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Εγγραφα σε επιγραφές ναών χρυσόβουλλα - εκκλησιαστικές πράξεις - βρέβια - δωρεές - διαθήκες

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Church Inscriptions as Documents. Chrysobulls - Ecclesiastical Acts - Inventories - Donations - Wills

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The practice of recording official documents on the walls of a church seems to go back to middle Byzantine imperial donations and acts. An interesting piece of information is given by Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, the Spanish high official who joined an embassy to the court of Timur in Samarkand (1403-1406) and visited Constantinople during his journey, in 1403. Clavijo recounts that at the entrance of the monastery church of Panagia Peribleptos, thirty castles and towns which were granted to the monastery by its founder Romans III Argyros (1028-1034) were depicted under the figure of the Virgin; near by hung those documents, sealed with wax and lead, by which the privileges over these castles and towns were bestowed on the monastery.

Of special interest are the still extant marble slabs with an inscription reproducing the edict of Manuel I Komnenos (1143-1180) which embodied the acts of the Council of 1166. The council, which was presided over by the emperor himself, discussed a subject concerning the nature of Christ, namely the passage in John, 14:28 "καὶ ο Παύλος ὁ ἴδιον οὗτος ἢ τοὺς ἄνθρωπους ἢ τοὺς χήρους ἔγραψεν". The slabs were reused in the mausoleum (türbe) of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent at Istanbul from 1567; according to the sources, the edict was carved in stone and placed on the left-hand side as one entered St Sophia. The inscription is, moreover, mentioned in an epigram by Theodore Balsamon who praised Isaakios Angelos for having opposed the heretics and for having set up on both sides of the slabs the images of the two "pillars" of the Christian dogma: the saints Peter and Paul. Interestingly a manuscript survives (cod. Vat. gr. 1176) which contains the five acts of the Synod of 1166. The codex is considered to be the original one as it includes the signatures of the Patriarch Loukas Chrysoberges and of thirty clerical participants as well as the imperial portraits of Manuel I and his second wife Maria of Antioch. This is a rare case, among the examples 

* This paper was presented at the XXe CIEB, Pré-actes, III. Communications libres, Paris 2001, p. 324. I am indebted to Professors Spyros Troadon and Heleni Saradi for their expert and ready response to many of my questions. My thanks are due to Aimilia Bakourou, director of the 5th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities, for kind permission to use the English text.


pieces to be discussed in this article, where both the original document and the relevant inscription on stone have come down to us. It should also be noted that, as has been recently argued, the mosaics in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which represent the seven ecumenical and six provincial church councils and record the texts of their main acts, go back to the time of the reign of Manuel I Komnenos.

Monumental evidence of imperial documents reproduced on the walls of a church increases in the Palaiologan period. On the west façade of the monastery church of the Theotokos in Apollonia a chrysobull is written next to portraits including those of the emperors Michael VIII, Andronikos II and Michael IX. The chrysobull was initially issued in favor of the monastery in Apollonia by Manuel I Komnenos and confirmed by Michael VIII Palaiologus after the defeat of the Franks in the battle of Berat in 1281/82.

Furthermore, traces of a twenty-line long inscription on the southern façade of the church of St Nicholas in Mantas have been interpreted as reproducing the text of a chrysobull issued by Andronikos II, prior to 1300.

The most impressive example from the Palaiologan period occurs in the very well known southwestern chapel of the Hodegetria monastery church (Aphentiko) in Mistras (Fig. 1). The texts of four chrysobulls—and a fragment of a fifth—are painted on the walls of the chapel. Three of them were issued by Andronikos II in the years 1314/15, 1320 and 1322, and one by Michael IX, in the year 1319. The chrysobulls record the landed property of the monastery: estates, fields, vineyards, trees, mills, dependencies (metochia) etc.

Another example is the five episcopal acts whose texts are inscribed on the columns of the Metropolis of Mistras (Fig. 2). They include acts by the metropolitans Nicephorus (1312), Loucas (1330 and 1341) and Neilos (May 1339 and December 1339).

Both cases—Aphentiko and Metropolis—reveal the special interest of the abbots and/or metropolitans in assuring the privileges and the landed property of their monasteries. In their effort to secure the conceded properties for the future in perpetuity, the authors of the documents as well as the recipients of the grants do not merely appeal to the curses of the 318 fathers against anyone not complying with the terms of the chrysobulls but also record the text of the documents on long lasting materials, such as stone, marble or the walls of the church.

The particular interest of the emperors and of the high ecclesiastical authorities in securing the property of the last two monuments is reflected in their excellent quality. Especially in the case of Aphentiko, its relationship with the capital is well attested as regards the architectural form and painted decoration.

A further example occurs in the metropolitan church of the Dormition of the Virgin in Stagoi (today Kalamakpa) in Thessaly. Imperial and patriarchal acts reconfirming the bishopric’s property, namely a chrysobull issued by Andronikos III Palaiologus in the year 1336 and a sigillion of Constantineople Antonios IV (1389-90 and 1391-97) of the year 1393, are inscribed next to each other on the north wall of the inner narthex.

This Byzantine practice of recording imperial and ecclesiastical concessions to a church or monastery on the walls of a religious building was copied by the Nemanid rulers of Ser-

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Fig. I Mistras. Hodegetria monastery, SW chapel. Chrysobullof Andronikos II Palaiologos. 1314/15.

Bia, as V. Djuric has shown in a study on the Esphigmenou monastery of Mt Athos13. According to the vita of St Symeon Nemanja, which prefaces the typikon of the monastery of Studenica (1208/09), the villages, icons, books, holy vessels and vestments that were granted to the monastery by Nemanja, were also recorded on the walls of the church14. Still preserved on the walls of the belfry at Žiča (ca. 1310)15 is the text of documents recording grants that were made by Stephan the First Crowned and by King Milutin. Furthermore, on the western wall of the diakonikon in the church of Gračanica the text of a document registers the concessions of King Milutin to the monastery (1321/22)16. In Serbia the practice of recording official acts on the walls of royal foundations is followed in later examples not only by

members of the ruling family but also by people ranking lower in the social hierarchy. The foundation inscription on the west wall of the naos of St Andreas at Treska, built shortly after 1374/75 and decorated with frescoes in 1388/89\textsuperscript{17}, lists, among other items, villages endowed to the church. Two inscriptions that run along the outer and inner walls of the building reproduce documents of grants to the monastery issued by its founder Kraljevic Andreas, son of king Vukasin. Moreover, in the monastery church of Lipovac the (re)foundation inscription of the monk Germanos (1398/99) is followed by an excerpt from a document issued by knez Stefan, the future despot Stefan Lazarević (1402-1427), and his brother Vuk, who endowed estates and vineyards to the monastery\textsuperscript{18}.

A further example occurs in the church of Sveti Konstantin i Jelena at Ochrid, dated to approximately 1380-90\textsuperscript{19} (Fig. 3). The donor, a priest-monk named Parthenios, recorded on the south wall of the church in the Greek language, in the form of a triptych, not only all landed property (vineyards, fields, vegetable plots) but also the holy vessels and books belonging to the church. The whole text seems to reproduce the brebion of a monastic typikon, i.e. the inventory of monastic property both movable and immovable\textsuperscript{20}. A parallel register of the movable property of a church occurs on the gold-plated silver revetment of an icon of the Virgin from Mesembria, now in the National Museum of Sofia. The first two inscriptions on the revetment, written in Greek, mention that the uncle of the great emperor Ivan Alexander renovated the church of the Theotokos Eleousa in 1341/42 and dedicated the golden and silver adornment (i.e. revetment) of the icon; the third inscription, in smaller Greek characters, enumerates other donations to the church, such as sacerdotal vestments, holy vessels in gold and silver, books etc\textsuperscript{21}.

Lastly, an inscription on the western wall of the church of

\textsuperscript{17} J. Prolovic, \textit{Die Kirche des Heiligen Andreas an der Treska}, Vienna 1997, p. 29-37.
\textsuperscript{18} Br. Ovečković, Manastir Lipovac. Prilog proučavanja, Leskovčki Zbornik 39 (1999), p. 87-95, figs 9-11. I wish to thank the author for kindly drawing my attention to this monument.
\textsuperscript{19} G. Subotic, \textit{Sveti Konstantin i Jelena u Ohridu}, Belgrade 1971, p. 4-28, 107-108, 113-115. For a gospelbook donated to a church of the Theotokos which was founded by the abbot of Saint Clemens of Ochrid before 1368 see F. Evangelatou-Notara, \textit{Χορηγοί-Κτήτορες-Δωρητές σε σημειώματα κωδίκων. Παλαιολόγειοι χρόνοι}, Athens 2000, p. 57-58, 245 (no. 279); for another gospelbook offered to the church of the Protomartyr Stephanos at Konče by its founder, a high-ranking official at the court of the Serbian emperors, c. 1366, see S. Gabelić, \textit{The frescoes of Konče}, XXe CIEB, Pré-actes, III. Communications libres, Paris 2001, p. 348. Inscriptions comprising inventories that register the movable property of temples were known since Antiquity, M. Guarducci, \textit{L’epigraphia greca dalle origini al tardo impero}, Rome 1987, p. 187-191.
\textsuperscript{21} A. Grabar, \textit{Les revêtements en or et en argent des icônes byzantines du moyen âge}, Venice 1975, p. 26-28, no. 6, fig. 9.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Fig. 2. Mistras, Metropolis, third column of south colonnade. Episcopal act of Neilos. December 1339.}
\caption{Fig. 2. Mistras, Metropolis, third column of south colonnade. Episcopal act of Neilos. December 1339.}
\end{figure}
the Dormition of the Virgin in Velestovo, in the region of Ochrid, records the property that was collectively donated to the church by a priest and members of the village (1444 and 1450/51)22.

The practice of recording official documents – mostly notarial acts – on the walls of provincial and usually humble churches was widespread in the Late Byzantine period in provinces either belonging to Byzantium or under Latin or Turkish rule.

The Byzantine province of Laconia in Southern Peloponnese is rich in relevant examples. A long inscription painted on the northern wall of the church of Archangel Michael at Polemitas in Mesa Mani (1278) lists the donations of over thirty villagers consisting in fields of very limited dimensions, olive trees and vegetable plots23. A second, very damaged inscription on the southern wall of the same church24 seems to have a similar content. In addition, fields donated by villagers are recorded in an inscription painted in the

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narthex of the church of Αi-Strategos at Boularioi of Mesa Mani25(13th-14th a.). A mutilated inscription of the first half of the fourteenth century engraved on a marble colonnette, now in the Museum of Sparta26, refers to vineyards and fields offered to a church or monastery in order that the holy liturgy will be held three times a week “in the church or on the tomb of a saint”27. Another dedicatory inscription (1367/68), painted over the iconostasis door, records the offerings in land and trees of a monk and two laymen to the church of St John the Forerunner at Chrysapha in Laconia26( Fig. 4). Further, if less well attested, examples are known from the Greek mainland. It seems that on the columns of the catholikon of the monastery of Barnakova in Actolia there were inscriptions which included information about the metochia and the landed possessions of the monastery25, among other matters. Although the original columns do not exist, the text has been preserved in a Greek manuscript (ms. I) in the archives of the monastery of Barnakova and in an Italian version in a manuscript of the General State Archives (Γενικά Αρχεία του Κράτους). Both manuscripts date from the beginning of the nineteenth century but are considered to go back to older sources. The title of the Greek text, “Μετάγραψις εύβγαλμένη ἀπὸ ταῖς κολώναις τῆς ἐκκλη-
σίας τῆς Ἐπισκοπῆς Θεοτόκου τῆς ἐπονομαζομένης Βαρ-
νάκοβας, πληρόν τῆς πόλεως Ναυπάκτου”, indicates that the text of the manuscript must be a “copy reproduced from (inscriptions on) the columns of the church of the very holy Virgin so-called Barnakova, close to the town of Naupaktos”28. Furthermore, the Chronicle of Galaxeidi, written in 1703 by the monk Euthymios Pentagiotis, which was based on older documents, mentions that the name of Michael II, sovereign of Epiros who founded the monastery of the Transfiguration of the Saviour near Galaxeidi about the middle of the thirteenth century, was written on a marble column in the narthex29. May we assume that on the same column were inscribed, in addition, Michael’s II offerings to the monastery – bronze candelabra, silver and golden lamps etc – recorded in the Chronicle?30

Further examples of a donation documented on the walls of a church may be mentioned from Seljuk occupied Cappadocia. Thamar (ή κυρά Θαμαρή), the wife of the άμηράτζη Χωρίτος Βουλίτου (regent), a Christian high military official (amir arži) in the Seljuk court, donated a vineyard, according to an inscription, to the church she founded to honour Saint George at Belisirama (Kirk Dam Alti Klisie) between 1283 and 129531. It is interesting to note that Belisirama is a typical example of hybrid culture in Turkish-occupied Cappadocia

27. Ibid., p. 324. Furthermore, a donation of a vineyard and fruit-bearing trees by an individual to an unknown monastery is mentioned in a marble inscription in Mistras dated to 1300/01. The vineyard had initially been bought by the same individual from the monastery for 40 hyperpyra. The original setting of the inscription (built in the walls of a church or in the precinct of the cemetery mentioned in the inscription?) is unknown. A. Boeckh and J. Franz, IG, IV, Berlin 1877, p. 350, no. 8763.
29. Philippidis-Braat, Inscriptions du Péloponèse, op.cit., p. 337-338, no. 76, pl. XXVI, 1. For a mutilated inscription from the Péloponèse which could be of interest for our context ibid., p. 344-345, no. 82 (first half of the 15th c.?).
31. Sathas, op.cit., p. 200. On the monument see recently P.L. Vokotopoulous, Παρατηρήσεις στον ναό τού Κυρίου Δωρίδος στη Βοιωτία, ΔΧΑΕ 13 (1993-1994), p. 199-210. The power of the tradition of recording the property of a church on its walls, in order to secure it, is demonstrated by the following case. In the monastery of Sagmata in Boeotia, in the niche above the western entrance of theLite, there is a copy of a chrysobull, said to have been issued by Alexis I Komnenos in 1106; it has been proved however that this document is a forgery probably of the nineteenth century, MM, 5, p. 253, no. II. Α. V. Lamprou, Στιγμιακά, ΝΕ 13 (1916), p. 365. A.K. Orlandos, Η Βυζαντινή Νόμος Τζαμικών, ARME Ζ (1951), p. 107. S. Vassilades, Παρατηρήσεις στην οικοδομική ιστορία τού μονής Σαγματά στη Βοιωτία, ΔΧΑΕ ΙII (1995), p. 66-67. I wish to thank Dr. Stauron Mamatoukou for his interest in this study and for kindly drawing my attention to the examples of Barnakova, Galaxeidi and Sagmata.
of the thirteenth century and that the dedicatory inscription mentions both the Seljuk sultan Masud II (1283-1305) and the Byzantine emperor Andronikos II (1282-1328). Another type of donation, also reflecting a notarial act, is recorded in an inscription in the narthex of Hagios Nikolaos tes Steges in Kakopetria in Cyprus (14th c.). The supplicant couple offered to the church a shop or workshop (χα
νούτι) 34(Fig. 5).

Recording wills on the walls of a church also seems a common practice in the late Medieval period. For example, a priest-monk wrote his will in the year 1286/87 on the omophorion of St Gregory of Nyssa, who is depicted in the conch of the diakonikon in the church of St Nicholas at Klenia/Korinthia 35. He bequeathed to the church his cell, a vineyard and a field.

In Cappadocia, three inscriptions of the year 1293 in the Triconch of Ortaköy (St George) refer to deceased people who made grants to the holy monastery: the first an unknown number of hyperpyra, the second, who was a monk, 49 hyperpyra, and the third a field of one modios as well as a walnut tree 36.

A final example comes from Venetian occupied Crete. Manuel Eremoiannes gives notice in an inscription of the year 1470, written in the church of the Holy Fathers (Αγιοι Πατέρες) at Pano Phloria Selinou, that he leaves to the church twenty goats, ten bee-hives, the enclosure of the monastery with the houses, the trees, the vineyard, as well as one more vineyard 37. All these holdings had been initially granted to the church by the Venetian nobleman Aligizos Kokkos (Cocco) 38. The aforementioned inscriptions include both donations by donors granting property while still alive or wills 39 written by individuals who leave property to a church or monastery af-

34. A. and J. Stylianou, Ό ναός τοϋ 'Αγίου Νικολάου της Στέγης παρά την Κακοπετριάν, Διπτυχα 10 (1946), p. 132-136, fig. 9.
36. The inscriptions are written in the apse of the southern side-chapel.
38. According to the census records of Trivan the Cocco family belonged to a Venetian noble family of Cana (Nobili Veneti), M.I. Manousakas, ‘Η παρά Trivan απογραφή τής Κρήτης (1644) και ο δήθεν κατάλογος των κρητικών οικών Κερκύρας, Κρητικά 3 (1949), p. 45.

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After death. They are found in humble buildings and represent collective (Polemitas, Boularoi) or individual (Klenia, Belisrama, Pano Phloria) donations by villagers (Polemitas, Boularoi), local archontes (Belisrama), priests or monks (Ortaköy, Pano Phloria). The mural paintings of these churches reflect a simplified version of monumental art as developed in the large artistic centres of Byzantium and are provincial in quality.

Recording the content of official documents on the walls of churches or monasteries testifies to the need for protecting the granted property from falsification and for securing their possessions from sale, appropriation or usurpation, by notifying them to a wider audience. Moreover, a document on parchment or paper may easily become lost or destroyed whereas a register on stone or on the walls of a church or monastery is more permanent. The authors of monastic typika are well known to have taken care to secure their documents by writing exact copies (ίσότυπα) for use whenever needed and by keeping the original copy in the skevophylaxion of the same monastery or of another monastic foundation which was thought to be more secure.

Donations and wills of individuals in the Late Byzantine provinces were as a rule written by ecclesiastical notaries, the so-called nomikoi, in the presence of a small number of witnesses. The existence of nomikoi in remote villages, like those in the Mani, is documented by a collective dedicatory inscription in the church of Saints Anargyroi at Kipoula (1267) where the donor who offered the greatest sum of money was an anagnostes and nomikos.

In the case of documents reproduced on the walls of a church, the inscription of the deed may indicate the date of donation (e.g. 1157). Sometimes the deed is also written in the church (e.g. Notre Dame de l'Assomption, Kerkyra, consecrated 1723).


42. Kalopissi-Verti, Dedicatory Inscriptions (n. 23), p. 67-69, no. 19. 43. F.I. Uspenskij - V.V. Benešević, Vivelonske akty. Materiały dla istoty krestjanskogo zemledeljenja v Vizantii XIII-XV vekov, Leningrad 1927, no. 27 (ca. 1260) four ψώμιαρια, no. 31 (ca. 1301) five ψώμιαρια, no. 111 (1254) two χοίνικες, no. 111 (1254) two χοίνικες, no. 55 (ca. 1250-60) four χοίνικες, no. 46 (1264) two fields of one μόδιος each, no. 110 (2nd half of the 13th c.) a field of one μόδιος, no. 14 (ca. 1262) and no. 16 (ca. 1245) fields of two μόδιος. For the surface measures ψώμιαριον (1/6 μόδιος) and χοίνικες (1/4 μόδιος) see E. Schilbach, Byzantinische Metrologie, Munich 1970, p. 283 and passim.
church, no notary and no witnesses were needed since the ecclesiastical community as a whole served as a witness of the recorded agreements. It seems reasonable to assume that there also existed notarial acts written on parchment or paper recording the same donations, as in the case of chrysobulls or ecclesiastical acts which were also inscribed on the walls of a church.

The poverty of the members of Late Byzantine rural society, often attested in the church inscriptions mentioned above, is also testified in notarial documents of rural communities. For example, the acts of the monastery of Vazelon or Zaboulon in Pontos include donations to the monastery of St John the Baptist, dating from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, in the form of small landed property. This property was offered for the salvation of the donor, his parents or other relatives and included land varying in size from four or five ψυμίσβισσαι – or from two or four χόινικες – to one or two μύδια. Donations of single trees (walnut and apple trees) are also attested in the same documents.

Donations registered in church inscriptions did not take the form of a notarial act, i.e. neither names of witnesses nor the name of the notary were included. Nevertheless, they shared some common features with notarial acts, such as the cross at the beginning and at the end of the text as a holy sign invoking God as a witness. Another common feature shared by notarial acts and certain of the aforementioned documents related either to donations or to wills were curse clauses. They were written at the end of the text and served both to protect the beneficiary (i.e. the church or monastery) and to warrant the will of the donor or testator.

44. Uspenskij - Benešević, op.cit., no. 114 (end 13th c.) a walnut and an apple tree, no. 175 (1449) a walnut tree. In document no. 10 (ca. 1435) a woman with her sons leaves her share of a walnut tree and another woman offers half a walnut tree.

45. Saradi, Notai e documenti (n. 41), p. 110-111.

46. See episcopal acts in the Metropolitan of Mistra, inscriptions in the church of Sts Constantine and Helen at Orchid and St Nicholas at Klenia.


50. A. Steinwenter, Byzantinische Mönchstestamente, Ägyptus 12 (1932), p. 55-64.

51. The acts of the monastery of Vazelon include several wills of monks (Uspenskij - Benešević, Vazelonskie akty (n. 43), no. 34, ca. 1264; no. 107, 2nd half of the 13th c.) and hieromonks (ibid., no. 12, 1435; no. 18, ca. 1260-70; no. 183, 2nd half of the 15th c.) as well as the will of a nun (ibid., no. 100, 1344). Wills of a nun and of monks are also included in the acts of the monastery of Panagia Lembiotissa near Smyrna, dated from the thirteenth century, MM, IV, no. 51, 1281, will of a monk leaving to the monastery of Lembiotissa a field and trees; no. 69, 1285, will of a monk leaving to the same monastery 46 olive trees with the land; no. 22, 1255, will of a monk leaving part of his property to the monastery, part to his family; no. 58 (s.a.), will of a monk leaving a field and a vineyard to the monastery of Lembiotissa, where he was to become a monk, and part of his property to his wife and children. Cf. the will of a nun (s.a.) leaving her property to members of her family, F. Trincherà, Syllabus Graecarum membranarum, Naples 1865, 551, p. 551.
though in principle prohibited, was allowed under certain circumstances, especially for monks and nuns coming from wealthy families\(^52\). In most cases the property of a monk was left to the monastery where he belonged, reflecting the prevailing practice in everyday life. This practice is also testified in wills recorded in the Late Byzantine churches, e.g. in Kle- nia and in Pano Phloria.

Of special interest is the διαθηκών γράμμα of a monk of the year 1192 which seems to bear close similarities to the inscription of Pano Phloria Selinou in Crete. According to this document, included in the Acts of the monastery of Panagia Lembiotissa near Smyrna, the monk Gerontios left to the monastery of Hagia Marina των Μήλων, which he himself had erected from its foundations by his own labour and expense, everything to be found in the monastery, i.e. animals, land, implements, ecclesiastical books, food supplies. All this property was left to the monastery and to his son, also a monk\(^53\).

In conclusion: The literary and, in particular, the archaeological evidence of official documents painted on the walls or engraved on stone or on the columns of churches includes foundation charters comprising initial endowments to a church or monastery, later endowments or renewals, inventories of landed property and, in a few cases, lists of icons, holy vessels and liturgical books as recorded in monastic typika (brebia), as well as testaments of individuals.

It seems that the Middle Byzantine practice of registering imperial grants or acts on the walls of a church became widely disseminated in Byzantium in the Palaiologan period. The practice was followed by the Serbian rulers, and was also reflected in the donations of common people in the Late Medieval period in provinces either still belonging to Byzantium or under foreign rule.