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Seeing the Unseen: Plaster Reliefs in Middle Byzantine Constantinople

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Abstract

This paper discusses the scarce, but crucial evidence for plaster reliefs in Constantinople between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries. While many plaster reliefs survived in the Balkan peninsula, there is room to confirm that they were also used in the capital. Plaster reliefs were a quick substitution for marble, but could also answer aesthetic needs and architectural conventions that continued from Late Antiquity in to Middle and Late Byzantine architecture, even with some changes.

Keywords

Byzantine sculpture – stucco – Constantinople – Byzantine architecture – aesthetic

1 Looking for Plaster Reliefs (9th–15th Centuries)*

The history of a material is the history of the people who worked with it, those who commissioned it, and the society in which they lived. We often perceive Byzantine architecture through durable materials, such as bricks, marble,

* In this paper, I will use the terms ‘plaster reliefs’, ‘stucco’, and ‘plasterworks’ interchangeably to indicate sculptures made of mixtures composed of gypsum and lime indistinctively. This is because most of the Byzantine plaster reliefs made between the ninth and the fifteenth centuries did not benefit from chemical analysis except for those from Epiros, see Papadopoulou, Varvara, “Γύψινα υστεροβυζαντινά ανάγλυφα από την Ήπειρο”, *Αρχαιολογικόν Δελτίον*, LVI/1 (2001): pp. 341–64. Therefore, the terms used in this article do not attempt to indicate their composition.

mosaic, and wall paintings. However, built environments were also spaces decorated with a range of less durable materials such as wooden furnishings, textiles, and plaster reliefs.¹ The first two rarely survive due to later refurbishments, and to the climatic and soil conditions of most of the Mediterranean (except for Egypt), which do not easily allow for their preservation.² However, their crucial role in the articulation and the perception of the space is well known and studied.³

Plaster reliefs, by contrast with wooden and textile furnishing, are less studied among Byzantinists, especially for the period between the ninth and the fifteenth centuries. However, the tradition of using plaster reliefs for the interior and the exterior of buildings was rooted in the Mediterranean long before the Byzantine Empire.⁴ Here is not the place to trace the history of the use of plaster reliefs in the Mediterranean. However, it is important to understand that its use in Roman and Late Antique architecture represents the main tradition on which plasterworks continued to be based in Middle and Late Byzantine buildings, even though plaster reliefs were widely used in Islamic architecture too.⁵ Late Antique plasterworks are the most well-known among Byzantinists. In particular, those from the churches of Ravenna made between the fifth and

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- 1 Recent contributions on wooden furnishings and plaster reliefs are: Vanderheyde, Catherine, *La sculpture byzantine du IX^e au XV^e siècle. Contexte-mise en œuvre-décors* (Paris: Picard, 2020): pp. 127–33; Taddei, Alessandro, “Le porte bizantine in Grecia”, in Iacobini, Antonio (ed.), *Le porte del Paradiso. Arte e tecnologia bizantina tra Italia e Mediterraneo* (Rome: Campisano Editore, 2009): pp. 523–64. For textiles, Bühl, Gudrun, Krody, Sumru B., and Elizabeth D. Williams, *Woven interiors: furnishing Early medieval Egypt* (Washington D.C.: George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2019); Woodfin, Warren, *The Embodied Icon: Liturgical Vestments and Sacramental Power in Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012); a survey of Byzantine texts describing altar coverings is in Speck, Paul, “Die Ἐνδυτή. Literarische Quellen zur Bekleidung des Altars in der byzantinischen Kirche”, *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinischen Gesellschaft*, xv (1966): pp. 323–75.
 - 2 Vanderheyde, *La sculpture byzantine*: pp. 123–33.
 - 3 See above, note 1. For similar observations but on Early Medieval Rome, see Osborne, John, “Textiles and their painted imitations in early Medieval Rome”, *Papers of the British School at Rome*, lx (1992): pp. 309–51.
 - 4 Lucas, Alfred, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989): pp. 76–9.
 - 5 The use of stucco in Byzantine religious buildings tends to be bound to the space reserved to architectural sculpture. It differs from the use of stucco in Islamic architecture, even though there are some exceptions. For a comparative analysis of Byzantine stucco and stucco production in Medieval Italy and Islamic architecture, see Vanni, Flavia, *Byzantine stucco decorations (ca 850–1453): cultural and economic implications across the Mediterranean* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2020): I, pp. 222–76.

the sixth centuries,⁶ those from the church of St. Mary in Grad (sixth century), from the Euphrasian Basilica in Poreč (sixth century),⁷ from St. Maria Formosa in Pula (sixth century) and in the duomo,⁸ those from several buildings on Cyprus (fourth to seventh centuries),⁹ and finally those from Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (sixth century).¹⁰ Most of these cases were included in general surveys on the use of stucco between the Late Antique period and the Early Middle Ages and in studies concerned with the evolution of the plasterwork technique in the West.¹¹

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- 6 These are those from the church of Santa Croce (beginning of the fifth century), the Baptistry of the Orthodox, the Baptistry of the Arians, the Archbishop chapel, the church of Sant'Agata Maggiore, San Vitale, and Sant'Apollinare in Classe, on these buildings, see Pasquini, Laura, *La decorazione a stucco in Italia fra Tardoantico e Alto Medioevo* (Ravenna: Longo 2002): pp. 24–51 and bibliography quoted there. Other buildings were decorated with plaster reliefs too as testified in the ninth century by Agnellus of Ravenna (*Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis*, edited by Deborah Mauskopf-Deliyannis (Turnhout: Brill 2006): ch. 23, 41, 86.
- 7 Russo, Eugenio, *Sculture del complesso eufrasiano di Parenzo* (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane 1991); on the stuccoes from the episcopo, see Matejčić, Ivan, “Breve nota e novità sulle decorazioni a stucco del periodo paleocristiano in Istria”, in Sapin, Christian (ed.), *Stucs et décors de la fin de l'Antiquité au Moyen Âge (V^e–XII^e siècle)*, *Actes du Colloque international tenu à Poitiers du 16 au 19 septembre 2004* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006 [Bibliothèque de l'Antiquité tardive, 10]): pp. 125–9; Matejčić, Ivan and Chevalier, Pascale, “L'episcopium de Poreč”, in Balcon, Sylvie et al. (eds.), *Des 'domus ecclesiae' aux palais épiscopaux: Actes du colloque tenu à Autun du 26 au 28 novembre 2009* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012): pp. 163–72.
- 8 Pasquini, *La decorazione a stucco*: pp. 63–5.
- 9 Argoud, Gilbert, Callot, Olivier, and Bruno Helly, *Salamine de Chypre*, xi. *Une résidence byzantine, “L'huilierie”* (Paris: de Boccard 1980): pp. 27–8, 31–6, pl. IVa, xxiii 7–8, xxiv–viii; Rautman, Marcus, *A Cypriot village of late antiquity: Kalavastos-Kopetra in the Vasilikos Valley* (Portsmouth, R.I.: JRA, 2003 [Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series, 52]): pp. 46–7; Panayidis, Panayiotis, “Βυζαντινή Κύπρος I: Ὑστερη Αρχαιότητα και Πρώιμη Βυζαντινή περίοδος (284–649 μ.Χ.)”, in Neokleous, Savvas (ed.), *Ιστορία της Κύπρου (1000 π.Χ.–649 μ.Χ.)*, I (Athina: Melathron Oikoumenikou Hellenismou, 2018): pp. 223–5, figs. 45, 47, 50.
- 10 Hawkins, Ernest J., “Plaster and stucco cornices in Hagia Sophia”, in *Actes du XII^e congrès international des études byzantines, Ochrde 10–16 septembre 1961* (Beograd: Naučno delo, 1964): III, pp. 131–5; Fobelli, Maria Luigia, *Un tempio per Giustiniano: Santa Sofia di Costantinopoli e la Descrizione di Paolo Silenziario* (Roma: Viella, 2005): p. 65; Guiglia, Alessandra and Barsanti, Claudia, “İstanbul Ayasofyası'nın Dekorasyonlarının Az Bilinen Yönleri / Aspetti meno noti della decorazione della Santa Sofia di Costantinopoli”, *Arkeoloji ve Sanat*, CXXXIX (2012): pp. 191–201; Niewöhner, Philipp and Teteriatnikov, Natalia, “The South Vestibule of Hagia Sophia at Istanbul. The Ornamental Mosaics and the Private Door of the Patriarchate”, *DOP*, LXVIII (2015): pp. 124–5.
- 11 Pasquini, *La decorazione a stucco*; Sapin, Christian (ed.), *Le stuc, visage oublié de l'art médiéval. Catalogue de l'expositions, Poitiers, Musée Sainte-Croix, 16 sept. 2004–16 janv. 2005* (Paris: Somogy, 2004): pp. 130–3; Id. (ed.), *Stucs et décors*: pp. 115–32; Palazzo-Bertholon,

The record becomes patchy when we attempt to trace the continuous use of plasterworks from the seventh century until 1453. I will skip here the seventh and the eighth centuries because they are not the focus of this volume; it is sufficient to say that stucco in the seventh and eighth centuries continued to be used as testified by the examples in Cyprus,¹² and by some capitals in the Basilica of St. Demetrios in Thessaloniki.¹³ From the ninth century onwards, the evidence for plaster reliefs increases, and it includes friezes, capitals, arcolia, proskynetaria frames, colonnettes, free-standing liturgical furnishings, and window transennae.¹⁴ While most of the evidence survives in monuments located in the Balkan peninsula, it should not be considered a localised phenomenon. Stuccoworks were also found in few, but key-case studies, in Constantinople.

2 The Evidence from Constantinople

This paper focuses on the few surviving plaster reliefs from Constantinople in light of contemporary production from the rest of the Byzantine Empire. It argues that their use was not only dictated by the 'absence' of marble, but from the perpetuation of aesthetic conventions which continued from the Late Antique period, even with some changes. The evidence from Constantinople

Benedicte, *La nature des stucs entre le V^e et le XII^e siècle dans l'Europe médiévale: confrontation de la caractérisation physico-chimique des matériaux aux contextes géologiques, techniques et artistiques de la production*, in Sapin (ed.), *Stucs et décors*: pp. 13–48; Ead., "Le décor de stuc autour de l'an Mil: aspects techniques d'une production artistique disparue", *Les Cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa*, XL (2009): pp. 285–98; Ead., "Confronti tecnici e decorativi sugli stucchi intorno all'VIII secolo", in Pace, Valentino (ed.), *L'VIII secolo: un secolo inquieto. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi, Cividale del Friuli, 4–7 dicembre 2008* (Udine: Comune di Cividale del Friuli, 2010): pp. 285–96.

12 Panayidis, *Βυζαντινή Κύπρος I*: pp. 224–7, fig. 47.

13 Bauer, Franz Alto, *Eine Stadt und ihr Patron: Thessaloniki und der Heilige Demetrios* (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2013): pp. 106, n. 97, fig. 66.

14 A survey on plaster reliefs (or stuccoes) is in Vanni, *Byzantine stucco decorations*; a preliminary census for middle Byzantine stuccoes is in Ead., "Aspetti meno noti della scultura medio bizantina: la decorazione a stucco", in Cosentino, Salvatore, Pomero, Margherita Elena, and Giorgio Vespignani (eds.), *Dialoghi con Bisanzio: spazi di discussione, percorsi di ricerca: atti dell'VIII Congresso dell'Associazione Italiana di Studi Bizantini (Ravenna, 22–25 settembre 2015)* (Spoleto: CISAM, 2019): pp. 119–40. Other quick surveys are in Vanderheyde, Catherine, *La sculpture architecturale byzantine dans le thème de Nikopolis du X^e au début du XIII^e siècle (Épire, Étolie-Acarnanie et Sud de l'Albanie)* (Athènes: ÉFA, 2005 [Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique. Supplément, 45]): pp. 83–87; Papadopoulou, "Τύψινα υστεροβυζαντινά ανάγλυφα": pp. 341–344.

is composed of most of the same types of decorations recorded elsewhere: friezes, proskynetaria frames, and window transennae. I will not discuss here window transennae, because they deserve a particular focus.¹⁵ However, it is important to bear in mind that from the Middle Byzantine period onwards their use became almost ubiquitous.¹⁶ In Constantinople, and areas where marble was abundant, such as the Mani, window transennae were also often made of marble or stone.¹⁷ However, plaster window transennae allowed for a simple glazing which was sometimes used in combination with other types of glazing (stained glass and marble) to mark different areas of the church, as has been observed for the Pantokrator monastery (twelfth century), and the pareklesion of St. Saviour at Chora (1316–21);¹⁸ another case is transennae of a Late Byzantine tomb in the narthex of the Pammakaristos church for which there is less information excepting that they were used in the dome.¹⁹ The pieces that will be discussed in the following lines are, unfortunately, the only known surviving stucco decorations from Constantinople. However, they are crucial to trace the continuous use of stucco during the Middle and probably the Late Byzantine period in Constantinople, which followed more general trends in Byzantine architecture.

The first plaster relief to discuss is a fragmentary frieze found in a room excavated in 1983 by the Istanbul Archaeological Museum Directorate, during

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- 15 A preliminary list of stucco window transennae is in Vanni, *Byzantine stucco decoration*, II: pp. 274–282.
- 16 Ousterhout, Robert G., *Master Builders of Byzantium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999): pp. 151–6; Dell'Acqua, Francesca, "Plaster Transennae and the shaping of light in Byzantium", in Boissavit-Camus, Brigitte, Chevalier, Pascale, and Sylvie Balcon-Berry, *La mémoire des pierres: mélanges d'archéologie, d'art et d'histoire en l'honneur de Christian Sapin* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016): pp. 325–34.
- 17 For Constantinople, see Ousterhout, *Master Builders*: p. 152. For the Mani, see Drandakes, Nikolaos, *Βυζαντινά γλυπτά της Μάνης* (Athina: Archaiologiki Hetaireia, 2002): pp. 114, 202/206, 274/274, figs. 181, 318, 414.
- 18 On the Pantokrator: Dell'Acqua, Francesca, "The Stained-Glass Windows from the Chora and the Pantocrator: a 'Byzantine' Mystery?", in Klein, Holger K. and Ousterhout, Robert G. (eds.), *Restoring Byzantium. The Kariye Camii in Istanbul and the Byzantine Institute restoration* (New York: Wallach Art Gallery 2004): pp. 68–77; Ousterhout, Robert G., "The Architectural Decoration of the Pantokrator Monastery: Evidence Old and New", in Ödekan, Ayla, Akyürek, Engin, and Nevra Necipoğlu, *Papers of the First Sevgi Gönül Memorial Symposium 2007* (Istanbul: Anamed, 2010): pp. 432–9. On Chora: Megaw, Arthur H.S., "Notes on Recent Work of the Byzantine Institute in Istanbul", *DOA*, XVII (1963): p. 349 note 49, 365; Ousterhout, Robert G., *The architecture of the Kariye camii in Istanbul* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987): pp. 54–60.
- 19 Hallensleben, Horst, "Untersuchungen zur Baugeschichte der ehemaligen Pammakaristoskirche, der heutigen Fethiye Camii in Istanbul", *Istanbuler Mitteilungen*, XIII–XIV (1963–4): pp. 180–1, fig. 11.

the construction of the railway.²⁰ The room is located in the area of the palace of the Boukoleon, north of the so-called 'Justinian House'.²¹ The room measures 5×7 metres, and it had a decorative scheme which, at least in its last phase, was composed of different materials: cornices and colonnettes made of architectural ceramics, two stone arches with glass inlaid, marble friezes, a marble sculpture of angel made in champlévé technique, and a stucco frieze.²² They are all today on display at the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul, and were dated by Marlia Mundell-Mango to the second half of the ninth century.²³ The plaster relief probably belongs to this phase, since a chronology to the second half of the ninth century fits well with the style and the decorative pattern. In fact, the stucco frieze is decorated with a series of flutes and vertical fillets (probably darts) (Figs. 1–2), which is the same motif as the architectural ceramics from the same room.²⁴ Flutes of this kind tend to disappear from marble and stucco sculpture after the end of the tenth century.²⁵ Some close comparisons are the marble cornice in the Fatih Camii (church of St. Stephen) at Trilye (ninth century),²⁶ and the cornices and the impost of the capital from the lost church of St. Clemens in Ankara.²⁷ The room's opus sectile pavement is later than the carved elements, and should be dated to the time of the emperor Nikephoros Phokas (963–9).²⁸ The original function of this room is unknown, since its surroundings were not excavated. Scholars agree

20 Asgari, Nuşin, "İstanbul temel kazılarında haberler-1983", *Araştırma Sonuçları Toplantısı*, 11 (1984): pp. 45–6, figs. 12–9.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid. Mundell-Mango, Marlia, "Polychrome Tiles Found at Istanbul: Typology, Chronology and Function", Gerstel, Sharon E.G. and Lauffenburger, Julia A. (eds.), *A Lost Art Rediscovered: The Architectural Ceramics of Istanbul* (Baltimore: The Walters Art Museum, 2001): pp. 22–5, 172–5.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.: pp. 172–5 (n. cat. 1).

25 Some Early Byzantine examples are the marble cornices and bracket from the Kalenderhane camii (Theotokos Kyriotissa) in Istanbul: Peschlow, Urs, "Architectural sculpture", in Striker, Cecil L., Kuban, Doğan (eds.), *Kalenderhane in Istanbul: the excavations. Final reports on the archaeological exploration and restoration at Kalenderhane Camii 1966–1978* (Mainz: von Zabern, 2007): pp. 296–7, cat. no. 41, 58, 64, pl. 7.41, 8.64.

26 Di Bello, Claudia, "Le sculture della Fatih Camii a Trilye: una tappa significativa nel processo di transizione verso la plastica mediobizantina", in Di Bello, Claudia, Gandolfi, Riccardo, and Monica Latella (eds.), *In corso d'opera: ricerche dei dottorandi in storia dell'arte della Sapienza*, 11 (Roma: Campisano Editore): pp. 11–8.

27 Peschlow, Urs, *Ankara: die bauarchäologischen Hinterlassenschaften aus römischer und byzantinischer Zeit* (Wien: Phoibos Verlag, 2015): pp. 213–6, 229–30, pls. 157–61.

28 Guiglia, Alessandra, "The marble floor decoration in Constantinople: prolegomena to a corpus", in Şahin, Mustafa (ed.), *XI. Uluslararası Antik Mozaik Sempozyumu, 16–20 Ekim 2009 Bursa, Türkiye/11th International Colloquium on Ancient Mosaics October 16th–20th*,



FIGURE 1 Istanbul, Arkeoloji Müzeleri, stucco frieze from the room in the Boukoleon palace area excavated in 1983
PHOTO: AUTHOR

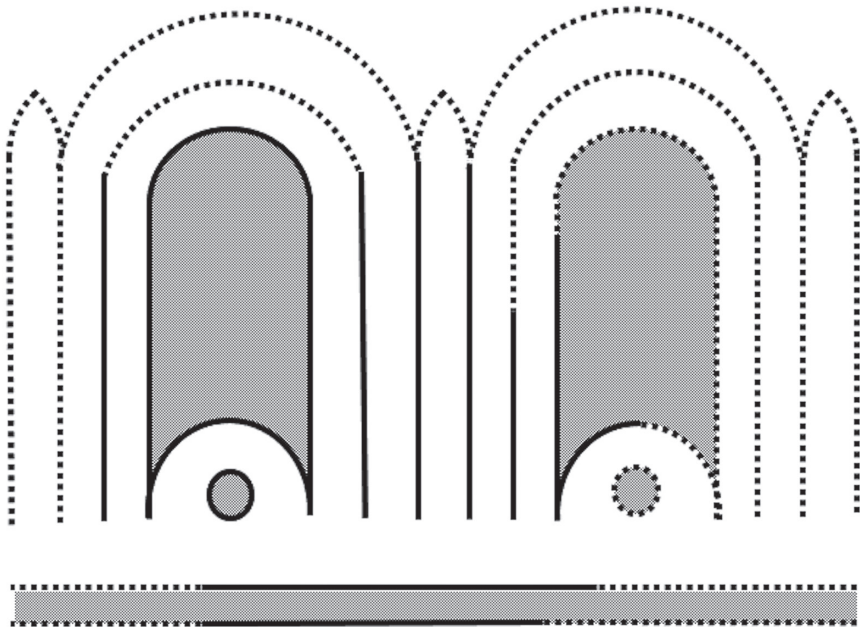


FIGURE 2 Drawing of the stucco frieze from the Boukoleon palace area, and hypothetical reconstruction of the decorative pattern
DRAWING BY THE AUTHOR

that by the time of the installation of the marble floor, the room functioned as a chapel or oratory. Therefore, the room was built and decorated between the second half of the ninth and the late tenth century, which corresponds with the interest shown to this area by the emperors from Theophilos (829–42) to Nikephoros Phokas.²⁹ The use of stucco in this room seems to me to be a choice not dictated by the absence of marble, because marble supply was not a problem in Constantinople and the emperors in this period did not lack the means to afford marble.³⁰ The plaster frieze reproduces the motif encountered on some ceramic cornices from the same room, which were mounted on walls through chunks of plaster.³¹ It is possible that the plaster relief was worked at the time of installing the ceramics and modelled *en-pendant* with them. These architectural ceramics are among the first encountered in Constantinople, perhaps an introduction from the Abbasid territories.³² The stucco frame of the Boukoleon room, even in its generic design, belonged to this innovative decorative system and it is possible that the two materials (stucco and ceramics) were often paired together.

Plaster reliefs and architectural ceramics also appeared next to each other in a room belonging to the Sampson hospital complex;³³ though, there the two may not have been contemporary. The plaster reliefs were described by

2009, *Bursa Turkey* (Istanbul: Ege Yayınları, 2011): pp. 429–30 and bibliography quoted there.

29 Bolognesi suggested identifying this room with the chapel of the Archangel Michael in the palace of Kamilas built by the emperor Theophilos (829–42), Bolognesi, Eugenia Marta, Berucci, Giuseppe, and Daniele Garamone, “The Bukoleon monumental itinerary and the two connected western and eastern itineraries”, *Araştırma Sonuçları Toplantısı*, xxv (2008): pp. 122–3. Mundell-Mango, “Polychrome Tiles”: p. 25 note 25 dated the room to the post-iconoclastic period due to the image of the angel and connected the room to the addition to the Lower Palace made at the time of Michael III (842–67) or Basil I (867–76). For the date of the opus sectile to the time of Nikephoros Phokas (963–9), see above, note 25.

30 This has been already discussed for architectural ceramics and their use in Constantinople, see in part for the Boukoleon room Mundell-Mango, “Polychrome Tiles”: p. 25.

31 Lauffenburger, Julie A. and Vogt, Christine, “Technical Insight into the Working Practices of the Byzantine Tile Maker”, in Gerstel and Lauffenburger (eds.), *A Lost Art Rediscovered*: pp. 74–5. In the Theotokos church of the monastery of Constantine Lips there is again the use of stucco mouldings and architectural tiles. However, here the plaster cornice was merely functional to support the architectural tile, and therefore, it did not have any carved or painted decoration since it was ‘covered’ by the ceramic frieze, Gerstel and Lauffenburger (eds.), *A Lost Art Rediscovered*: pp. 36; 189–95, in part. fig. 30, VI.3.

32 Mundell-Mango, “Polychrome Tiles”: p. 22.

33 The room is called ‘martyrium’ in the report of Dirimtekin, while it is named as ‘room no. 5’ by Peschlow, see Dirimtekin, Feridun, “Les fouilles faites en 1946–1947 et en 1958–1960 entre Sainte-Sophie et Sainte-Irène à Istanbul”, *Cahiers Archéologiques fin de l’Antiquité et Moyen Age*, XIII (1962): pp. 161–85; Peschlow, Urs, *Die Irenenkirche in Istanbul*.

Dirimtekin as ‘cadre d’icones’ decorated with geometric patterns and dated between the eleventh and the twelfth centuries.³⁴ Dirimtekin justified this chronology based on the close resemblance of the stucco frames to some at the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul; however, the inventory number provided by Dirimtekin does not correspond with the published catalogues of sculptures of the museum, nor those on display, and the current location of the stucco proskynetaria is unknown;³⁵ thus, I could not verify this chronology. Some information can be extracted from the context to which they belonged: the room no. 5. Room no. 5 is the result of some works which altered the sixth-century structure and may be connected with the refurbishments made by Leo *droungarios* in the 970s when he was in charge of the hospital of Sampson.³⁶ The opus sectile floor confirms this chronology³⁷ and the architectural ceramics,³⁸ while the masonry of the niches (recessed-brick) provides us only with a *terminus post-quem* (mid-tenth century).³⁹ We can neither exclude nor confirm, that the stucco frames and the wall paintings they were associated with, but now lost, are later works. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries the hospital was still functioning and had some religious images destroyed by the Crusaders during the sack of 1204.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, the images mentioned in the text cannot be identified with those framed by the plaster frames.⁴¹ Therefore, we should date the plaster frames more broadly to the Middle Byzantine period, a chronology that fits well with the general spread of proskynetaria frames in Byzantine architecture.⁴²

Untersuchungen zur Architektur (Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1977 [Istanbuler Mitteilungen, Beiheft 18]): pp. 146–9, 168–71, 187–8, 190–205, pl. 1, n. 5.

34 Dirimtekin, “Les fouilles”: p. 175.

35 The inventory numbers provided by Dirimtekin are inv. no. 6156–6181. The plaster reliefs may be located in some of the deposits of Hagia Sophia. Unfortunately, all attempts to connect with the former Hagia Sophia Museum, and the Archaeological Museum were unsuccessful.

36 Mango, Cyril, “Ninth- to Eleventh-Century Constantinople: The Cultural Context”, in Gerstel, Lauffenburger (eds.), *A Lost Art Rediscovered*: p. 9.

37 Guiglia, *The marble floor decoration*: pp. 425–6.

38 Mundell-Mango, “Polychrome Tiles”: pp. 26–8.

39 Peschlow, *Die Irenenkirche in Istanbul*: p. 170, plan 1. On recessed-brick see Ousterhout, *Master Builders*: p. 174, fig. 136.

40 The account of the sack of the hospital is in Darrouzès, Jean, “Le mémoire de Constantin Stilbès contre les Latins”, *REB*, XXI (1963): ll. 380–4, p. 83, note 89. On the history of the hospital until the Fourth Crusade, see Spatharakis, Dionysios, “Discovering a Military Order of the Crusades: The Hospital of St. Sampson of Constantinople”, *Viator*, xxxvii (2005): pp. 255–73.

41 The account mentions the images of a ‘templon’: *Ibid.*

42 Kalopissi-Verti, Sophia, “The Proskynetaria of the Templon and Narthex: Form, Imagery, Spatial Connections, and Receptions”, in Gerstel, Sharon E.J. (ed.), *Thresholds of the*

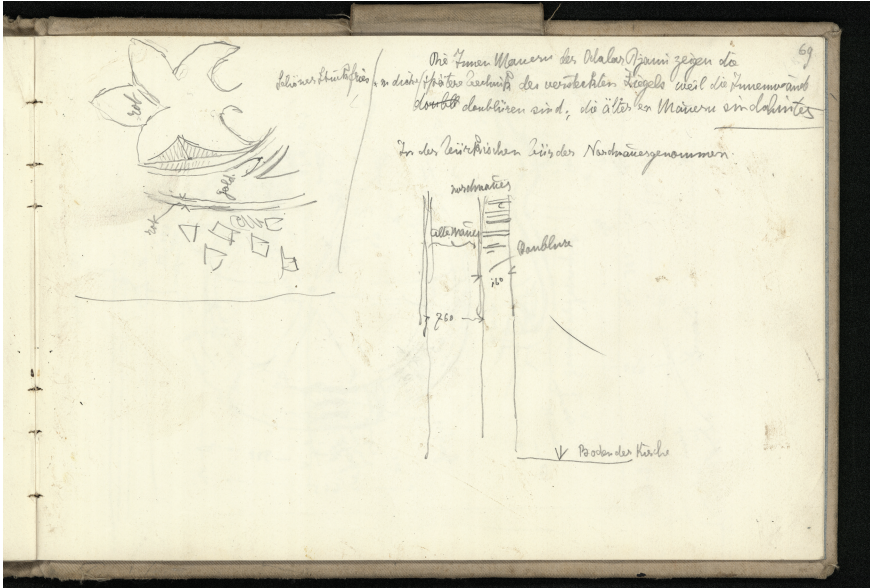


FIGURE 3 Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (DAI), Zentrale, Archiv der Zentrale, NL Schazmann, Paul, No. 61 Skizzenbuch grau, p. 69
COURTESY OF DEUTSCHES ARCHÄOLOGISCHES INSTITUT

The now almost destroyed Odalar Camii preserved some fragments of plaster reliefs too. The original function of the Odalar Camii had been at the centre of a lot of debate since the beginning of the twentieth century;⁴³ however, the current opinion is that it probably belonged to St. John of Petra's monastery, one of the wealthiest monasteries of Constantinople, especially during the Late Byzantine period.⁴⁴ The stucco pieces are now lost, but they survive in two unpublished drawings of Schatzmann (1934) preserved at the DAI archive in Berlin in 'Skizzenbuch grau' no. 61. The first (Figs. 3–4) shows a frieze with a five-leave palmette and half-palmette scroll with traces of gilding and red paint (probably the preparation for the golden leaf). The second is a life-size profile

Sacred. Architectural, Art Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives on Religious Screens, East and West (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2006): pp. 107–34.

- 43 See Barsanti, Claudia, "Una ricerca sulle sculture in opera nelle cisterne bizantine di Istanbul: la Ipek Bodrum Sarnici (la cisterna n. 10)", in Rigo, Antonio, Babuin, Andrea, and Michele Trizio (eds.), *Vie per Bisanzio. VII Congresso Nazionale dell'Associazione Italiana di Studi Bizantini, Venezia 25–28 novembre 2009* (Bari: Edizioni di Pagina, 2013): pp. 484–90.
- 44 Asutay-Effenberger, Neslihan, "Das Kloster des Ioannes Prodromos τῆς Πέτρας in Konstantinopel und seine Beziehung zur Odalar und Kasım Ağa Camii", *Millennium*, v (2008): pp. 299–325.



FIGURE 4 Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (DAI), Zentrale, Archiv der Zentrale, NL Schazmann, Paul, No. 61 Skizzenbuch grau, p. 69, detail of the stucco frieze
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of a torus cornice with two flat fillets and blue and red paint traces (Fig. 5). Perhaps the pieces are parts of the frieze photographed by Schatzmann and published by Westphalen in pl. 38 no. 4, whose material is not specified.⁴⁵ Both

45 Westphalen, Stephan, *Die Odalar Camii in Istanbul: Architektur und Malerei einer mittelbyzantinischen Kirche* (Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1998 [Istanbuler Mitteilungen, Beiheft 42]: p. 42 (cat. no. 3, 4b), pl. 38 fig. 4.

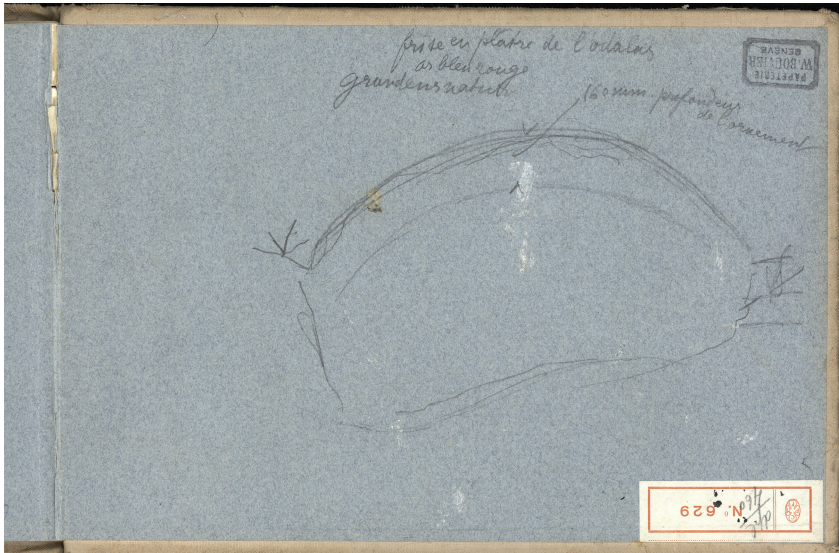


FIGURE 5 Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (DAI), Zentrale, Archiv der Zentrale, NL Schazmann, Paul, No. 61 Skizzenbuch grau, internal cover not numbered COURTESY OF DEUTSCHES ARCHÄOLOGISCHES INSTITUT

the photograph and the sketches document the display of the same decorative motif, the torus profile, and the dimensions, which are for the first fragment 16 cm thick,⁴⁶ and for the second a diameter of 14 cm.⁴⁷ They both had traces of red paint on the leaves, while only the second had blue in the recessed parts, a common practice in Byzantine sculpture.⁴⁸ Gold is not recorded here, but it is possible that the traces of red may belong to the preparation for gilding. The original location of the plaster friezes within the building is unknown. However, one of the drawings of Schatzmann seems to suggest that one was located next to a mosaic surface (Fig. 4); this is not surprising since stucco cornices are frequently used to mark the transitions between wall revetments made of opus sectile and niches, spandrels or domes covered with mosaic.⁴⁹

46 Schatzmann annotated these dimensions on the drawing, *ibid.*: fig. 5.

47 Westphalen, *Die Odalar Camii*: p. 142, no. 3.

48 Melvani, Nicholas, *Late Byzantine Sculpture. Studies in the Visual Cultures of the Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013): p. 36; Barsanti, Claudia, "Scultura dipinta a Bisanzio", in Andreuccetti, Paola Antonella and Bindani, Deborah (eds.), *Il colore nel Medioevo: arte, simbolo e tecnica. Tra materiali costitutivi e colori aggiunti: mosaici, intarsi e plastica lapidea. Atti delle giornate di studi, Lucca, 24-25-26 ottobre 2013* (Lucca: Istituto Storico Lucchese, 2016): pp. 61-86; Pedone, Silvia, "Bisanzio (ri)colorata: tecniche, effetti e problemi aperti", *ibid.*: pp. 87-102; Vanderheyde, *La sculpture byzantine*: pp. 161-6.

49 This is the case of the stringcourse cornices in the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (see above, note 10 for bibliography on them), and those in the Katholikon of Hosios Loukas,

The thickness of the frieze perhaps suggests a stringcourse or a dome cornice, as it is almost identical to the one in the katholikon of Hosios Loukas (ca 15 cm),⁵⁰ and it is thicker than the plaster reliefs and marble *arcosolia* used for funerary monuments (usually between 5 and 10cm).⁵¹ Schatzmann's drawing of the plaster relief is also very important because it testifies to the use of mosaic in the church; whether it was in the crypt, or the upper church is impossible to say.⁵² Indeed, it is known that the lower crypt was decorated with wall paintings, while there is less information about the upper church.⁵³ Regarding the chronology of the fragments, it is impossible to say whether they belong to the Middle or Late Byzantine phase of the building. The torus profile and the ornament are typical to both periods, finding comparisons with the stucco friezes from the Çanlı Kilise in Cappadocia (around the end of the eleventh century),⁵⁴ with the torus marble stringcourse cornice of the northern church of the Pantokrator monastery (twelfth century),⁵⁵ and with the one in the dome of the south church of the Lips monastery (1290–1300).⁵⁶ Both chronologies correspond to some of the phases of the monument: ninth to tenth century for the crypt, mid-twelfth century for the church,⁵⁷ and end of the thirteenth-beginning of the fourteenth century for the sculptures.⁵⁸

see Schultz, Robert W. and Barnsley, Sydney H., *The Monastery of Saint Luke of Stiris in Phocis, and the dependent Monastery of Saint Nicolas in the Fields, near Skripou, in Boeotia* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1901): pp. 27–9, pl. 28.

- 50 These are the measures of the dome cornice's parts now on display at the sculptural collection of the monastery located in the old refectory.
- 51 See the *arcosolia* made of marble and stucco in the narthex of the katholikon of the Iviron monastery, Pazaras, Theocharis, "Οι κτητορικοί τάφοι στο καθολικό της μονής Ιβήρων", *Βυζαντινά*, xxvi (2006): pp. 125–52; Id., "Γύψινες ανάγλυφες διακοσμήσεις της μεσοβυζαντινής εποχής στο καθολικό της Μονής Ιβήρων", *Μακεδονικά*, xxxvi (2007): pp. 47–64. Some stucco friezes which may belong to a tomb were found in the Çanlı Kilise (Cappadocia): Ousterhout, Robert G., *A Byzantine Settlement in Cappadocia* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2005): pp. 189 note 29, 206, figs. 254, 269.
- 52 The fragment was probably already out of context together with other fragments of sculptures when drawn by Schatzmann, see Westphalen, *Die Odalar Camii*: p. 141.
- 53 *Ibid.*: pp. 85–140.
- 54 Ousterhout, *A Byzantine settlement in Cappadocia*: p. 189 note 29.
- 55 Id., "The architectural decoration of the Pantokrator": p. 434, fig. 8.
- 56 Melvani, *Late Byzantine Sculpture*: pp. 190–1 note 6 and bibliography quoted there.
- 57 Westphalen *Die Odalar Camii*: pp. 83–4. On the church and wall paintings see also Brunov, Nikolaj, "Die Odalar-Djami von Konstantinopel", *BZ*, xxvi (1926): pp. 352–72; Alpatov, Michail, "Die Fresken der Odalar-Djami in Konstantinopel", *BZ*, xxvi (1926): pp. 373–9.
- 58 Belting, Hans, "Zur Skulptur aus der Zeit um 1300 in Konstantinopel", *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, xxiii (1972): pp. 73–4; Firath, Nezih, *La sculpture Byzantine figurée au Musée Archéologique d'Istanbul* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1990): pp. 81–2.

The use of plaster reliefs recorded in these three buildings in Constantinople is consistent with their use in the Byzantine Empire. Cornices and friezes were used in the katholikon of the monastery of Hosios Loukas (eleventh century),⁵⁹ in the katholikon of Vatopedi (beginning of the eleventh century),⁶⁰ probably in the Panagia Kosmosoteira in Feres (1152),⁶¹ and in the katholikon of the monastery of Daphni.⁶² Proskynetaria frames made of plaster are also known from different buildings, such as the Protaton church on Mount Athos (tenth century), and St. Panteleimon at Nerezi (1164).⁶³ These cases come from religious buildings; however, an isolated passage from the written sources provides us with some evidence for plaster reliefs in lay and domestic contexts. This is the comment of the canonist Theodore Balsamon (late twelfth century) on canon 100 of the council of Trullo, where he complained about the rich who decorated their houses with ‘indecorous’ painted scenes of erotes and human figures made of stucco.⁶⁴ It has been noted that Balsamon’s Comments are full of references to contemporary laws, practices, and contemporary life.⁶⁵ Canon 100, first written in 692, is one of the first occasions when the Church dealt with the power of images making a distinction between good and bad images using the criterion of corruption and purity.⁶⁶ In the late twelfth cen-

59 See above, note 46.

60 Pazaras, Theocharis, *Τα βυζαντινά γλυπτά του καθολικού της Μονής Βατοπεδίου* (Thessaloniki: University studio Press, 2001): pp. 58–63.

61 Ousterhout, Robert G. and Bakirtzis, Charalambos, *The Byzantine Monuments of the Evros/Meriç River Valley* (Thessaloniki: European Center for Byzantine and Post-Byzantine monuments, 2007): pp. 59–60.

62 Bouras, Charalambos and Boura, Laskarina, *Η έλλαδική ναοδομία κατά τόν 12ο αιώνα* (Athina: Emporiki Trapeza tis Hellados, 2002): pp. 114–7, fig. 113 δ-ε.

63 Kalopissi-Verti, “The Proskynetaria”: pp. 110–1, figs. 2–4.

64 « [...] Σημείωσαι τοῦτο· παρά γάρ οἴκοις πλουσίων τινῶν, οὐ μόνον γραφαί τοιαῦται, καί ταῦτα χρυσόπαστοι, μετὰ πάσης σχημοσύνης ἐξεικονίζονται, ἀλλά καί διὰ γυψίνων κατασκευασμάτων στηλογραφοῦνται ἀνθρωπόμορφα εἰκονίσματα »: PG: CXXXVIII, col. 862. « [...] Note this also: in the houses of some rich, not only are such paintings (even gilded ones) indecorously represented, but human forms made of stucco are also set up », English translation in Mango, Cyril, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire (312–1453). Sources and documents* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972): p. 234.

65 Browning, Robert, “Theodore Balsamon’s commentary on the Canons of the Council in Trullo as a source of everyday life in twelfth-century Byzantium”, in Angelidi, Christina (ed.), *Η καθημερινή ζωή στο Βυζάντιο* (Athens: Centre de Recherches Byzantines, 1989): pp. 421–7.

66 Brubaker, Leslie, “In the beginning was the Word: Art and Orthodoxy in the Councils of Trullo (692) and Nicaea II (787)”, in Louth, Andrew, and Casiday Augustine (eds.), *Byzantine Orthodoxies. Papers from the Thirty-Sixth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Durham, 23–25 March 2002* (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2006): p. 98.

tury, Balsamon made this prescription more restrictive by condemning an aristocratic habit or fashion. It goes into detail by specifying the material in which the ‘indecorous’ images were made: stucco.⁶⁷ This latter aspect is particularly relevant because mentions of plaster reliefs are infrequent in any genre of Middle and Late Byzantine texts.⁶⁸ Byzantine authors almost never used the adjective *gypsinos* (made of gypsum) or the terms *gyposos* (gypsum/stucco) and *koniama* (plaster/stucco) in relation to the decoration of buildings. This does not mean that plaster reliefs were not appreciated nor used (otherwise Balsamon would not have complained about them), but that they cannot be easily spotted in texts because they are not accompanied by the specification that they were made of plaster. Nevertheless, the material evidence in combination with the written sources shows that plaster reliefs continued to be used without interruption from Late Antiquity to the Late Byzantine period, and this raises questions about how it was perceived and why its use continued in the Middle and Late Byzantine periods.

3 Plaster Reliefs in Byzantine Architecture

As we saw above, plaster reliefs were used next to a variety of other materials (mosaics, coloured marble, architectural ceramics, wall paintings). They combined to adorn the building in the richest way possible. The plaster’s easy workability allowed artisans to create elaborate carvings, which could be covered with gold and paintings (as in the Odalar Camii), and were highly appreciated. A confirmation comes from the sixth-century *ekphrasis* of Hagia Sophia of Constantinople by Paul the Silentiary.⁶⁹ This literary text is most well-known for its description of the numerous types of marble which covered the interior of the church, but there is also a passage which has been connected by scholars to the stucco cornice that runs through the naos and the narthex.⁷⁰ Paul described it as ‘The twining vine with shoots like golden ringlets winds its

67 PG: CXXXVIII, col. 862.

68 The only other mentions are in the Letter of Saint Nilus of Ancyra to Olympiodoros, PG: LXXIX, col. 577–80, English translation in Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire*: pp. 32–3 and in Lefort, Jacques, Oikonomides, Nicholas, and Denise Papachrysanthou, *Actes d'Ivroun*, 1. *Des origines au milieu du XI^e siècle. Texte* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1985): pp. 171–2, esp. l. 49.

69 Paulus Silentiarius, *Descriptio Sanctae Sophiae, Descriptio ambonis*, edited by Claudio De Stefani (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 2011); English translation in Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire*: pp. 80–96.

70 See above, note 9.

curving path and weaves a spiral chain of clusters. It projects gently forward so as to overshadow somewhat with its twisting wreaths the stone that is next to it. Such ornaments surround the beautiful church. [...]’⁷¹ Paul focuses the reader’s attention on the evocative shape of the cornice which resembles a golden vine scroll, while he overlooks its actual materiality. This is not the case for the variety of marble revetments and marble sculptures of the Hagia Sophia which are described in great detail with regards to their colour, their ability to reflect the light, their shape, and their durability. This reflects the appreciation the Byzantines had for marble itself, which is a direct inheritance from the Greek and Roman tradition.⁷² If we want to understand how Byzantines appreciated plaster reliefs, then, we should turn back again to the material evidence. In most of the buildings analysed, stucco was used next to other materials. The use of different materials in the architectural decoration perpetuated the taste for variety, which aimed at arousing *thauma* (wonder) in beautiful buildings through the impossibility to fix the gaze on anything in particular, because of the incredible artisans’ craftsmanship and the variety of materials.⁷³ Variety was one of the major aesthetic principles that guided Late Antique and Byzantine art and literature.⁷⁴ Plaster reliefs were part of these devices, which came together to make the visitor feel lost and at the same time amazed by the shining colours and extravagant shapes.

In sum, plaster reliefs were an aspect of Byzantine interior decoration which continued to characterise religious and lay buildings in Constantinople and in the rest of the Byzantine Empire. However, it is difficult to give an exact answer

71 Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire*: p. 86.

72 Recently on this topic, Kiilerich, Bente, “The aesthetic viewing of marble in Byzantium: from global impression to focal attention”, *Arte medievale*, 4th series, II (2012): pp. 9–28; Vanderheyde, *La sculpture byzantine*: pp. 116–21. On the meaning of *marmaros* in rhetoric and in architecture, see Pentcheva, Bissera, “Hagia Sophia and Multisensory aesthetic”, *Gesta*, L/2 (2011): pp. 96–102.

73 Some examples of *thauma* in beautiful buildings (real or imaginary) in Early and Middle Byzantine literary texts are: the description of St. Sergios at Gaza by Chorikios of Gaza (sixth century): Chorikios of Gaza, *Opera*: I, 2.17–76, English translation in Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine empire*: pp. 60–8; the church of the Virgin of the Pharos in the Great Palace of Constantinople by the patriarch Photios (r. 858–67, 877–86): ΦΩΤΙΟΥ ΟΜΙΛΙΑΙ, edited by Vasileios Laourdas (Thessaloniki: EMS, 1966 [Ἑλληνικά, Παράρτημα, 12]): x, p. 100, vv.31–103, here v.5, English translation in Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine empire*: pp. 185–6; the palace of king Staphylos in Assyria by Nonnus of Panopolis, *Dionysiaca*, translated by Rouse, William, H.D. Rouse (London: Heinemann, 1962 [The Loeb Classical Library]), xviii, in part. vv. 67–86, p. 69.

74 Kiilerich, “The aesthetic viewing of marble in Byzantium”. For *poikilia* in poetry, see Gullo, Arianna, s.v. “Shield/bouclier”, in Guez, Jean-Philippe (ed.), *Dictionnaire des images du poétique* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019).

to the extent of the real diffusion of such reliefs in Middle and Late Byzantine Constantinople. The three cases discussed above provide us with the premise for recognising the use of stucco in the capital as well as in the Balkan Peninsula. The high availability of marble in Constantinople may also explain the scarce diffusion of stucco here, at least in public, and religious buildings. Nevertheless, we should not forget that plaster reliefs are easily removable and that the history of the buildings from Constantinople to Istanbul and their continuous change in use may have affected the amount of plaster reliefs originally present there. The stucco artisans, or people in charge of stucco decorations (*gypsoplastai*) were active in Middle Byzantine Constantinople alongside painters, sculptors and carpenters, as attested by Chapter 22 of the Book of the Eparch.⁷⁵

While made of an ephemeral material, plaster reliefs had a long life in Byzantine architectural practices, a life that is visible to us through fragments and pieces to put together, but that testifies to their appreciation by the Byzantines.

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75 Koder, Johannes, *Das Eparchenbuch Leons des Weisen* (Wien: ÖAW, 1991 [Corpus fontium historiae Byzantinae, 33]): pp. 138–43, esp. ll. 783, 785. A detailed analysis on stucco artisans (written sources and material evidence) is in Vanni, *Byzantine stucco decoration*: 1, pp. 94–132.

PG: *Patrologia Graeca*.

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