

Of Texts and Objects: Perceptions of “Persian” Art from Later Byzantium to Modern Greece*

Nikolaos Vryzidis

Later Byzantium: Otherness, exoticism, and memory

The substantial gap in scholarship concerning the Byzantine perception of Persia has recently been addressed in an innovative essay by Rustam Shukurov. Shukurov convincingly argues that Persia was a preeminent locus for Byzantine culture, and that its image was informed by both contemporary knowledge and past memories engraved in the collective consciousness.¹ The abundant mention of Persia in Byzantine texts in part illustrates how the long-standing apprehension of different aspects of Persian culture prompted a continuous process of reactivation of memory of past interactions.² While this suggests an intense interaction between the two cultures,³ the Byzantines exercised an expansive use of the term “Persian” to denote all Islamic polities that dominated Anatolia from the tenth century on,⁴ resulting from the widespread influence of Persian culture in the Seljuk and other courts of Anatolia during this period.⁵ Especially in the case of the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum, the origins of which were

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1 Rustam Shukurov, “The Byzantine Concepts of Iran: Cultural Memory and Its Reactualization,” in *Identity and the Other in Byzantium: Papers from the Fourth International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Symposium, Istanbul, 23–25 June 2016*, ed. Koray Durak and Ivana Jevtić (Istanbul: The Koç Stavros Niarchos Foundation Center for Late Antique and Byzantine Studies [Gabam], 2019), 143–167; 143–147. See also Rustam Shukurov, “Byzantium and Asia: An Attempt at Reconceptualization,” in *Proceedings of the Plenary Sessions: The 24th International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Venice and Padua, 22–27 August 2022*, ed. Emiliano Fiori and Michele Trizio (Venice: Edizioni Ca’ Foscari, 2022), 515–529.

2 Shukurov, “The Byzantine Concepts of Iran,” 151–156.

3 For the position of the Byzantines in the Persian narrative, see Rustam Shukurov, “The Image of Rūm in Persian Epics: From Firdawsī to Niẓāmī,” in *Sasanidische Spuren in der byzantinischen, kaukasischen und islamischen Kunst und Kultur*, ed. Neslihan Asutay-Effenberger and Falko Daim (Mainz: Verlag des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums, 2019), 61–73.

4 Shukurov, “The Byzantine Concepts of Iran,” 158–159.

5 Rustam Shukurov, *The Byzantine Turks, 1204–1461* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 11–48.

Turkic, the use of the Persian language by courtiers, bureaucrats, and men of letters naturally prompted this designation.⁶ In the first section of this article, I shall explore the later Byzantine attitudes towards what is thus “Persian” art, as shaped by the activation of cultural memory, their contemporary knowledge, and the tension between otherness and exoticism that emerges when these texts and objects come under examination. In later sections, I will then examine the impact on these processes by the Ottoman conquest, and the status of such objects in modern Greece.

Most famous among the Byzantine texts that touch upon the artistic production coming out of the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum is the early thirteenth century architectural *ekphrasis* on the Mouchroutas hall in the Komnenian Palace of Constantinople.⁷ Nikolaos Mesarites (ca. 1163/4–after 1216) describes with detail and admiration the cross-shaped colored tiles, muqarnas, and figural iconography of the hall made by a “Persian” hand, i.e., Rum Seljuk, as a backcloth reflecting the personality of John Komnenos Axouch, nicknamed the Fat (d. 1200/1). Mesarites’ elegant writing style treats the enchanting, yet superficial, beauty of the hall as a visual metaphor for John’s incompatibility with Byzantine imperial office.⁸ Besides John’s character, it has been suggested that his partial Seljuk origin, as the son of Alexios Axouch (fl. twelfth century), threw further doubt on his fitness to serve as emperor.⁹ A similar attitude can be detected in John Kinnamos’ (ca. 1143–after 1185) description of the “foreign” paintings decorating Alexios’ house in the suburbs of Constantinople; Kinnamos might not be as explicit in his attribution of the artwork to a Seljuk workshop, but similar notions of otherness come through very clearly. In his eyes, the paintings reveal Alexios’ continuing association with the court of his origin, cementing his untrustworthiness.¹⁰ Contrastingly, a 1220 letter by John Apokaukos (ca.

6 Rustam Shukurov, “Grasping the Magnitude: Seljuq Rum between Byzantium and Persia,” in *The Seljuqs and their Successors. Art, Culture and History*, ed. Sheila N. Canby, Deniz Beyazit, and Martina Rugiadi (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 144–160; 149–158. On the Byzantine interest in the Persian language, see Rustam Shukurov, “Speaking Persian in Byzantium,” *Journal of Late Antique, Islamic, and Byzantine Studies* 2, no. 1–2 (2023), 202–214.

7 Neslihan Asutay-Effenberger, “‘Muchrutas’: Der seldschukische Schaupavillon im grossen Palast von Konstantinopel,” *Byzantion* 79, no. 2 (2004): 313–329; Alicia Walker, “Middle Byzantine Aesthetics of Power and the Incomparability of Islamic Art: The Architectural Ekphrasis of Nikolaos Mesarites,” *Muqarnas* 27 (2010): 79–101. See also Alicia Walker, *The Emperor and the World: Exotic Elements and the Imaging of Middle Byzantine Imperial Power, Ninth to Thirteenth Centuries C.E.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 144–164.

8 John had staged a failed coup that took place, according to the text, inside the very same hall, the symbol of his own decadence, see Walker, *The Emperor and the World*, 93–94.

9 Walker, *The Emperor and the World*, 155–156.

10 Alicia Walker, “John Kinnamos: Paintings in the House of Alexios Axouch in Suburban Constantinople,” in *Sources for Byzantine Art History. Volume 3: The Visual Culture of Later Byzantium (c. 1081–c. 1330)*, ed. Foteini Spingou (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 607–616.

1155–1233), metropolitan of Nafpaktos, offers the rare view of a more provincial context. In describing the confiscation of his episcopal palace by Constantine Doukas (ca. 1172–after 1242), governor of the southern peninsula of the Despotate of Epirus, Apokaukos is particularly incensed by the addition of a “Persian-style” hall to the building’s original structure. Like Mesarites, Apokaukos highlights this un-Christian, foreign hall as a reflection of Constantine’s shady character, although, unlike Mesarites, he accompanies his remarks with no appreciative comments, and conveys the perceived otherness in much greater intensity.¹¹

These texts illustrate how an appreciation of Seljuk (“Persian”) art was regarded as a potentially threatening fraternization with the Other, raising questions of political (and religious) loyalties. At the same time, Apokaukos’ criticisms imply a contrast between secular and ecclesiastical aesthetics, at least in the specific provincial context. This flimsy textual evidence may be nuanced through an analysis of the visual and material remnants, which seem to offer a more complex narrative.

Dated to the thirteenth century, the Anatolian candlesticks that survive in ecclesiastical collections in Greece are perhaps the most relevant material remnants for the Nikolaos Mesarites *ekphrasis*.¹² The imagery and style of these candlesticks clearly recall what Mesarites describes as “Persian figures” (see Fig. 1).¹³ The Greek word *samountanin* (σαμουτανίν) for candlestick is additionally a linguistic loan from Persian, perhaps implying a consolidated consumption pattern or at least preference.¹⁴ The unearthing of these remnants in ecclesiastical collections, especially the sacristies of Athonite monasteries, puts Apokaukos’ criticisms into perspective. Perhaps the broad distribution of these candlesticks across different locations in Greece offers a rare insight into a general receptivity toward Seljuk art, which the despoliation of Byzantine sites in Anatolia/Asia Minor deprives us of.¹⁵ This alone is

11 Foteini Spingou and Alicia Walker, “John Apokaukos: A Seljuq-Style Hall in Nafpaktos,” in *Sources for Byzantine Art History. Volume 3: The Visual Culture of Later Byzantium (c. 1081–c. 1330)*, ed. Foteini Spingou (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 644–654.

12 See Paschalis Androudis, “Islamiko kēropēgio apo tē Megistē Lavra tou Agiou Orou” [Ισλαμικό κηροπήγιο από τη Μεγίστη Λαύρα του Αγίου Όρους] [Islamic candleholder from the Great Lavra of Mount Athos], *Byzantina Βυζαντινά* 23 (2002–2003): 293–314.

13 See also figure 6 in Nikolaos Vryzidis, “The Second Life of a Mamluk Lamp from Saint John the Theologian Monastery, Patmos, and the Oral Tradition Attached to It,” in *Art, Trade and Culture in the Islamic World and Beyond: Studies Presented to Doris Behrens-Abouseif*, ed. Alison Ohta, J. M. Rogers, and Rosalind Wade-Haddon (London: Gingko Library, 2016), 26–35.

14 Shukurov, *The Byzantine Turks*, 319 and 409.

15 In relation to medieval Anatolia/Asia Minor, portable objects have also been suggested as a plausible source for the transmission of architectural ideas from the Seljuk to the Byzantine realms. See Scott Redford, “Portable Palaces: On the Circulation of Objects and Ideas about Architecture in Medieval Anatolia and Mesopotamia,” *Medieval Encounters* 18 (2012): 382–412.

insufficient to discount the likely popularity of Apokaukos' opinions in wider society, however. On the contrary, I would suggest that while Byzantium was receptive to foreign artistic productions, even those loaded with Islamic otherness, this did not pass without complaint.¹⁶ After all, voices in favor of cultural protectionism and introversion continued to be heard until the dissolution of Byzantium.¹⁷ An alternative point of view would suggest that the existence of such complaints indicate how widespread the reception of such artifacts was, demanding condemnation from important figures.



Fig. 1. Candlestick, brass with silver inlay, thirteenth century, Anatolia/Asia Minor. Monastery of Saint John the Theologian (Patmos). Courtesy of George Makkas. © Monastery of Saint John the Theologian.

At the same time, one could interpret the exoticism with which Seljuk art was perceived as the end-product of a process that attributes value to the (at least “Persian”) Other.¹⁸ For Nikolaos Mesarites, this appears to be firmly the case. Traces of the structures that Mesarites, Kinnamos, and Apokaukos describe, however, have not survived, or at least have not yet been discovered,

16 I expand upon this point in a similar interpretation in Nikolaos Vryzidis, “The “Arabic” Stole of Vatopediou Monastery: Traces of Islamic Material Culture in Late Byzantium,” *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Cultures of the Islamic World* 36 (2019): 85–99.

17 Particularly well known are the strong views expressed by Nikephoros Gregoras (ca. 1295–1360) on the integrity of Byzantine dress. See Anthony Kaldellis, “Ethnicity and Clothing in Byzantium,” in *Identity and the Other in Byzantium. Papers from the Fourth International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Symposium. Istanbul, 23–25 June 2016*, ed. Koray Durak and Ivana Jevtić (Istanbul: The Koç Stavros Niarchos Foundation Center for Late Antique and Byzantine Studies (Gabam), 2019), 41–52; 51–52.

18 Jean-Francois Staszak, “Other/Otherness,” in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, ed. Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift (Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2009), 43–47, <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:77582>.

prompting a turn to visual sources to illuminate the extent of the dissemination of Rum Seljuk forms in Byzantine art and architecture.

The influence of Islamic forms, Seljuk included, may be seen for instance on manuscript illuminations of the Palaiologan period.¹⁹ Among the earliest examples that I have been able to trace is a headpiece in a manuscript that is attributed to the thirteenth century. It consists of a panel of star and crossshaped ornaments, like the ones mentioned in Mesarites' description of the "Persian" hall.²⁰ The composition's golden ground differs from the copper tones of Islamic lusterware, although that might simply reflect the painter's effort to render a shiny surface. This points to a creative engagement with the prototype, possibly a ceramic panel. A similar pattern is also used in the representation of an *endyte*, the cloth dressing on the altar, in the early fourteenth-century Church of Saint George Orphanos in Thessaloniki, although in this case the palette is limited to black and white.²¹ Furthermore, star-shaped ornaments, most probably an allusion to tiles, adorn the arch framing Saint John the Theologian in an illumination from a Byzantine evangeliary (see Fig. 2). If the manuscript's attribution to the early fifteenth century is correct, then the arch's decoration implies the endurance of such artistic devices in the Byzantine visual idiom, if not the continuous engagement of Byzantium with the art of its Muslim neighbors.²²

19 Robert S. Nelson, "Palaeologan Illuminated Ornament and the Arabesque," *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 41 (1988): 7–22, 151–162. See also Paschalis Androudis, "Aravourgēmatikes diakosmēseis kai epidraseis tēs islamikēs technēs stēn Palaiologeia Technē tēs Makedonias" Αραβουργηματικές διακοσμήσεις και επιδράσεις της ισλαμικής τέχνης στην Παλαιολόγεια Τέχνη της Μακεδονίας [Arabesque patterns and influences of Islamic art in the Palaiologan art of Macedonia], in *Γ' EPISTĒMONIKO SYMPOΣIO «BYZANTINE MAKEDONIA»*, *Theologia – Istoría – Filologia – Dikaio – Archaíologia – Technē, Thessalonikē 14–15 Maíou 2016* Γ' ΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΟΝΙΚΟ ΣΥΜΠΟΣΙΟ «ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΗ ΜΑΚΕΔΟΝΙΑ», Θεολογία – Ιστορία – Φιλολογία – Δίκαιο – Αρχαιολογία – Τέχνη, Θεσσαλονίκη 14–15 Μαΐου 2016 (Thessaloniki: Society for Macedonian Studies, 2019), 771–793; 774–775.

20 The manuscript is preserved in Philotheou Monastery, Mount Athos. See Stylianos Pelekanidis, *Oi thēsauroi tou Agiou Orou: Eikonografēmena cheirografa Tom. G': M. Megistēs Lauras, M. Pantokratoros, M. Docheiariou, M. Karakalou, M. Filotheou, M. Agiou Paulou* Οι θησαυροί του Αγίου Όρους: Εικονογραφημένα χειρόγραφα. Τόμ. Γ': Μ. Μεγίστης Λαύρας, Μ. Παντοκράτορος, Μ. Δοχειαρίου, Μ. Καρακάλου, Μ. Φιλοθέου, Μ. Αγίου Παύλου [The treasures of Mount Athos: Illuminated manuscripts. Vol. 3: Monasteries of Great Lavra, Pantokratoros, Docheiariou, Karakallou, Philotheou and Agiou Pavlou] (Athens: Ekdotike Athenon, 1990), 194, and figure 6 in Androudis, "Islamiko kēropēgio."

21 Anna Tsitouridou, *O zōgrafikos diakosmos tou Agiou Nikolaou Orfanou stē Thessalonikē. Symvolē stē meletē tēs Palaiologeias zōgrafikēs kata ton prōimo 14o aiōna* Ο ζωγραφικός διάκοσμος του Αγίου Νικολάου Ορφανού στη Θεσσαλονίκη. Συμβολή στη μελέτη της Παλαιολόγειας ζωγραφικής κατά τον πρώιμο 14ο αιώνα [The painted decoration of Saint Nikolaos Orphanos in Thessaloniki: Contribution to the study of early fourteenth-century Palaiologan painting] (Thessaloniki: Centre for Byzantine Research, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 1986), 215–216.

22 This dating has been proposed by the researchers who have published the catalog of miniature paintings found in the Greek manuscripts of the National Library of Greece. Based on stylistic grounds,

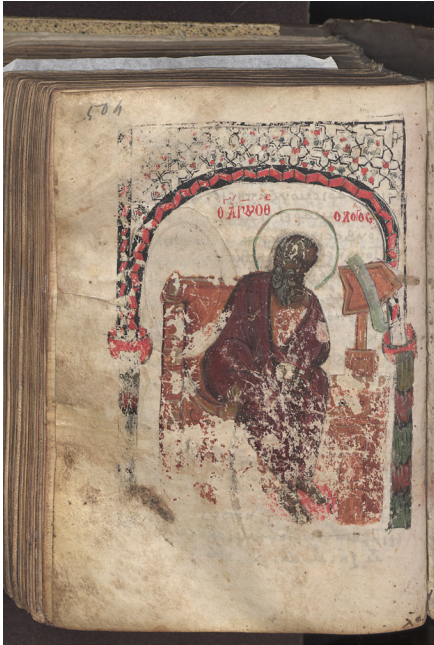


Fig. 2. *Saint John the Theologian, painting on parchment, evangelary, early fifteenth century (?), Byzantium. National Library of Greece (fol. 504 in EBE 156). © National Library of Greece.*

But perhaps the most enigmatic and challenging case of assimilation of Seljuk ornamentation relevant to Nikolaos Mesarites' description is the Church of Saint Nikolaos Phountoukli in Rhodes. The church is provisionally dated to the last decade of the fifteenth century, albeit on the grounds of a now hardly legible inscription²³—a date which might be challenged by an analysis of its

their opinion is that the mediocre painter tried to render an earlier prototype in a rather coarse way. See Anna Marava-Chatziniolaou and Christina Toufexi-Paschou, *Katalogos mikrografion byzantinon cheirogragdon tes Ethnikes Vivliothekēs tes Ellados B' / Cheirografa Kainēs Diathēkēs IG–IE aiōnos, en Athēnais* Κατάλογος μικρογραφιών βυζαντινών χειρογράφων της Ἐθνικῆς Βιβλιοθήκης τῆς Ἑλλάδος, Β'. Χειρόγραφα Καινῆς Διαθήκης IG–IE αἰῶνος, ἐν Ἀθῆναις [Catalogue of illuminations of the Byzantine manuscripts of the National Library of Greece 2: New Testament Manuscripts of the Thirteenth–Fifteenth Centuries in Athens] (Athens: Publications Bureau of the Academy of Athens, 1985), 252–255.

23 Myrtali Acheimastou-Potamianou, retired director of the Byzantine Museum, warns that her reading should be considered with caution. The inscription presents difficulties not only because of its fragmentary state, but also because of its idiosyncratic style. See Myrtali Acheimastou-Potamianou, “Οἱ τοιχογραφίες τῆς οἰκογένειας Βαρδοάνη στον Ἅγιο Νικόλαο στο Φουντουκλί τῆς Ρόδου” Οἱ τοιχογραφίες τῆς οἰκογένειας Βαρδοάνη στον Ἅγιο Νικόλαο στο Φουντουκλί τῆς Ρόδου [The mural paintings of the Vardoanes family in Saint Nikolaos in Phountoukli of Rhodes], in *Thōrakion. Aferōma sti mnēmē tou Paulou Lazaridē* Θωράκιον. Αφιέρωμα στη μνήμη του Παύλου Λαζαρίδη [Parapet: Dedication in honour of Pavlos Lazarides], ed. Loula Kypraiou (Athens: Hellenic Ministry of Culture, 2004), 247–262 and plates 77–83; 249.

painted decoration as imitating panels of ceramic tiles with a clear Rum Seljuk provenance (see Fig. 3).²⁴ Nikolaos Mastrochristos's recent doctoral dissertation is quite perceptive in its interpretation of the sacredness and symbolism with which the surfaces reserved for these Seljuk-style "painted panels" were charged.²⁵ While recognizing the archaic elements in the church's architecture,²⁶ and the uniqueness of its painting style when compared to other fifteenth-century churches on the island,²⁷ Mastrochristos does not go so far as to question the posited date of erection, though it ought be noted that its decoration would rather cohere to a much earlier artistic and cultural environment.²⁸ Irrespective of this question of dating, the employment of such ornamentation in a Christian religious space sharply contrasts with Apokaukos' sensibilities, while also implying the

24 Sharon E. J. Gerstel, "Facing Architecture: Views on Ceramic Revetments and Paving Tiles in Byzantium, Anatolia, and the Medieval West," in *From Minor to Major: The Minor Arts in Medieval Art History*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton: Index of Christian Art, Princeton University, 2012), 43–65; 60–63.

25 Nikolaos Mastrochristos, "Ο ναός του Αγίου Νικολάου στο Φουντουκλί Ρόδου" [The church of Saint Nikolaos in Phountoukli, Rhodes] (PhD Diss., University of Athens, 2019), 198–199.

26 Mastrochristos, "Ο ναός του Αγίου Νικολάου", 48–53.

27 Mastrochristos, "Ο ναός του Αγίου Νικολάου", 264.

28 An often-neglected aspect in this discussion is the Turcoman presence in the Dodecanese. In 1278 a group of settlers from Lycia arrived at Rhodes at the invitation of Giovanni de lo Cavo (fl. second half of the thirteenth century), who ruled the island in the name of Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos (r. 1261–1268). They resided in the eastern part of the island until the predominance of the Knights Hospitaller. In this cultural context, the Byzantine titles of the church's patron, the Seljuk–Anatolian inspiration of the aniconic ornament, the classic Islamic star pattern on the handkerchief hanging from the patron's waist (see Fig. 8), and other elements all make sense. See Michael D. Volonakis, *The Island of Roses and her Eleven Sisters: Or, the Dodecanese from the Earliest Time down to the Present Day* (London: Macmillan, 1922), 235; Elizabeth Zachariadou, *Trade and Crusade: Venetian Crete and the Emirates of Menteshe and Aydin (1300–1415)* (Venice: Istituto Ellenico di Studi Bizantini e Postbizantini di Venezia, 1983), 10; Anthony Luttrell, "Settlement on Rhodes, 1306–1366," in *Crusade and Settlement: Papers Read at the First Conference of the Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East, and presented to R. C. Smail*, ed. Peter W. Edbury (Cardiff: University College Cardiff Press, 1985), 273–281; 273–274; Michalis Skandalidis, "Ἐπειρατεία στὴ Ρόδο καὶ στὰ ἄλλα νησιά τοῦ δωδεκανησιακοῦ ἀρχιπελάγους" [Piracy in Rhodes and the other islands of the Dodecanese archipelago], *Δωδεκανησιακά Χρονικά* 12 (1987): 11–32; 21–22; and Charis Mich Koutelakis, "Aladiōtes-Kountouriōtes. Αμοιβαίοι υποτιμητικοί χαρακτηρισμοὶ τῶν κατοίκων τῆς Τήλου" [Aladiotes-Kountouriototes: Mutual derogatory designations of the inhabitants of Telos], *Onomata: Revue onomastique* 12 (1988): 256–279; 263. The painted decoration could also be interpreted as a late afterlife of Rum Seljuk art; see Patricia Blessing, "Seljuk Past and Timurid Present: Tile Decoration of the Yeşil Külliye in Bursa," *Gesta* 56, no. 2 (2017): 225–250. It seems unlikely that this would have occurred in late fifteenth-century Rhodes, however, where such cultural references would have been more out of place than out of date.

activity of traveling artists, who either traveled from Anatolia/Asia Minor to Rhodes to work on this church, or had traveled to Anatolia/Asia Minor previously and become acquainted with Rum Seljuk art.



Fig. 3. Mural painting, thirteenth to fifteenth century, Church of Saint Nikolaos Phountoukli, Rhodes. Image courtesy of Ioanna Christophoraki. © Ephorate of Antiquities of Dodecanese.

An exhaustive analysis of the evidence pertaining to the Byzantine assimilation of Seljuk art is not the objective of this essay. Nonetheless, one ought nevertheless to discuss the zigzag pattern in Byzantine art from the thirteenth century on. In Rum Seljuk visual culture, the red zigzag against a white background was used in state buildings and on flags, clearly conveying regal connotations,²⁹ with this pattern found in elite settings throughout the region and across religions.³⁰ To the best of my knowledge, the zigzag, or chevron, was not a particularly popular pattern in middle Byzantine art, appearing sporadically on ceramics (see Fig. 4) and buildings, often with a

²⁹ Scott Redford, “A Grammar of Rūm Seljuk Ornament,” *Mésogeios* 25–26 (2005): 283–310; 293–294.

³⁰ Scott Redford, “Flags of the Seljuk Sultanate of Anatolia: Visual and Textual Evidence,” in *The Hidden Life of Textiles in the Medieval and Early Modern Mediterranean: Contexts and Cross-cultural Encounters in the Islamic, Latinate, and Eastern Christian Worlds*, ed. Nikolaos Vryzidis (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020) 67–82; 69–74.

different palette than the Seljuk version.³¹ It is during the thirteenth century that zigzags clearly recalling the Rum Seljuk version begin to appear in structures associated with Christians in Anatolia/Asia Minor. For example, the tomb of Michael Komnenos in Maria Spilaiotissa, a church situated close to the Seljuk capital of Konya/Ikonion, is decorated with such zigzags.³² Furthermore, in the Bezirana Kilisesi, a fairly typical Cappadocian cave church dedicated to the Virgin, the red and white zigzag is juxtaposed with a representation of Saint Stephen dressed as a deacon, beside Christ Emmanuel (see Fig. 5).³³ These examples point to the local Byzantine Christians' embrace of the Rum Seljuk convention.

The employment of the zigzag pattern in Byzantine monuments in Greece is a more complex issue. Perhaps one of the most interesting examples is the zigzag on a relief that once decorated an aristocratic tomb in the *katholikon* of the Monastery of Panagia Vlacherna in Arta (see Fig. 6).³⁴ This church is among the most important monuments of the Despotate of Epirus, associated with the state's ruling class.³⁵ If a Seljuk source could be argued for this zigzag, the case of Constantine Doukas' nonextant palace in Nafpaktos seems certainly relevant.

31 Sharon E. J. Gerstel and Julie Lauffenburger, "The Nikomedia Workshop: New Evidence on Byzantine Tiles," *Journal of the Walters Art Museum* 66/67 (2008–2009): 5–53; catalogs 22–24, 43, 63, and 72–74.

32 Michael Komnenos was apparently a Byzantine aristocrat who had infiltrated the Rum Seljuk elite. Regarding the tomb's inscriptions, see Paul Wittek, "L'épithaphe d'un Comnène à Konia" [The epitaph of a Komnenos in Konya], *Byzantion* 10 (1935): 505–515. To the best of my knowledge, the zigzags decorating the tomb have yet to be a source of scholarly discussion. I am thankful to Scott Redford for bringing this important detail to my attention and to Pagona Papadopoulou for sharing with me her images of the tomb.

33 Catherine Jolivet-Lévy, Nicole Lemaigre Demesnil, and Georges Kiourtzian, "Bezirana kilisesi (Cappadoce): Un exceptionnel décor paléologue en terres de Rûm. Nouveau témoignage sur les relations entre Byzance et le sultanat" [The Bezirana Church (Cappadocia): An exceptional Palaiologan painted decoration in the lands of Rum. New evidence on the relations between Byzantium and the sultanate], *Zograf* 41 (2017): 107–142; 121–122.

34 See figure 85 in Varvara N. Papadopoulou, "Ta glypta tēs Vlachernas" Τα γλυπτά της Βλαχέρνας [The sculptures of the Vlacherna], in *Ē Vlacherna tēs Artas H Βλαχέρνα της Άρτας* [The Vlacherna at Arta], ed. Varvara N. Papadopoulou (Arta: Hellenic Ministry of Culture, Education and Religion, Ephorate of Antiquities of Arta, 2015a), 96–105; and figure 89 in Varvara N. Papadopoulou, "Οι sarkofágoi" Οι σαρκοφάγοι [The sarcophagi], in *Ē Vlacherna tēs Artas H Βλαχέρνα της Άρτας* [The Vlacherna at Arta], ed. Varvara N. Papadopoulou (Arta: Hellenic Ministry of Culture, Education and Religion, Ephorate of Antiquities of Arta, 2015), 106–117.

35 On the monument's history, see Nikolaos Kaponis, "Ἐ ναοδομικῆ αρχιτεκτονικῆ του Δεσποτατοῦ τῆς Ἐπειροῦ: τῆν περίοδο τῆς δυναστείας τῶν Κομνηνῶν Ἀγγελῶν (1204-1318)" Η ναοδομική αρχιτεκτονική του Δεσποτάτου της Ηπείρου: την περίοδο της δυναστείας των Κομνηνών Ἀγγέλων (1204–1318) [Church architecture in the Despotate of Epirus: The time of the Komnenoi Angeloi dynasty] (PhD diss., University of Ioannina, 2005), 125–136.



Fig. 4. Glazed ceramic tile, tenth century, Constantinople. The Walters Art Museum (48.2086.66.1-59). Public domain.



Fig. 5. Mural painting, end of the thirteenth century or later. Bezirana Kilisesi, Ihlara valley (Cappadocia). Courtesy of Catherine Jolivet-Lévy.

At the same time, from the thirteenth century onward the motif sometimes appears in representations of textiles but with a slight chromatic variation: red and black against a white background. The representation of a textile decorating the throne on which the Virgin and the Child sit in the Church of Saint Stephen in Kastoria is a prime example of this combination (see Fig. 7).

This specific fresco belongs to the thirteenth-century phase of the church's mural decoration, and has been recently interpreted as more of a manifestation of a Mediterranean *koiné* than a direct loan from Islamic art.³⁶ While the black zigzag clearly deviates from the specificity of the red and white palette of the Rum Seljuk visual convention, a direct transmission via Rum Seljuk artifacts, e.g., a textile, is still a possible explanation—the Byzantine artist may simply have chosen to reinterpret rather than to copy wholesale, a choice frequently the purview of the artists themselves.³⁷

This hypothesis may be furthered with a view to the combination of black and white zigzags and red and white zigzags that decorate the columns framing the representation of the church's donors in Saint Nikolaos Phountoukli (see Fig. 8).³⁸ In this version, the black and the red are two halves of the same lines, which in the context of the church's overall decoration does not seem accidental, but rather like an intentional creative engagement with Rum Seljuk art.

Finally, a representation of cloth decorated with a red and white zigzag appears in the Perivleptos Monastery, Mystras (see Fig. 9). In a monumental representation of Christ's triumphant entry to Jerusalem, the elderly man who leads the crowd wears a cloak with this pattern.³⁹ Although the Sultanate of

36 See Nikolaos Siomkos, "Kastoria: Interférences avec l'Occident et les peuples voisins à travers des témoignages artistiques" [Kastoria: Associations with the West and the neighboring peoples through the artistic evidence], in *Byzance et ses voisins, xiiiè-xve siècle. Art, identité, pouvoir* [Byzantium and its neighbors, 13th–15th centuries: Art, identity, power], ed. Elisabeth Yota (Brussels: Peter Lang Éditions scientifiques internationales, 2021), 127–141; 136–138. The motif was previously interpreted as a loan from Western art (Nikolaos Siomkos, *L'église Saint-Etienne à Kastoria: Étude des différentes phases du décor peint (xe–xive siècles)* [The Church of Saint Stephen in Kastoria: Study of the different phases of the painted decoration (10th–14th centuries)] (Thessaloniki: Centre for Byzantine Research, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 2005), 255. Be that as it may, these motifs could also be seen in light of the mobility of people; it is often overlooked that the aristocratic family of Lysikoi, for example, active in late medieval Veroia, were in fact Christianized Seljuks. This understanding of mobility could lead to a better understanding of certain "Islamic" elements in the local artistic production, see Androudis, "Aravourgēmatikes diakosmēseis kai epidraseis," 783–784. On the Christianized Rum Seljuks in Veroia, see Elizabeth A. Zachariadou, "Oι christianoi apogonoi tou Izzeddin Kaïkaous B' stē Veroia" Oι χριστιανοί απόγονοι του Ιτζεδδίν Καϊκαούς Β' στη Βέροια [The Christian descendants of Izzeddin Kaykaus II in Veroia], *Makedonika Μακεδονικά* 6, no. 1 (1965): 62–74.

37 Other exotic patterns in the later Byzantine art of continental Greece have also been attributed to the circulation of textiles (Paschalis Androudis, "À propos des motifs d'allure orientale du sarcophage d'A. Maliassene" [Apropos the orientaling motifs of the sarcophagus of A. Maliassene], *Byzantiaka Βυζαντικά* 20 (2000): 266–281.

38 Mastrochristos, "O naos tou Agiou Nikolaou," 196.

39 About this mural, see Athanasia Panagiotakopoulou, "Eikonografikos kyklos tōn Pathōn tou Christou stēn Perivlepto tou Mystra" Εικονογραφικός κύκλος των Παθών του Χριστού στην Περιβλεπτο του Μυστρά [The Iconographic Cycle of the Passion of Christ in the Perivleptos of Mystra] (MA Thesis, University of Peloponnese, 2019), 40–43. The exact same pattern appears in the representation of Christ's triumphant entry to Jerusalem in another church in Mystras, the Pantanassa, the frescoes of which are dated to the second quarter of the fifteenth century, ca. 1430–1444 (Mary

Rum had most probably dissolved by the time this mural was completed, representations of such red and white zigzags in textiles continued to appear in other visual cultures that come out of Iran, such as the Ilkhanid.⁴⁰

I would thus suggest that the specific uses of the zigzag pattern in Byzantine visual culture during the thirteenth century were not coincidental, despite the diverse and nuanced interpretations of this Rum Seljuk aesthetic. These are, however, only preliminary remarks, which deserve further, interdisciplinary treatment.



Fig. 6. *Champlevé relief, marble and wax-mastic, thirteenth century. From the south tomb in the Monastery of Panagia Vlacherna (Arta), Glyptothèque of the Parigoritissa Church. © Ephorate of Antiquities of Arta.*

Aspra-Vardavaki and Melita Emmanouil, *Ἡ Μονὴ τῆς Παντάνασσας στὸν Μυστρά. Οἱ τοιχογραφίες τοῦ 15οῦ αἰῶνα* [The Monastery of Pantanassa in Mystras: The Fifteenth-century Murals] (Athens: Commercial Bank of Greece, 2005), 122–126.

40 Redford, “Flags of the Seljuk Sultanate,” 73, and figures 7 and 8.



Fig. 7. Mural painting, thirteenth century, Church of Saint Stephen, Kastoria. Image courtesy of Dimitris Loupis. © Ephorate of Antiquities of Kastoria.



Fig. 8. Mural painting, thirteenth to fifteenth century, twentieth-century conservation on the upper central surface, Church of Saint Nikolaos Phountoukli, Rhodes. Image courtesy of Ioanna Christophoraki. © Ephorate of Antiquities of Dodecanese.



Fig. 9. Mural painting, after mid-fourteenth century, Perivleptos Monastery, Mystras. Image courtesy of Constantine Vaphiades. © Ephorate of Antiquities of Laconia.

Returning to Shukurov’s theory regarding the activation of cultural memory, it seems that the mentions of “Persian” textiles in later Byzantine texts are paradigmatic of this dynamic. Textual evidence reveals that precious textiles arriving from or through Persia were met in the Byzantine imagination with deeply embedded connotations, activated by the developments in silk weaving and Eurasian trade during the late Middle Ages. The probably thirteenth-century *Tale of Livistros and Rodamne* offers particular insight into the textiles consumed in the Empire of Nicaea (1204–1261), where the Byzantine court was based until the reconquest of Constantinople.⁴¹ Among the most relevant to our discussion is a Babylonian draper whose merchandise included the textile *kamouchas*.⁴² The term *kamouchas* appears to refer to the opulent textiles imported from Central Asia during the thirteenth and fourteenth

41 While earlier scholarship attributed the poem to the fifteenth century, more recent studies date it to the thirteenth century, making it much more relevant to the idea of Rum Seljuk as “Persian.” In an earlier article I developed the same conceptualization of Persia based on the fifteenth-century dating. See Nikolaos Vryzidis, “Persian Textiles in the Ottoman Empire: Evidence from Greek Sacristies,” *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* 56, no. 2 (2017): 228–236; 229–230.

42 Ece Turnator, “Trade and Textile Industry in the State of Nicaea through the Romance of Livistros and Rodamne (Thirteenth Century),” in *Trade in Byzantium: Papers from the Third International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Symposium*, ed. Paul Magdalino and Nevra Necipoğlu, with the assistance of Ivana Jevtić (Istanbul: Koç University Press, 2016), 313–321.

centuries, with the reference to Babylon an anachronism perhaps alluding to the wider geography of the Ilkhanate.⁴³ Such textiles were one of the primary Eastern commodities to reach the reinstated Byzantine Empire through Seljuk lands in the 1270s.⁴⁴ Moreover, it is known that Theodore Hyrtakenos (fl. last quarter of the thirteenth–first quarter of the fourteenth century), a prominent Constantinopolitan aristocrat, had ordered a textile called *kamcha* (an abbreviation of *kamouchas*) from Trebizond in the language of the “Persians,” possibly referring to the Rum Seljuks, if not another Islamic polity.⁴⁵

Another vivid example in which cultural memory interweaves with contemporary reality is the fourteenth-century *Romance of Belisarius*. This poem, which recounts the life and works of Flavius Belisarius (ca. 500–565), a military commander serving Emperor Justinian I (r. 527–565), mentions that *kamouchades* were presented to the Byzantines by the King of Persia.⁴⁶ This is a clear reference to the intermediary role that Persia played in the Silk Road during a time when Byzantium did not yet have a consolidated sericulture. The intriguing element is that the mention of *kamouchades* alludes to the role of “Persia” as a supplier of opulent textiles during a time when the Byzantine weaving industry was in definite decline. Thus, past and present seem to collide in the most eloquent way.

Moreover, Persia appears in Byzantine texts even in the fifteenth century as a maker and provider of textiles. Cardinal Bessarion (1403–1472) mentions with admiration in his well-known *Encomium to Trebizond* the variety of foreign textiles in the local market, Persian included.⁴⁷ Given the date of the encomium, Bessarion must have been referring to the weavings of Timurid Iran, today rare.⁴⁸

43 Turnator, “Trade and Textile Industry,” 315.

44 Scott Redford, “Caravanserais and Commerce,” in *Trade in Byzantium*, 297–311; 309.

45 David Jacoby, “Late Byzantium between the Mediterranean and Asia: Trade and Material Culture,” in *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557). Perspectives on Late Byzantine Art and Culture*, ed. Sarah T. Brooks (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2006), 20–41; 24.

46 Raffaele Cantarella, “Diēgēsis d̄raiotatē tou thaumastou ekeinou tou legomenou velisariou” La διήγησις ωραιοτάτη του θαυμαστού εκείνου του λεγομένου βελισσαρίου (di anonimo autore). Testocritico, con una Appendice: Sulla fortuna della leggenda di Belisario [The beautiful narration of the admired (man) called Belisarius (by an anonymous author). Critical edition, with an appendix: On the fate of the legend of Belisarius], *Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici* 4 (1935): 153–202; 169.

47 Bessarion takes pride in his hometown’s role as a prime transit center in the Silk Road, where textiles, among other goods, arrived and were subsequently imitated by the local artisans. See Scott Kennedy, *Two Works on Trebizond. Michael Panaretos. Bessarion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 112–115.

48 See for example Carol Bier, *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart: Textiles Arts of Safavid and Qajar Iran 16th–19th Centuries* (Washington, D.C.: The Textile Museum, 1987), catalog 8; Louise

Thus it seems that the late Byzantine reception of “Persian” art, whether Rum Seljuk, Ilkhanid, or Timurid, was a negotiation between otherness and desirable exoticism, with moments when cultural memory was activated as a filter for the present. In the next section, we will follow how these rather complex processes were conditioned by the Ottoman conquest of Anatolia/Asia Minor and the Balkans.

The Ottoman Greek context: Transformations and specificities

The dissolution of the Byzantine Empire by the Ottomans, including whatever remained of the empire in the Balkans and Anatolia/Asia Minor, was a major event, with multiple transformative effects in the history of medieval Hellenism. Nonetheless, continuities in the cultural and social life of Greek Orthodox communities led to the consolidation of a post-Byzantine state, as first proposed by Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga in the 1930s.⁴⁹

When it comes to “Persian” art, I would suggest that while this conception of the post-Byzantine can be useful, an in-depth understanding of the Ottoman context is imperative in order to draw reliable conclusions. Firstly, the embrace of the Ottoman aesthetic by the Greek Orthodox elite, whether members of the high clergy or the prominent families that gravitated to the ecclesiastical institutions, was a reality that circumscribed the popularity of Safavid art.⁵⁰ Secondly, the penetration of “Persian” textiles in later Byzantium was facilitated by the decline of its own silk production, whereas the Ottoman textile sector did not leave a substantial space to be filled by Persian imports—particularly given that the textile trade was one of the

W. Mackie, *Symbols of Power: Luxury Textiles from Islamic Lands, 7th–21st Century* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 2015), figure 9.4; Amanda Phillips, *Sea Change: Ottoman Textiles between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021), 64–65.

49 Nicolae Iorga, *Byzance après Byzance: continuation de l' "Histoire de la vie byzantine"* [Byzantium after Byzantium: A history of the continuation of Byzantine life] (Bucharest: Institut d'études byzantines, 1935).

50 See for example Anna Ballian, “Ekklesiastika asēmika apo tēn Kōnstantinoupolē kai o patriarchikos thronos tou Ieremia B'” [Ecclesiastical silver from Constantinople and the patriarchal throne of Jeremiah II], *Deltio Kentrou Mikrasiatikhōn Spoudōn Δελτίο Κέντρου Μικρασιατικών Σπουδών* 7 (1988–1989): 51–73; Katerina Korre-Zografou, “Ta kerameika Iznik tēs Monēs Panachrantou tēs Androu” [Τα κεραμικά Ιζνίκ της Μονής Παναχράντου Άνδρου] [The Iznik Ceramics of the Panachrantou Monastery, Andros] (Andros: Kaireios Library, 2004); Christos Merantzias, “Ottoman Textiles Within an Ecclesiastical Context: Cultural Osmoses in Mainland Greece,” in *The Mercantile Effect Art and Exchange in the Islamicate World during the 17th and 18th Centuries*, ed. Sussan Babaie and Melanie Gibson (London: Gingko Library, 2017), 102–113; Nikolaos Vryzidis, “Ottoman Textiles and Greek Clerical Vestments: Prolegomena on a Neglected Aspect of Ecclesiastical Material Culture,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 42, no. 1 (2018): 92–114.

facets of Ottoman–Safavid antagonism.⁵¹ This antagonism in particular seemed to have affected the Ottoman perception of Safavid imports, at least during or after periods of political turmoil.⁵² However, mentions of Persian objects did appear in the inventories of Ottoman estates, among other textual sources,⁵³ which allows us to trace their appreciation outside the walls of the Topkapı Palace.⁵⁴ Thus, despite the often difficult and conflicting relationship between the Ottomans and the Safavids, different types of Persian textiles, carpets, and illuminated manuscripts still found their way into the Ottoman elite household.

In this context, I would argue that Greek texts can complement the Ottoman documentation as a more neutral source of information. While the term “Persian” continues to appear in Greek literature, as *atzemis/atzemikos* (Ἀτζέμις/ἄτζέμικος),⁵⁵ it represents there a lesser point of cultural reference than previously. It is primarily used as an ethnonym that is sometimes associated with textiles, perhaps revealing how deeply these notions were engraved in cultural memory. In one such instances, *atzemis* (Ἀτζέμις) is used as a synonym for draper. Notably, a verse from a Cypriot folk song

51 This argument requires more scholarly attention, but for an initial discussion see, for example, Sinem Arcak Casale, “The Persian Madonna and Child: Commodified Gifts between Diplomacy and Armed Struggle,” *Art History* 38, no. 4 (2015): 636–651.

52 Sinem Arcak Casale has analyzed the subject extensively in her doctoral dissertation, “Gifts in Motion: Ottoman–Safavid Cultural Exchange, 1501–1618” (PhD Diss., University of Minnesota, 2012), 250–254.

53 Amanda Phillips, *Everyday Luxuries: Art and Objects in Ottoman Constantinople, 1600–1800* (Dortmund: Kettler, 2016), 44, 105, 108, 109, 151, 152, 153, 154, 156, 157, 158, and more; Phillips, *Sea Change*, figure 3.14. On the import of Persian paintings in the Ottoman Empire, see Gwendolyn Collaço, “‘Word-Seizing’ Albums: Imported Paintings from ‘Acem and Hindūstān on an Eclectic Ottoman Market,” *Ars Orientalis* 51 (2021): 133–187. Also see Hedda Reindl-Kiel, “The Must-Haves of a Grand Vizier: Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa Pasha’s Luxury Assets,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 106 (2016): 179–221; 187, 200–201, 204, and more.

54 On objects, primarily carpets and textile furnishings, attributable to Safavid Iran in the Topkapı Palace collection, see Hülye Tezcan, *The Topkapı Saray Museum: Carpets*, trans., expand. and ed. J. M. Rogers (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987), 139–145; Hülye Tezcan and Sumiyo Okumura, *Textile Furnishings from the Topkapı Palace Museum* (Istanbul: Vehbi Koç Vakfı and Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2007), catalogs 2, 6, 8, and 34. On Asian textiles, including Persian, in the Topkapı Palace costume collection, see Hülye Tezcan, “Textiles of Asian Origin Arriving at the Ottoman Palace from the 15th Century Onwards,” in *Art turc: 10e Congrès international d’art turc, Genève, 17–23 septembre 1995: actes = Turkish art: 10th International Congress of Turkish Art, Geneva, 17–23 September 1995: proceedings*, ed. François Déroche et al. (Geneva: Fondation Max Van Berchem, 1999), 657–666.

55 *Atzemis* and *atzemikos* derive from the Ottoman Turkish *acem* for Persian. See Emmanuel Kriaras, *Lexiko tēs Mesaiōnikēs Ellēnikēs Dēmōdous Grammateias, 1100–1699. Tomos G Λεξικό της Μεσαιωνικής Ελληνικής Δημόδους Γραμματείας, 1100–1669. Τόμος Γ [Dictionary of the Medieval Greek Demotic Literature, 1100–1699. Vol. 3]* (Thessaloniki: Kentro Ellēnikēs Glōssas, 1973), 313.

also mentions “Persians” as sellers of the *kouroukla* (κουρούκλα), the island’s traditional headscarf worn by women.⁵⁶

Somewhat more complex is the mention of *atzemi* (ἀτζεμί) in the *Tesoro della lingua greca-volgare ed italiana*, a Modern Greek–Italian dictionary published in Paris in 1709. The word is mentioned in a section dedicated to textile terminology. The Greek compound term *atzemi dimpasi* (ἀτζεμί ντιμπασί) is translated into Italian as *lastra aggemis abbrocata*, while the same term, with the addition of *sante* (σαντέ) “plain,” becomes *lastra aggemis lissa (sic)*.⁵⁷ The difference between the two variations of the same textile is the “brocading,” or rather, its absence in the plain version.⁵⁸ At the same time, *lastra* in the context of textiles usually denotes a cloth interwoven with precious metals.⁵⁹ As for *aggemis*, it associates linguistically with the verb *ageminare*, used for the technique of damascening, i.e., inlaying different metals into one another. *Ageminare* derives from the Arab word for Persian, denoting the perceived provenance of the technique.⁶⁰ Relevant to this discussion is that in the dictionary’s second volume, Persia translates in Greek as *atzemia* (Ατζεμιά).⁶¹ But while both terms—the Italian *aggemis* and the Greek *atzemi*—share the same origin, their exact meaning in relation to textiles remains unclear. They seem to denote the use of precious metals, although there is no guarantee that *agemis* or *atzemi*, meaning “Persian,” only referred to a Safavid import or at least a fabric decorated in the Persian style.

Nevertheless, many Safavid and Qajar textile remnants in Greek historical collections are precious silk cloths often interwoven with silver or gold

56 Kyriakos Chatziioannou, *Peri tōn en tē Mesaiōnikē kai Neōtera Kyprīakē xenōn glōssikōn stoiceiōn* [Concerning the foreign language elements in the Medieval and Modern Cypriot (dialect)] (Athens: Byzantinisch-Neugriechische Jahrbücher, 1936), 123. As a side note, it seems that Persian cloth traders gathered in a *han* (an inn for travelers) in Eminönü in Ottoman Constantinople. See Phillips, *Everyday Luxuries*, 38.

57 Alessio da Somavera, *Tesoro della lingua greca-volgare ed italiana*, 2 vols. [Thesaurus of the modern Greek language, Italian edition] (Paris: Michele Guignard, 1709), 1:257.

58 Brocading in this context probably refers to an inwoven pattern decorating a textile, and not for example embroidery.

59 For example, *lastra d’oro*, “cloth of gold,” is mentioned in the Doge’s vestiary during the sixteenth century (Bartolomeo Cecchetti, *Il Doge di Venezia* (Venice: Pietro Naratovich, 1864), 49.

60 See “Agèmina,” Trecanni, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://www.trecanni.it/vocabolario/agemina/>. See also Louis Clément de Ris, *La curiosité: Collections françaises et étrangères, cabinets d’amateurs biographies* [Curiosity: French and Foreign collections, cabinets of amateur biographies] (Paris: Librairie ve Jules Renouard, 1864), 61.

61 Somavera, *Tesoro*, 2:348.

thread.⁶² An important observation, which illuminates the limited penetration of Persian imports, is the uneven geographical distribution, with Persian textiles circulating primarily in the Black Sea region, due to the close proximity.⁶³ The same must have been the case in inner and Eastern Anatolia/Asia Minor, although the evidence is relatively scant.⁶⁴ At the same time, it could also be suggested that local culture in the Black Sea and Eastern Anatolia/Asia Minor presented, at least to a certain extent, borderland traits, continuing thus the long-standing cultural and mercantile connection with Persia.⁶⁵

In any case, there is preliminary evidence that Ottoman notables in these regions of Anatolia/Asia Minor sought Persian artifacts as well.⁶⁶ In the codex of Saint George of Argroupolis/Gümüşhane there is indirect textual evidence, which can be matched with actual objects, that Persian sashes were converted into stole-shaped vestments (see Fig. 10).⁶⁷ This practice shows a creative local engagement with objects of Persian manufacture. Moreover, Persian imports,

62 I make the distinction between historical and private collection here, as the private collection of the Benaki family is not indicative of the reception of Persian art during the Ottoman period.

63 Vryzidis, “Persian Textiles in the Ottoman Empire.”

64 There is, for example, the important Safavid textile, most probably used as a curtain for the sanctuary door, which comes from a Christian monastery close to Ikonion/Konya. See Nikolaos Vryzidis and Elena Papastavrou, “Notes on the Sanctuary Curtain: Symbolisms and Iconographies in the Greek Church,” in *L'évolution de la broderie de tradition byzantine en Méditerranée orientale et dans le monde slave (1200–1800)*, ed. Joëlle Dalègre, Elena Papastavrou, and Marielle Martiniani Reber, *Cahiers balkaniques* 48 (2021): 91–122; 103–105.

65 On the position that the Empire of Trebizond held in late medieval Eurasian trade, see Aslıhan Akışık-Karakullukçu, “The Empire of Trebizond in the World-Trade System: Economy and Trade,” in *Trade in Byzantium*, 323–336. In fact, Trebizond and Ilkhanid Iran traded so much towards the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries that their weighting system merged. Silk, in particular, arrived from Iran and the Caucasus to Trebizond. See Sergey P. Karpov, *Istoria tēs Autokratōrias tēs Trapezountas* Ιστορία της Αυτοκρατορίας της Τραπεζούντας [History of the Empire of Trebizond], trans. Evgenia Krichevskaya and Angeliki Eustathiou, ed. Mikhail Gratsianski and Stefanos Kordosis (Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, 2017), 152 and 166. But even earlier, during the Middle Byzantine period, Trebizond was home to perhaps the most important community of Muslim merchants in Byzantium.

66 Suraiya Faroqhi, “Trade Between the Ottomans and Safavids: The Acem Tüccarı and Others,” in *Iran and the World in the Safavid Age*, ed. Willem Floor and Edmund Herzig (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 237–252; 242–244.

67 Anna Ballian, *Relics of the Past: Treasures of the Greek Orthodox Church and the Population Exchange. The Benaki Museum Collection* (Milan: 5 Continents and Benaki Museum, 2011), catalog 27; Vryzidis, “Persian Textiles in the Ottoman Empire,” 231–232 and figure 6. See also Elena Papastavrou and Nikolaos Vryzidis, “Sacred Patchwork: Patterns of Textile Reuse in Greek Vestments and Ecclesiastical Veils during the Ottoman Era,” in *Spolia Reincarnated: Afterlives of Objects, Materials, and Spaces in Anatolia from Antiquity to the Ottoman Era*, ed. Ivana Jevtić and Suzan Yalman (Istanbul: ANAMED Publications, 2019), 259–286; figure 10.

as opposed to Italian and Indian, are rarely noted, if ever.⁶⁸ This suggests that they may have been standard artifacts in this specific cultural context. Finally, one of the very few known Persian floor coverings with a documented Christian use, now in the Benaki Museum collection, was collected from a church in Anatolia/Asia Minor.⁶⁹ Although a modest finding, it may nevertheless indicate the particular appreciation of Persian rugs, especially considering that much ecclesiastical patrimony has been lost to the region's turbulent history.⁷⁰



Fig. 10. Small omophorion of two sashes, silk and metal thread, eighteenth century, Iran. From Anatolia/Asia Minor, Benaki Museum (33735). Image courtesy of Vassilios Tsonis. © Benaki Museum.

In Greece, the preference for Persian textiles came particularly from Mount Athos—to be more specific, from Iveron Monastery. The brotherhood's continuous association with Georgia, which was under Safavid suzerainty from the sixteenth century on, is the most logical explanation for the vast number of Safavid textiles that survive in its sacristy, more than any other in Athos and Greece

68 In a previous article, "Persian Textiles in the Ottoman Empire," 229, I mentioned that Kashan appears in the codex as the provenance of a textile. Unfortunately, this is probably a misreading of the scribe's elusive handwriting. The absence of mention of Persian textiles further reinforces the above-mentioned interpretative hypothesis.

69 Although on display at the Benaki Museum of Islamic Art, this is a refugee heirloom. See Vryzidis, "Persian Textiles in the Ottoman Empire," 234 and figure 8.

70 Relevant to this dynamic is the detailed description of the Persian carpets used in the 1589 coronation of the first Russian Patriarch. The Archbishop of Ellassona Arsenius (1548–1625), who had attended the ceremony, expressed deep admiration in verse, utilizing also the toponym Persia, implying a thorough knowledge of this craft among the members of the Greek Orthodox elite of the time (Vryzidis, "Persian Textiles in the Ottoman Empire," 233–234).

(see Fig. 11).⁷¹ Safavid textiles were also found in other Athonite monasteries, such as Vatopedi,⁷² perhaps arriving in Athos via Russia, an important transit center of Safavid textile trade,⁷³ as well as an important source of oblations for the monasteries.⁷⁴ The appearance of Persian textiles in the rest of Greece is considerably more sporadic.⁷⁵ Perhaps the most interesting aspect, at least from a Christian point of view, is the use of Persian textiles with animal motifs (see Fig. 11). I have argued elsewhere that such textiles were used for their ease of cultural translation, particularly given the role that animals, especially birds, held in the Christian religious narrative.⁷⁶ This was a particular advantage of Persian textiles, allowing for their favorable reception in a Christian context.

It thus seems reasonable to conclude that Greek Orthodox communities received Safavid and Qajar textiles positively, as refined contemporary products, but on a very different scale than prior. While the cultural memory of Persia was waning during the Ottoman period, it could still be reactivated under the right circumstances. This same trajectory is evident in the intellectual arena as well, with increasing disinterest in Persian manuscripts, illuminated or not, and only few extant translations of Persian texts into Modern Greek.⁷⁷

71 Vryzidis, “Persian Textiles in the Ottoman Empire,” figures 3 and 4. Even though the monastery became dominated by the Greek majority during the Ottoman period, the spiritual bond with Georgia continued. See Jacques Lefort, Nicolas Oikonomidès, Denise Papachryssanthou, Vassiliki Kravari, and Hélène Métrévéli, *Actes d’Iviron IV: de 1328 au début du xvie siècle. Édition diplomatique* [Acts of Iveron IV: From 1328 to the beginning of the fifteenth century. Diplomatic edition] (Paris: CNRS Éditions R.Lethielleux, 1995), 5–7, 22–25, and 27–28.

72 Lefort et al., *Actes d’Iviron IV*, figure 2.

73 See for example Robert Chenciner and Magomedkhan Magomedkhanov, “Persian Exports to Russia from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century,” *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* 30 (1992): 123–130; Rudolph Mathee, “Anti-Ottoman Politics and Transit Rights: The Seventeenth-century Trade in Silk Between Safavid Iran and Muscovy,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 35, no. 4 (1994): 739–761.

74 For Russian oblations in embroideries, among other artifacts, see Nikolaos Mertzimekis, “Epitrachelion aux inscriptions dédicatoires et liturgiques du tsar Fiodor Ier Ivanovitch (1584–1598), conservé au monastère de Vatopedi au Mont Athos” [The epitrachelion with dedicatory and liturgical inscriptions of tsar Fiodor I Ivanovitch (1584–1598), preserved in Vatopedi Monastery of Mount Athos], *Annuaire de L’Université de Sofia “St. Kliment Ohridski”* 99, no. 18 (2017): 59–69; Nikolaos Mertzimekis, “Vêtements sacerdotaux russes, brodés d’or au monastère d’Iviron du Mont Athos: source de savoir et de mémoire” [Gold-embroidered Russian sacerdotal vestments from (the monastery of) Iveron of Mount Athos: Source of knowledge and memory], in *L’évolution de la broderie de tradition byzantine en Méditerranée orientale*, *Cahiers balkaniques* 48 (2021): 217–230.

75 Vryzidis, “Persian Textiles in the Ottoman Empire,” 230 and fig. 5.

76 Nikolaos Vryzidis, “Animal Motifs on Asian Textiles Used by the Greek Church: A Case Study of Christian Acculturation,” in *The Hidden Life of Textiles*, 155–184; 160–161 and figures 11–13.

77 A curious case is the 1748 Modern Greek translation of a Persian treaty on geomancy by a Greek Orthodox deacon, found in a manuscript from Anatolia/Asia Minor, now in the collection of the Benaki Museum (Venetia Chatzopoulou, *Katalogos ellēnikōn cheirotōn tou Mouseiou*



Fig. 11. Detail of epitachelion. Fabric: lampas weave, silk, and silver thread, seventeenth century, Safavid Iran. Iveron Monastery (141). Image courtesy of Thanos Kartsoglou. © Iveron Monastery.

Modern Greece: Migrant objects

The last issue I would like to raise in this article is the status of certain objects of Persian manufacture as Modern Greek heirlooms. As already mentioned, there was a large concentration of Persian textiles on the Black Sea shore of Anatolia/Asia Minor, especially in Argyroupolis/Gümüşhane (see Fig. 12).⁷⁸ The heritagization of these objects derives from their process of collection and transfer from Turkey to Greece, in accordance with a bilateral agreement dictating the fate of moveable property after the Christians' relocation from Anatolia/Asia Minor to Greece. These objects essentially followed the same path that their proprietors took after the population exchange in the first quarter of the twentieth century, which led to the emergence of Modern Greece

Benakē (16os–20os aiōnas) Κατάλογος ελληνικών χειρογράφων του Μουσείου Μπενάκη (16ος–20ός αιώνας) [Catalogue of Greek Manuscripts of the Benaki Museum (16th–20th Century)] (Athens: Benaki Museum, 2017), 237–238.

78 Ballian, *Relics of the Past*, catalog 24.

and Turkey.⁷⁹ As a result, the status of these objects was twofold: they were ethnographic material, serving the same educational purposes as the rest of ethnographic collections in Greece; but they were also witnesses to a displaced culture. Given that the integration of the heterogeneous refugee populations was probably not entirely smooth,⁸⁰ it will be interesting to examine how these heirlooms of Persian manufacture were perceived, and the role that their otherness may have played in these interpretations.



Fig. 12. *Phelonion*. Main body: woven fabric and silk, nineteenth century, Qajar Iran. From Argyroupolis/Gümüshane, Benaki Museum (33717). Image courtesy of Vassilios Tsonis. © Benaki Museum.

79 See Paschalis M. Kitromilides, “The Greek-Turkish Population Exchange,” in *Turkey in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Erik-Jan Zürcher (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2008), 255–270.

80 On this matter, see for example Barbaros Tanc, “Where Local Trumps National: Christian Orthodox and Muslim Refugees since Lausanne,” *Balkanologie: Revue d’études pluridisciplinaires* 5, nos. 1–2 (2001): 1–15, <https://journals.openedition.org/balkanologie/732>; Georgios I. Kritikos, “Silencing Inconvenient Memories: Refugees from Asia Minor in Greek Historiography,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 18 (2021): 4269–4284; Eleni Kyramargiou, “Refugees of the 1923 Population Exchange between Turkey and Greece: Greek Efforts for Integration and Assimilation,” in *The Routledge Handbook on Contemporary Turkey*, ed. Joost Jongerden (London: Routledge, 2021), 51–62.

The heirlooms in question were given to three different national museums: the Benaki Museum, the Byzantine Museum (later the Byzantine and Christian Museum), and the Museum of Greek Folk Art (later the Museum of Modern Greek Culture). Notes on the objects' original use and provenance exist in the museum sheets, providing a partial context. Of the three institutions, the Benaki Museum seems to have invested the most in its collection. In its first permanent exhibition, a room was reserved for the "heirlooms of the refugees from Asia Minor, the Pontus and Thrace."⁸¹ The narrative is built on their ecclesial use and their common provenance through forced migration. The selection of objects itself brings transculturality to light, since objects bearing inscriptions in Arabic, Armenian, Georgian, and Karamanlidika (Ottoman Turkish written with Greek characters) are selected in what seems to be an effort to align as closely to the original context as possible.⁸² It is also noticeable that the possible former Islamic use of certain objects is noted, such as the conversion of a prayer carpet into a sanctuary curtain.⁸³ This museological approach is somewhat bold, given that only a decade had passed since the forced migration, and the cultural integration of many refugee communities was still incomplete.

An unexpected exclusion in this exhibition is a masterpiece of Safavid weaving, known to many Persianists from Arthur Upham Pope's monumental *Survey of Persian Art*.⁸⁴ Despite the fact that it was collected from the Monastery of Saint Chariton in Sille (Ikonion/Konya), and had a documentable ecclesial use, it was put on display in a room dedicated to Islamic textiles, alongside holdings from the Benaki family private collection.⁸⁵ It is particularly remarkable that in the description of this object, it was left undecided whether it fell under the Islamic or the Byzantine and post-Byzantine art department, a clear indication that such intercultural objects presented difficulties in their classification.⁸⁶ Given that a large part of the Benaki collection consisted of

81 Benaki Museum, *Mouseion Benakē Athēnai. O odēgos* Μουσείου Μπενάκη Αθήναι. Ο οδηγός [Benaki Museum Athens: The Guide] (Athens: Benaki Museum, 1935), 19.

82 Benaki Museum, *Mouseion Benakē Athēnai*, 19, 20, 22.

83 Benaki Museum, *Mouseion Benakē Athēnai*, 20. See also Vryzidis and Papastavrou, "Notes on the Sanctuary Curtain," 103–110.

84 Arthur Upham Pope and Phyllis Ackerman, *A Survey of Persian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938–1939), 103–105.

85 Benaki Museum, *Mouseion Benakē Athēnai*, 159. On the position that Antony Benakis held in the art scene of Alexandria, see Mina Moraitou, "'Mr. Byzantine et ses amis': Antonis Benakis and the Art Scene of Alexandria," The Benaki Museum, uploaded July 7, 2020, YouTube video, 48:42, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mp3RTL_LuNI.

86 A similar dynamic is reflected in the decision to put on permanent display a Persian floor covering, originally from a Christian church in Anatolia/Asia Minor, in the Museum of Islamic Art, one of the annexes of the Benaki Museum (Vryzidis, "Persian Textiles in the Ottoman Empire," figure 8).

Islamic art purchased from gallerists and dealers, it might also be the case that the hanging's market value further complicated its classification. In the case of the Byzantine Museum, a national museum, the same difficulty seems to have been dealt with by creating a new taxonomy, that of "oriental" textiles coming from vestments, which were displayed in a separate case.⁸⁷ In this case, there is a clear effort to separate the Christian from the Islamic crafts, at the expense of the Christian use and context, so that Christian vestments are decontextualized and recontextualized, taking on an Oriental otherness.

Of all the temporary exhibitions on Anatolian Christian heirlooms, perhaps the most relevant to our discussion is the 2011 *Relics of the Past: Treasures of the Greek Orthodox Church and the Population Exchange. The Benaki Museum Collections*.⁸⁸ Held in the Orthodox Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambésy, Switzerland, it exhibited the biggest selection of migrant objects since their original relocation to Greece. Ioanna Petropoulou wrote an introductory essay for the catalog focusing on the "voice" of the heirlooms and the value offered to this material by new interdisciplinary perspectives. Petropoulou notes that these objects communicate many different layers of culture, in part as a result of their diverse provenances: "Constantinople, Adrianople/Edirne... And finally Georgia, Romania, and Germany and as far afield as Iran."⁸⁹ Despite the writer's clear intentions to communicate the cultural riches of this exhibition, the mention of Iran as a place "far afield" seems to respond more to the expectations of a modern Greek audience, to whom Iran is a distant country, both geographically and culturally. Anna Ballian, who has dedicated much of her life as a researcher to this collection,⁹⁰ researched three particular vestments made of Persian textile among the objects that were sent to Geneva, all of which reflect some of the main traits detected in the consumption patterns hitherto outlined: the preference for precious cloth with floral patterns (see Figs. 10 and 12), the

87 Most of the textiles in this collection were collected from Greece and, as one would expect, are Ottoman (Nikolaos Vryzidis and Elena Papastavrou, "The Double Life of 'Oriental' Textiles at the Byzantine & Christian Museum, Athens: Interpreting Storage and Displayability of Ottoman Fabrics in Twentieth-century Greece," in *Museum Storage and Meaning: Tales from the Crypt*, ed. Mirjam Brusius and Kavita Singh (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 218–227, with notably fewer Persian artifacts (Vryzidis, "Persian Textiles in the Ottoman Empire," figures 5 and 7).

88 Ballian, *Relics of the Past*.

89 Ioanna Petropoulou, "The Voice of the Heirlooms: Their Long Journey through Time," in *Relics of the Past*, 24–33; 26.

90 Anna Ballian, *Thēsauroi apo tēn Mikra Asia kai tēn Anatolikē Thrakē. Sylloges Mouseiou Benakē* [Θησαυροί από την Μικρά Ασία και την Ανατολική Θράκη. Συλλογές Μουσείου Μπενάκη] [Treasures from Asia Minor and Eastern Thrace: The Collections of the Benaki Museum] (Athens: Benaki Museum, 1992); Anna Ballian, "Patronage in Central Asia Minor and the Pontos during the Ottoman Period: The Case of Church Silver, 17th–19th Centuries" (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 1996).

reuse of sashes (see Fig. 10), as well as the role of Georgian patronage.⁹¹ Overall, *Relics of the Past* is an evident move towards reappreciating Christian Anatolian cultural heritage in all its diversity, while illustrating how politically sensitive heritage can be.⁹²

Closing remarks

The preceding analysis suggests that the Greek reception of Persian art, broadly conceived, was dictated by the transformation of Greek culture itself. Given the long timeline of this phenomenon, from the late Middle Ages to the modern era, this is hardly surprising. First, Byzantium interacted with Persian and Persianate cultures, amassing a remarkable amount of information on them, and creating a bank of memory that could be reactivated in future contexts. Later Byzantine culture continued to present this trait perhaps until the very political end of Byzantium, notwithstanding the different forms that the “Persian” could take in the often vague and generic collective conscience: from Rum Seljuk to Ilkhanid and Timurid. During the Ottoman period, this cultural memory lay relatively dormant, waning with time; while the idiosyncrasies of Mount Athos and the Black Sea suggest that Persian art had become more marginal on the wider cultural map. Certainly, the superseding of Ottoman aesthetics as the main “fertilizer” of early modern Greek visual and material culture limited Persian art to a secondary status in that specific context. Finally, the arrival of Persian artifacts from Turkey, as a result of the forced migration of Christians, led to their heritagization as units of cultural memory, with their Christian use being more important than their Persian manufacture. This heritagization is a dynamic negotiation of the heirlooms’ identity, a process that continues even today. Our understanding of each of these differing contexts could be enriched through further and specific future study of the sort essayed here, with respect to this shifting process of cultural memory.

91 Ballian, *Relics of the Past*, catalogs 24, 26, and 27.

92 The originality of *Relics of the Past* can best be understood by comparison to other exhibitions concerning the same subject.