟΥ /ΚΑΙ ΥΨΩΘΗΣΕ/ΤΕ) (draw 2), Habbakkuk [3:3: Ο Θ(ΕΟ)
The inscription held by the second prophet cannot be reconstructed, but the depicted figure can be identified with the prophet Aaron. The chosen quotations foreground the theme of the liberation of Jerusalem, indirectly voicing hopes for the return of the Byzantines to their old capital—Constantinople. Such references to the Old Testament captivity of Israel would have been highly meaningful in the Epirote context. Indeed, in a letter to the Patriarch Germanos II, George Bardanes expresses his hope for the return of the chosen people, that is, the Byzantines, from Babylon to Jerusalem. It bears emphasizing in this connection that some of the inscriptions held by the prophets in the Old Metropolis are unprecedented in monumental painting (Isaias 52:13, and Daniel 3:1 or 4:4), while others are very rare (Deuteronomy 28:66, Ezekiel 37:1, and Zachariah 9:9 or Sophonias 3:14), at least judging by the preserved examples from the Middle

79. “God shall come from Thaeman, and the Holy One from Mount”.
80. “O Lord, teach me, and I shall know: then I saw their practices”.
81. “The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord”.
82. “In the eighteenth year of Nabuchodonosor”.
83. “Thus said the Lord: Rejoice, O daughter”.
85. This inscription is encountered in the Monastery of Myriokephala in Crete, in St Demetrios Katsuris, and in Omorphoklisia near Kastoria. ΠΑΠΑΜΑΣΤΟΡΑΚΗΣ, Ο Διάκοσμος του τρούλου των ναών της Παλαιολόγειας περιόδου στη Βαλκανική Χερσόνησο και την Κύπρο, Athens 2001, 185.
86. [Cf.] Panagia Krina on Chios, St Nikolas tēs Rodias near Arta, and the Peribleptos church in Ohrid. The inscription was more common during the Palaeologan period. ΠΑΠΑΜΑΣΤΟΡΑΚΗΣ, Ο Διάκοσμος του τρούλου, 212, 214.
87. The inscriptions on the scrolls held by the prophets Zachariah and Sophonias were rather rare enough before the Palaeologan period. The inscriptions on Zechariah's scroll is encountered in St Demetrios Katsuris, in Panagia Krina on Chios, and the Peribleptos church in Ohrid, while the one of the Sophonias's is preserved in St Demetrios Katsuris and the

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Byzantine period and the thirteenth century. All this demonstrates that the creator of the iconographic program at Beroia purposefully selected excerpts from the Old Testament in order to articulate a very specific message.

Among the scrolls held by the prophets, one deserves closer analysis. This is the scroll carried by Daniel, which reads: “In the eighteenth year of Nabuchodonosor” (draw 6). It bears emphasizing that this inscription is unique in Byzantine mural painting. I would argue that the reference to the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign in Judaea does not pertain exclusively to the historical events alluded to in the inscriptions displayed by the other prophets in the series. It is possible that this specific chronological reference also alludes to the eighteenth year from the capture of Constantinople by the forces of the Fourth Crusade. In other words, this may be the year in which the figures of the prophets in the Old Metropolis were actually painted. Based on a document issued by Chomatenos, previously dated to 1215/1216, Papazotos and Kravari dates the liberation of Beroia to around this time, suggesting that certain wall paintings in the Old Metropolis were executed between 1215/1216 and 1224/1225. However, as Prinzing has demonstrated, the aforementioned documents should be dated to after 1220. Prinzing, with whom the late Angeliki Laiou agrees, suggests that Beroia was liberated in 1220. After the conquest of the city, which occupied a strategically important position, Theodore’s way to the former Empire’s second city was open, and indeed, several years later he managed to capture Thessalonike. It is likely that the inscriptions held by the two westernmost prophets in the series allude to these historical events: “In the eighteenth year of Nabuchodonosor” (Daniel

88. Nebuchadnezzar (605-562) was a king of Babylon and the founder of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. He besieged Jerusalem twice, in 597 and 586 BC, when he destroyed the city and exiled to Babylonian a large portion of its population. The events of his rule are recorded in the first chapters of the Book of Daniel and Chapter 24 of the Second Book of Kings.

89. V. Kravari, Villes et villages de Macédoine occidentale, Paris 1989, 41, 64; Papazotos, Βέροια, 39, 234-244.


3:1 or 4:4), and “Thus said the Lord: Rejoice, O daughter” (Zachariah 9:9 or Sophonias 3:14). The continuation of the latter quotation from Zachariah (9:9) refers to the triumphal entrance of the King into Jerusalem: Χαίρε σφόδρα, θύγατερ Σιών, κήρυσσε, θύγατερ Ἰερουσαλήμ· ἵδοι ὁ βασιλεὺς σου ἔρχεται σοι, δίκαιος καὶ σῶζων αὐτὸς, πραυς.

While the continuation of the quotation from Sophonias (3:14-15) alludes to the ransom of Jerusalem from the hand of its enemies: Χαίρε σφόδρα, θύγατερ Σιών, κήρυσσε, θύγατερ Ἰερουσαλήμ, εὑραίων καὶ κατατέρπου ἐξ ὀλίγης τῆς καρδίας σου, θύγατερ Ἰερουσαλήμ. Περιείλεν Κύριος τὰ ἁδικήματά σου, λελύτρωταί σε ἐκ χειρὸς ἐχθρῶν σου; βασιλεὺς Ἰσραήλ Κύριος ἐν μέσῳ σου, οὐκ ὄψῃ κακὰ οὐκέτι.

The eighteenth year of the Latin occupation corresponds to 1222. Finding himself in the liberated Beroia, and simultaneously approaching Thessalonike, Theodore was on the way of fulfilling his final goal, which was the liberation of the New Sion, i.e. Constantinople.

Conceptually related to the series of prophets in the nave of the Old Metropolis is a scene showing the repentance of David before the prophet Nathan, which is depicted on a pillar below (fig. 6). This scene, too, carried ideological overtones. The comparison between Theodore and David was common in the writings of the Epirote literati. Referring to Theodore's accomplishments in the “Western parts” of the former Empire,
John Apokaukos praises him for his struggle against his enemies and likens him to David. One reason for this comparison was the fact that Theodore was fighting with limited resources, but with an unfailing will and endurance; as Chomatenos puts it, he was “naked as David.” The representation of David’s repentance before Nathan is sometimes invested with royal connotations in the art of the Byzantine world. This theme is relatively rare in monumental painting. It appears, for instance, in Studenica, Mileševa, in the prothesis of the church of the Holy Apostles at Peć, in the gallery of the church of Hagia Sophia at Ohrid. On the basis of the Serbian examples, S. Radojičić has interpreted this theme as a model for the Serbian rulers in their obedience to ecclesiastic authorities.
This understanding is also relevant in the Epirote context. The relationship between Theodore Komnenos Doukas and the highest clergy of Epiros was harmonious. Apokaukos repeatedly praises Theodore's piety and modesty, and underscores his wise obedience to religious leaders. But the image of David falling on his knees before Nathan also exemplified the virtues of humility and self-control that every ruler was expected to cultivate. As Gilbert Dagron has astutely noted, “Power was absolute, did not allow itself to be confined within legal limits and was deemed sacred; but he who exercised it, whoever he might be, was never considered wholly innocent and might at any moment be convicted of illegitimacy. The Church was there to make him kneel, to bind him and to loose him.” The representation of David's prostration before Nathan in the Old Metropolis should be understood in this context. Taken together, the date of the Beroia murals, the proximity of the penitent David to the politically charged sequence of the prophets above, as well as the relative rarity of this theme in monumental art, make its association with Theodore highly plausible.

The western side of the pillar with the scene of David’s repentance is occupied by an unusual representation, which may also be dated to the early 1220s. St Eleutherios is here shown in the company of a smaller standing layman who turns towards him in prayer. Emerging from a segment of heaven in the upper left corner, Christ is depicted blessing the saint. The mortal supplicant at the saint’s side is accompanied by an inscription which reads: ΔΕΗΣΙΣ ΤΟΥ ΔΟΥΛΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΑΜΑΡΙΑΝΟΥ (“Prayer of the servant of God John Amarianos”). This John Amarianos is unknown from other historical documents. Papazotos believes that this individual and a certain Marianos Konstantinos, mentioned in a document by Chomatenos, came from the same family. Amarianos’ exact role, if any, in the decoration of the Old Metropolis is difficult to ascertain. Equally puzzling is the choice...
of St Eleutherios as the object of Amarianos’ veneration. This holy bishop of Illyricum\textsuperscript{110} is rarely depicted in monumental painting\textsuperscript{111}. Nonetheless, his representations do appear is several major fresco ensembles\textsuperscript{112}. St Eleutherios belonged to the eschelon of saints particularly venerated by the Byzantines for their prophylactic and therapeutic powers. He was renowned as a protector of the sick as well as of sailors and pregnant women\textsuperscript{113}. If included in a fresco program, St Eleutherios is usually depicted in the sanctuary as a member of an assembly of holy bishops, whether he is shown frontally or while taking part in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. In this regard, the representation of the saint in Beroia is unique\textsuperscript{114}. It seems that the presence of the saint in the Old Metropolis should be related to the significance of his name, which derives from the adjective ἐλεύθερος, meaning “free.” The saint, in other words, may be seen as an allegory of the desired freedom from a disease or more likely an enemy, the Latins in particular, as has been suggested by Papazotos\textsuperscript{115}. Amarianos’s depiction may indicate his involvement in the fresco decoration

\textsuperscript{110} His synaxis was held on December 15 in his martyrium near the area of Xerolophos in Constantinople (Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae, cols. 307ff).

\textsuperscript{111} The island of Crete is an exception. Depictions of St Eleutherios are here encountered with greater frequency. See I. Spatharakis, Dated Byzantine Wall Paintings of Crete, Leiden 2001, passim.

\textsuperscript{112} As e.g. in a mosaic portrait in Hosios Loukas, Phokida (ΕΥ. Στικας, Το Οικοδομικόν Χρονικόν της Μονής του Όσιον Λουκά Φωκίτας, Athens 1970, πίν. 62), in the Church of St Panteleimon at Nerezi, (I. Sinkovic, The Church of St Panteleimon at Nerezi, Wiesbaden 2000, 45), in the Monastery of Archangel Michael at Thari (M. Achiamastou - Rotamianou, Στο Θάρι της Ρόδου. Ο ναός και οι τοιχογραφίες της Μονής του Ταξιάρχη Μιχαήλ, Athens 2006, 33, 37, 40-42, 44-46, πίν. 2.), in the Virgin’s church at Studenica (B. Babic, V. Korac, S. Cerkovic, Studenica, Beograd 1986, 65, 76), in the St George church at Episkope in the Mani, in the church of St Strategos at Epano Mpoularii in the same region (N. Drandakis, Βυζαντινές τοιχογραφίες της Μέσα Μάνης, 1995, 178-179, σχεδ. 29, 180. 396, 430, πίν. 101), etc.

\textsuperscript{113} See the Menaion for December 15: Τῶν ἐπιτόκων γυναίων Πάτερ κηδόμενος, ἐλευθερίαν δίδως, τῷ Ναῷ σου φοιτώσας, εὐπλοίαν δὲ πάλιν ἄλλοις θερμός, ἐξαιτοῦσιν ἐπέδωκας, καὶ τοῖς νοσοῦσιν ὑγείαν ὑμῖν χορηγείς, διαλάμπων ἐν τοῖς θαύμασιν. Undoubtedly this is the reason why St Eleutherios is depicted together with the holy physicians Panteleimon, Kosmas and Damian in the church of St Basil of the Bridge in Arta. See D. Giannoulis, Οι τοιχογραφίες των Βυζαντινών μνημείων της Αρτας κατά την περίοδο του Δεσποτάτου της Ιππείρου, Ioannina 2010 194, fig. 36.

\textsuperscript{114} Gerstel, Beholding the sacred mysteries, 95.

\textsuperscript{115} Papazotos, Βέροια, 243-244.
of the Old Metropolis. On the other hand, one should not exclude the possibility that Amarianos was a military commander who commissioned his portrait after a successful campaign. The presence of a military saint on horseback on the south face of the pillar could point to a military context.

The stylistic features of the frescoes in the Old Metropolis, as well as the historical context, point to the years around 1220/1222 as the date of their execution. At this time, Theodore was already in Beroia, preparing for the liberation of Thessalonike. Theodore’s ambition, however, eloquently voiced in the writing of the ecclesiastical luminaries of his time, was the liberation of the New Sion, i.e. Constantinople. The same ambition is also reflected in the Beroia murals. While there is no evidence that Theodore was personally involved in the decoration of the Old Metropolis, these murals subtly, yet unmistakably, promote Theodore’s political and ideological program.

I wish to conclude this brief survey of the intersection between art and politics in the State of Epiros under Theodore’s rule by turning to the fragmentary fresco decoration in the basilica of the Theotokos Achæropoietos in Thessalonike. The decoration, preserved on the north wall of the south aisle, above the arcade, consists of a series of figures of the Forty Martyrs of Sebastea, depicted alternately as standing or en buste, in medallions (Fig. 7). Of these figures, eighteen remain. Scholars typically date the frescoes in the Achæropoietos to the period of Theodore’s short rule over Thessalonike. Yet there is no direct evidence, neither historical, nor stylistic, to support this chronology. In my opinion, it is possible that the basilica was decorated with the frescoes of the Forty Martyrs after 1230, that is, after the battle of Klokotnitsa, in memory of the soldiers who had died in this battle. One should recall in this regard that the catastrophe at Klokotnitsa took place on 9 March, which is, significantly, the feast day of the Forty Martyrs. Flanking the solemn file of the Sebastean saints in the south aisle of the Achæropoietos—all depicted as martyrs, with crosses in their hands—are

two large candlesticks, each with a lit candle (Fig. 8). In Byzantine art, this iconographic motif usually appears in funerary contexts, as, for instance, in the northwest chapel of Hosios Loukas, where two candlesticks are part of a decidedly funerary program\textsuperscript{118}. Here, it may allude to the tragic death that the Epirote army met at Klokotnitsa. If my interpretation is accepted, the frescoes in the \textit{Acheropoietos} were executed during the reign of Manuel Angelos, despot and emperor of Thessalonike (r. 1230-1237), who succeeded his brother Theodore on the throne of Thessalonike after the latter’s defeat and captivity in the hands of the Bulgars.

After the disaster at Klokotnica in 1230, the territory of the State of Epiros was drastically reduced. The principality continued to weaken, and it never reached the level of power and influence it had had during Theodore’s rule. Nevertheless, even after the recovery of Constantinople and the restoration of the Byzantine Empire under Michael VIII Palaiologos in 1261, the Epirote rulers continued not only to maintain and defend the independence of their state, but also to vigorously promote their ideological claims to the heritage of Constantinople. In this process, Epirote art continued to serve as a potent political instrument.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{118} T. Chatzidakis - Bacharas, \textit{Les Peintures Murales de Hosios Loukas: les chapelles occidentales}, Athens 1982, 111, ill. 36.
\end{flushright}
Draw 1: Deuteronomy (28:66)

Draw 2: Isaiah (52:13)

Draw 3: Habbakkuk (3:3)

Draw 4: Jeremiah (11:18)
Draw 5: Ezekiel (37:1)

Draw 6: Daniel (3:1 or 4:4)

Draw 7: Zachariah (9:9) or Sophonias (3:14)
Fig. 1: Episkope Mastrou, Bema, apse. (photo: Leonela Fundić).
Fig. 2: Blacherna monastery near Arta, a view from the southwest (photo: Leonela Fundić).

Fig. 3: Electrum trachy of Theodore Komnenos Doukas from National Museum in Belgrade (photo: Vujadin Ivanišević).
Fig. 4: St Demetrios Katsouris, near Arta. Dome, prophets Sophonias and Joel (photo: Historic and Photographic archive of Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens)
Fig. 5: Beroia, Old Metropolis, the second zone of the north wall of the nave (photo: Georgios Fousteris).
Fig. 6: Beroia, Old Metropolis, The repentance of David (photo Thanasis Papazotos).
Fig. 7: Thessalonike, Theotokos Acheiropoietos, north wall of the south aisle, figures of the Forty Martyrs of Sebasteia, detail (photo: Georgios Fousteris).
Fig. 8: Thessalonike, Theotokos Acheiropoietos, north wall of the south aisle, detail – candlestick with a lit candle (photo Georgios Fousteris).
SUMMARY

The paper sets out to reconstruct the political context of art-making in the State of Epiros under its second ruler Theodore Komnenos Doukas (r. 1215-1230), paying particular attention to two aspects: first, the ways in which art reflected and articulated political ideology; and second, the role played by works of art in the formation of a Byzantine imperial identity in exile.