
Image, meta-text and text in Byzantium

Leslie BRUBAKER

University of Birmingham

This paper concerns the dialogue between image and text in the medieval East Roman Empire, which we normally now call Byzantium. In the Byzantine world, images provide some of our best examples of meta-texts, especially—but not only—images in manuscripts (miniatures), where the picture is presented alongside the text, and acts as a visual commentary on it. Byzantine Greeks talked about relationship between words and images, and understood perfectly well that this dialogue took a number of forms, from the basic (fusion) to the complex (intertextual and intervisual commentary). The more complex the relationship, however, the fewer discussions of the association are provided by Byzantine authors; so I will start with the most basic linkage of word and image, where we have abundant documentation of Byzantine awareness of the process, before I move into more speculative arenas. This most basic linkage is fusion—the idea that word and image could have identical roles in furthering the narrative—and one of the most eloquent voices to explain to us how this worked belongs to St Basil of Caesarea.

For example, in the middle of the fourth century, St Basil wrote a number of sermons honouring martyrs, including the martyr Gordios (homily 18) and the forty martyrs of Sebasteia (homily 19). In the latter, Basil provided a grisly description of freezing to death in the course of which he equated writing and painting, concluding that ‘what the spoken narrative presents through hearing, this silent painting shows through imitation’.¹ In other words, Basil equated the narrative potential of word and image.

Basil went on: ‘Both painters of words and painters of pictures illustrate valour in battle, the former by the art of rhetoric, the latter by clever use of the brush, and both encourage everyone to be brave. A spoken account edifies the ear, while a silent picture induces imitation’.² For Basil, then, the narrative provided by words and images was particularly important as a didactic tool: writers and painters provide models for imitation. Finally, Basil linked both of these ideas to memory: ‘When we expound [the] memory [of the forty martyrs] in the midst of all, we make them helpful for the living, showing the holiness of these men for an example to all, as in a picture’.³ He addressed many of these same issues in his earlier homily on the martyr Gordios, and here he concluded that ‘when we see the sun, we are always filled with wonder. So also when we have his [Gordios’s] memory

1 PG 31: 508C–509A; discussion and trans. in H. Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium* (Princeton, 1981), 9.

2 PG 31: 508D–509A.

3 PG 31: 508C–D.

before our eyes [as an image], it will always remain fresh'.⁴ Basil proceeded logically: he equated words and images; indicated the value of both as didactic tools; and, especially, valued narrative—and particularly visual narrative—as a way to keep memory 'fresh'.

Basil's understanding of the relationship between words, images and memory was not forgotten by later Greek authors. Most specifically, all of the passages quoted above were enshrined in writings of the eighth and ninth centuries and continued to be remembered during the middle and late Byzantine periods, when Basil's sermon on the forty martyrs inspired homiletic and artisanal representations of them that have been preserved from the tenth century onwards.⁵

The idea of images as memory also runs through many Byzantine texts, and here the relationship between word and image develops slightly differently: the significance of the textual record is superseded by the role of images. Four hundred years after Basil, in the mid-eighth century, John of Damascus wrote: 'Things which have already taken place are remembered by means of images'.⁶ Greek authors continued to articulate the same concept until the end of the empire. Four hundred years after John, in the twelfth century, for example, Eustathios of Thessalonike noted with satisfaction that Stephen Nemanja looked closely at images representing the feats of Manuel I Komnenos, which had been 'cunningly wrought for the sake of remembrance'⁷; and toward the end of the thirteenth century George Pachymeres tells us that Michael VIII had scenes painted in the palace because he wished 'these deeds to be immortalized'.⁸

All the men I have just quoted—Basil of Caesarea, John of Damascus, Eustathios of Thessalonike, and George Pachymeres—were erudite literati who read widely and wrote extensively. All were very familiar with, or themselves wrote, history. Yet all four of them claim that the past was articulated (remembered) as well, or better, through images as through texts. These four men are representative of a larger picture: across the Byzantine era, images were celebrated consistently as historical memory. While to modern minds texts are the prime reporters of history, Byzantine authors made many more references to images as records of the past than to texts in that same role.

These references go beyond the simple fusion of words and images: images are not equated to texts, but instead provide an alternative mode of communication. Images can be used this way because our sources are historians and theologians, and to Basil of Caesarea, John of Damascus, Eustathios of Thessalonike and George Pachymeres texts are a given; precisely because pictures were not 'their media', our historians felt free to use them metaphorically.⁹ The tension between the word-men and the images that they write about is almost palpable at times, and it was obviously useful to the writers, who were able to exploit words about images to talk about all sorts of issues. Basil, for example, used artisanal copying of saintly portraits as a model for Christian behaviour: good Christians should study and imitate saintly acts in the same way a painter studied and imitated saintly imagery.¹⁰ He actually wrote 'As the painters when they paint icons from [other] icons, looking closely at the model, are eager to transfer the character of the icon to their own masterpiece, so must he who strives to perfect himself in all branches of virtue look at the lives of the saints as if

4 PG 31: 508A.

5 Discussion in Maguire, *Art and Eloquence*, 43–42; for iconophile references, see e.g. John of Damascus, *Against Those Who Attack Images* I, 40–46; ed. B. Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos III, Contra imaginum Calumniatores Orationes tres* (Berlin, 1975), 150–51; English trans. D. Anderson, *St John of Damascus, On the Divine Images, Three Apologies Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images* (Crestwood NY, 1980), 38–39.

6 John of Damascus, *Against Those Who Attack Images* I, 13; ed. Kotter, 86; trans. Anderson, 21.

7 Mango, *Art*, 225.

8 *Ibid.*, 246.

9 This is not because the Byzantines unquestioningly accepted the truth-value of texts; in fact, textual forgery was rampant, and recognized, throughout much of the Byzantine period, while forged pictures were almost unknown: Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning*, 49–51.

10 PG 32: 229A.

to living and moving images and make their virtue his own by imitation'.¹¹ This was such a popular trope that it surfaced in numerous later sources, including the ninth-century *Sacra Parallela*, where it was duly illustrated with an image of a painter copying an icon (fig. 1)—but Basil's theme was Christian behaviour, not the practice of painting.¹² Here, words about images are not really 'about' images at all, they are what one might call a metaphor, a meta-image. Images are, in this case, good to think with, to use as a pivot around which to spin other ideas.

Sometimes, however, texts and images were explicitly compared, and—perhaps because images were far more ubiquitous in Byzantium than texts were—writers often promoted the value of pictures above the value of words. At the seventh ecumenical council, held in Nicaea in 787, Epiphanius the Deacon quoted the passages from St Basil with which we began, and then told his audience that when we hear or read words about saints 'we are reminded of their zeal' but that in 'looking at their sufferings, we come to remember their bravery and their life inspired by God'.¹³ A century later (*ca* 870), Photios wrote: 'Martyrs have suffered ... and their memory is contained in books. These deeds they are also seen performing in pictures, and painting presents the martyrdom of those blessed men more vividly to our knowledge.... These things are conveyed both by stories and by pictures, but it is the spectators rather than the hearers who are drawn to emulation ... the comprehension that comes about through sight is shown to be far superior'.¹⁴ In a passage that has been quoted often, he continued: 'indeed much greater is the power of sight ... it sends the essence of the thing seen on to the mind, letting it be conveyed from there to the memory for the concentration of unfailing knowledge. Has the mind seen? Has it grasped? Has it visualized? Then it has effortlessly transmitted the forms to the memory'.¹⁵ It would be hard to express a more comprehensive promotion of the power of images over texts as aids to memory.

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So far, we have looked at the fusion of image and text (when words and images are claimed to communicate the same thing), the use of images as textual metaphors, and the comparative role of words and pictures (when images are found to be superior at promoting memory). I would like now to turn to image as meta-text: not just image as textual commentary, but image in dialectic with text.



fig. 1 *Sacra Parallela*, painter copying an icon: Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, gr. 923, f. 328v (photo: Paris, BNF)

¹¹ Epistle II. 3: PG 32: 229; English trans. from Weitzmann, *Sacra Parallela*, 213.

¹² Paris. gr. 923, f. 328v: K. Weitzmann, *The Miniatures of the Sacra Parallela, Parisinus Graecus 923*, Studies in manuscript illumination 8 (Princeton, 1979), 213, fig. 569; for a later paraphrase of the same text, see the thirteenth-century Lincoln College typikon: A.-M. Talbot, in J. Thomas and A. C. Hero, eds., *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents 4* (Washington DC, 2000), 1531.

¹³ Mansi XIII, 348C–D; English trans. from D. Sahas, *Icon and Logos: Sources in Eighth-Century Iconoclasm*, Toronto Medieval Texts and Translations 4 (Toronto, 1986), 163.

¹⁴ Homily 17, 5: ed. B. Laourdas, *Phōtiou homiliai* (Thessaloniki, 1959), 170; English trans. from C. Mango, *The Homilies of Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople*, Dumbarton Oaks Studies 3 (Washington DC, 1958), 294.

¹⁵ Homily 17, 5: ed. Laourdas, 170; trans. Mango, 294.

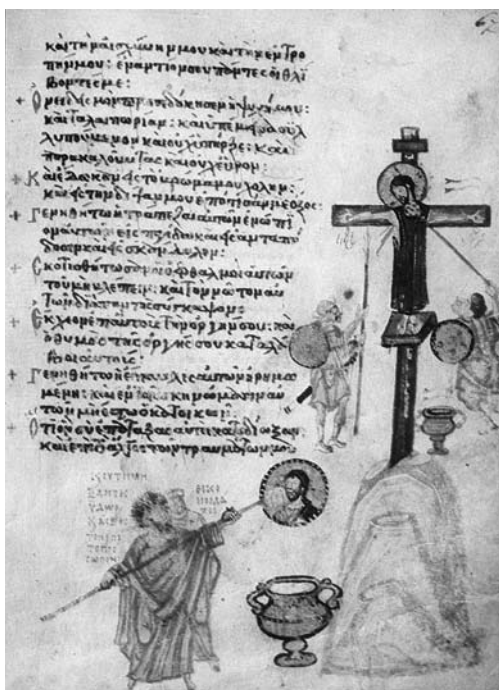


fig. 2 Khludov Psalter, crucifixion: Moscow, Historical Museum, gr. 129, f. 67r (photo: Moscow, Historical Museum)

Probably the most famous example of image as meta-text is a miniature in the Khludov Psalter, a manuscript produced in Constantinople in the 840s, immediately after the end of the great struggle about images in Byzantium (what we call iconoclasm, but which the Byzantines called iconomachy, ‘the image struggle’). Here we see the crucifixion of Christ above an image of iconoclasts whitewashing an image of Christ (fig. 2). The text is Psalm 68, which does not describe either event. Verse 22, however, prompted the upper scene. It reads: ‘They gave me also gall for my food, and made me drink vinegar for my thirst’. This reminded Byzantine commentators of Christ’s crucifixion, as described in the New Testament. So here we see Christ’s tormentors, one of whom offers him the sponge soaked in vinegar and gall described in the Gospels, inscribed ‘they [mixed] vinegar and gall’, thus verbally tying together the Old Testament psalm verse and the New Testament image. In other words, the image of the crucifixion acts as a meta-text, providing a commentary on the psalm verse and, at

the same time, providing the Christian audience of the (originally Jewish) psalter with a picture relevant to their religious concerns. This chain of associations, intent on taking an ancient text and making it significant to a modern audience, continues with the lower scene, which shows two iconoclasts whitewashing an icon of Christ. The inscription next to the iconoclasts verbalises the connection between the two images as ‘and they mixed water and lime on his face’. The point here, as expressed in a slightly earlier anti-iconoclast broadsheet, is that ‘formerly the impious put to the lips of Jesus a mixture of vinegar and gall; in our day, mixing water and lime and fixing a sponge to a pole, they applied it to the icon and besmeared it.... They have perpetrated the work of the Jews and have given themselves over to the devil’.¹⁶ What the miniature is suggesting is that dishonour to images is equivalent to dishonour to the person represented; whitewashing an icon of Christ is the same as denying his incarnation, thus effectively wiping him out.¹⁷ The text itself is simply a spur to the meta-text, which conveys the real message of this page: the destruction of images of Christ meant the destruction of Christ.

This relationship between words and pictures is common in ninth-century manuscripts. Here is another example, this one from a slightly later book, a copy of the *Homilies* of Gregory of Nazianzos commissioned by the patriarch Photios (whom we heard before talking about how powerfully sight ensured memories) for the emperor Basil I around the year 880.¹⁸ Basil I was the first of the renowned Makedonian emperors; his history, well known to Byzantinists, is worth recalling. Stripped of the many legendary accoutrements that later attached themselves to his

16 See the discussion, with additional bibliography, in Corrigan, *Visual Polemics*, 30–31.
 17 Basil’s formulation (honour to the image bestows honour on its archetype), which was applied by him to imperial portraits (PG 32: 149; English trans. in Mango, *Art*, 47), was adapted for iconophile use in the eighth century by, amongst others, John of Damascus: *Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images* I, 21, 51 (=II, 47) and esp. I, 35–36 (=II, 31–32); ed. Kotter, 108, 147–49, 154; trans. Anderson, 29, 36–37, 40. Discussion in L. Brubaker, ‘Icons before Iconoclasm?’, *Morfologie sociali e culturali in europa fra tarda antichità e alto medioevo*, Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo 45 (1998), 1215–54, at 1226.
 18 The following discussion draws on my *Vision and Meaning*, 173–79.

life, our sources tell us that Basil was a provincial who arrived in Constantinople under the patronage of a wealthy widow; met and was befriended by the then-emperor Michael III; was made co-emperor by Michael in 866; and murdered Michael in 867, after which Basil ruled for nearly 20 years, until his death in 886. By the tenth century, when his hagiographical life was written for his grandson, the equally luminous Constantine VII Porphyrogennitos, Basil's rise and success are made to appear inevitable. In Basil's own lifetime, one can imagine that the provincial usurper faced a more difficult press.

The miniature in the manuscript made for him presents a detailed history of the Old Testament figure Joseph, the peculiarities of which are evident from the scenes incorporated (fig. 3). The first four registers include ten scenes, all drawn from Genesis 37. In the first register Jacob sends Joseph to his brothers (vv. 13–14); Joseph journeys in search of his brothers (vv. 17–18); and Joseph's brothers, at table, see him coming and plot his humiliation (vv. 18–20). In the second, Joseph's brothers lower him into a cistern (v. 24); bloody his cloak with kid's blood (v. 31); and, in a scene inscribed 'the sorrow of Jacob', show their father the bloody garment (vv. 32–33). In the third register, Joseph's brothers remove him from the cistern (v. 28); then, again at table, they plot to sell Joseph to passing merchants (v. 25). In the fourth, we find 'the sale of Joseph', and 'Joseph led to Egypt' by the merchants (v. 28). While the top four registers illustrate a mere fifteen verses (Genesis 37: 13–28) with ten scenes, the fifth and final register presents a more compressed sequence: 'Potiphar buys Joseph' (Genesis 37: 35 and 39: 1); Joseph flees Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39: 12); Pharaoh invests Joseph (Genesis 41: 41–42); and Joseph appears in triumph, standing in a chariot (Genesis 41: 43).

The history of Joseph was translated into images often in Byzantium, but this image omits most of the most familiar episodes—neither Joseph's ability to interpret dreams nor his reunion with his father and brothers, for example, are included—to focus on the obstacles he was made to overcome—Joseph's betrayal by his brothers, his forced exile, and the treachery of Potiphar's wife—in order to emerge triumphant, finally, in the last two scenes.

The miniature prefaces Gregory's tenth homily, *To himself, his father, and Basil the Great after his flight and return*,¹⁹ and is certainly in its correct location, but there is only a tenuous link between the miniature and the text it introduces. The real point of this miniature is not, however, literal illustration, as becomes clear from the final two scenes. The penultimate image shows the enthroned pharaoh leaning forward to fasten the purple robe of Byzantine emperors over Joseph's shoulders, following Byzantine descriptions of imperial promotions.²⁰ This detail, which grounds the image in Byzantine imperial ceremony, appears in no other Byzantine versions of the scene. The final scene is also unique: Joseph wears Byzantine imperial regalia, holds the imperial orb

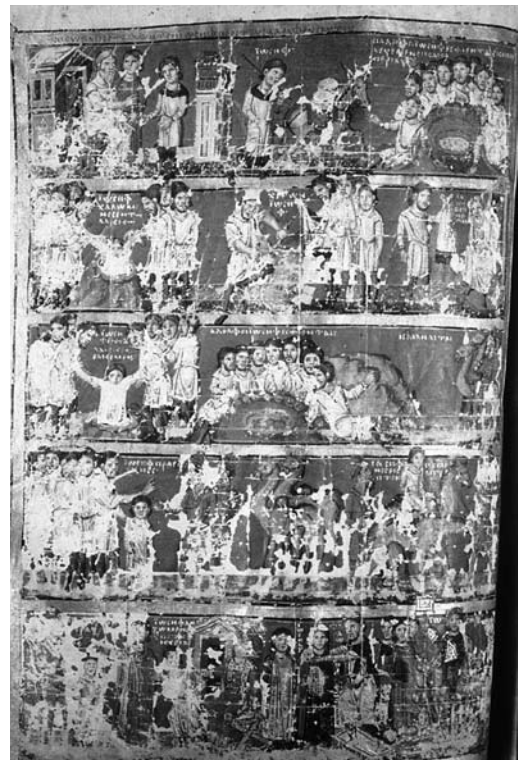


fig. 3 Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzos, life of Joseph: Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, gr. 510, f. 69v (photo: Paris, BNF)

¹⁹ SC 405, 316–27.

²⁰ Constantine Porphyrogennetos, *Book of Ceremonies* I, 43 (52); ed. Vogt 2 (1967a), 28.

and carries the prime symbol of Byzantine imperium, Constantine's *labarum*. He stands alone and frontal in a quadriga, flanked by bodyguards, and a pair of small figures kneels before him: these elements, too, were all borrowed from Byzantine imperial portraits.²¹

While a few other cycles or isolated images of Joseph connect him with the Byzantine emperor, in no case is the imperial accent so stressed as here. The imperial details salute the imperial status of the manuscript's recipient, but the configuration of scenes suggests that, beyond this, we are meant to view the entire sequence an analogy of the emperor Basil's life.

Joseph was viewed as an ideal ruler, and as such was a fitting antitype for a Byzantine emperor. But episodes detailing Joseph's abilities are not stressed here: instead, the miniature preserves the most extensive betrayal sequence in Byzantine art. The artisan responsible for the picture seems to have dwelt intentionally on Joseph's personal travails before he attained power.

The Joseph scenes in the Paris Gregory were selected to personalize the miniature, and to imply a specific link between Basil and Joseph. Whatever the truth of his background, Basil's status as a foreigner who was predestined to rule Byzantium, and overcame long odds to do so, is the underlying theme of the surviving texts that narrate his life.²² The visual allusions worked out in the miniature parallel the dominant theme of the written accounts of Basil's life by portraying Joseph, like Basil, as a foreigner who rose from agrarian stock to be made co-ruler after considerable personal struggle. Joseph, unlike Basil I, never ruled alone; yet he is shown without his co-ruler here, where Pharaoh serves an essentially menial function: I suspect that this is because Basil murdered his 'Pharaoh'—and Joseph's 'Michael III' is accordingly downplayed. The image functions as a commentary on the tenth homily and a panegyric to the recipient of the volume, whose struggles, like Joseph's, were ultimately rewarded with the imperial diadem.

I have spent considerable time on this picture because it is a meta-image the layers of which seem glaringly obvious once one understands them, but were completely opaque until the picture was contextualized. This miniature has been in the public domain for over 300 years, and has been discussed endlessly, and in considerable detail five times (by Omont in 1929, Der Nersessian in 1962, Vileisis in 1979, Riddle in 1981 and Gauthier-Walter in 1990).²³ None of these scholars—three of whom were or are extraordinary scholars, as you will recognise—could see the meta-image for what it was. That we can rely on their accumulated expertise, and on the comparatively modern realization that motifs/themes/images cannot be understood in isolation—comparative and contextualized seeing is imperative, just as comparative and contextualized reading is imperative to interpret texts.

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I hope that it has become clear that images communicate differently from words, but share many of the same propensities. Intervisuality, for example, is as prevalent in Byzantium as intertextuality. An example is provided by the well-known mosaic above the entrance to the Chora monastery (also known as the Kariye Camii) in Constantinople, decorated between 1316 and 1321, portraying Theodore Metochites dedicating the monastery to Christ (fig. 4).²⁴ The lopsided composition and location above the entrance portal to the church is a quote from the imperial door into Hagia

21 See Grabar (1936), 54–7, 85–8, 147–9.

22 See Tobias (1969), 1–156; Adontz (1933a); idem (1934).

23 H. Omont, *Miniatures des plus anciens manuscrits grecs de la Bibliothèque Nationale, du VI^e au XIV^e siècle* (Paris, 1929), 16–17; S. Der Nersessian, 'The Illustrations of the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus, Paris gr. 510', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 16 (1962), 214–15; B. Vileisis, 'The Genesis Cycle at Sta. Maria Antiqua', unpub. Ph.D. dissertation (Princeton University, 1979), 58–85; M. Riddle, 'Illustration of the "Triumph" of Joseph the Patriarch', *Byzantine Papers* I (1981), 75–76; M.-D. Gauthier-Walter, 'Joseph, figure idéale du Roi?', *Cahiers archéologiques* 38 (1990), 27, 32–33.

24 P. Underwood, ed., *The Kariye Djami* 2 (Princeton, 1966), 42 and 3, pl. 26.

Sophia, set 400 years earlier (*ca* 900), showing the emperor in *proskynesis* before Christ (fig. 5).²⁵ Theodore was evidently attempting to ensure that his memory was linked to imperial status, and this endeavour was buttressed by the scallop pattern formed by the mosaic cubes of the background, which finds its only roughly contemporary parallel in the Deesis mosaic installed by Michael VIII Palaiologos, probably to commemorate his triumphal return to Constantinople in 1261 (fig. 6).²⁶ Like Byzantine texts that copy and paraphrase each other (and the Bible) knowingly, so too pictures rely on their audiences' knowledge of other images to score points and amplify their meanings.

This brings us back to Byzantine responses to the relationship between verbal and visual communication, to the idea that images are good to think with. We have seen that images were quite explicitly compared with texts, and that the two media of communication were seen as equal or, if ranked, that images often took priority. We then looked at two examples of meta-images; that is, to put it a context that seems appropriate to this meeting, images that provide extra-verbal understanding to a given text.

To conclude: words and images communicate differently, and in fact can never communicate even the same message in the same way. In illuminated manuscripts, which are what we have concentrated on here, the text ultimately generates the image. But the miniatures, as we have seen, at the very least translate and transform the message. Often they transcend it entirely, and



fig. 4 Constantinople, Chora monastery (Kariye Camii), Theodore Metochites dedicates the monastery to Christ (photo: Dumbarton Oaks)

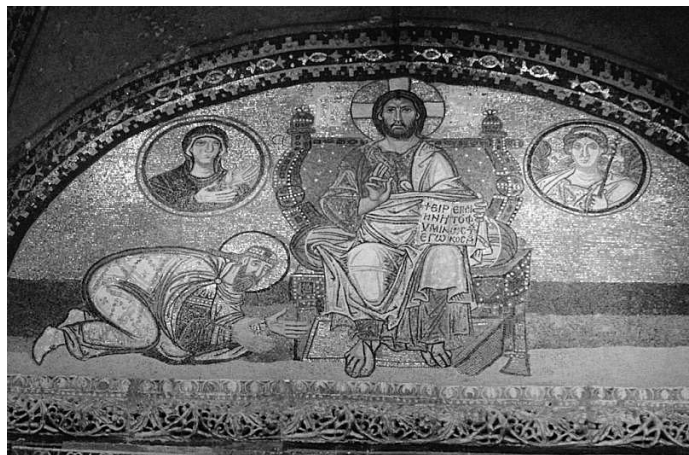


fig. 5 Constantinople, Hagia Sophia, narthex, mosaic, Leo VI before Christ (photo: Dumbarton Oaks)



fig. 6 Constantinople, Hagia Sophia, south gallery, mosaic, Deesis (photo: Dumbarton Oaks)

25 See Z. Gavrilović, 'The Humiliation of Leo the Wise (the Mosaic of the Narthex at Saint Sophia, Istanbul)', *Cahiers archéologiques* 28 (1979), 87–94; R. Cormack, 'The Emperor at St Sophia: Viewer and Viewed', in A. Guillou and J. Durand, eds., *Byzance et les images* (Paris 1994), 225–253.

26 So too R. Nelson, 'The Chora and the Great Church: Intervisuality in Fourteenth-Century Constantinople', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 23 (1999) 67–101.

provide a visual commentary on the words, based on a set of intervisual and/or intertextual cues which are totally independent of the accompanying text. Miniatures construct and authorise a particular interpretation of the words that they accompany, and in so doing they shape and guide the reader's understanding of the words. There is inevitably a tension—never expressed, and often creative—when words and images meet in Byzantine manuscripts. Some messages could be visualised in images but could not be said in words, and others could be said but not shown. Meta-text and meta-image meet in illuminated manuscripts, and together were capable of communicating more powerfully and expressively than any other medium in Byzantium.