

Secret Messages? Byzantine Greek Tetragrams and Their Display

The omnipresence of inscriptions is beyond discussion¹: labels, streets signs, dedicatory inscriptions on public buildings, funerary inscriptions on tombstones, graffiti etc.—words inscribed on different kinds of media are seen everywhere. Inscriptions are therefore an important source for the study of social interaction. The same applies to Antiquity: in ancient Greece and Rome inscriptions were omnipresent, too; many of them are still preserved and are *the* most important source for information about some aspects of the Greco-Roman World. The Byzantine Empire, Rome's successor, was certainly not “une civilisation d'épigraphie,” as the famous epigrapher Louis Robert once called the old Roman Empire,² and the epigraphic habit³ was not as developed as in earlier centuries simply due to the fact that other methods of communication had been invented; nevertheless, Byzantine inscriptions—preserved on stones, mosaics, frescoes, portable objects, textiles, seals, coins, etc.—play an important and long underestimated role⁴ for research on Byzantine society.

Apart from proper inscriptions, today more than ever one is also confronted with abbreviations and acronyms. Their meaning is understood even if not everyone is capable of resolving them correctly. Almost everybody is aware of the connotation of the acronyms CIA and FBI but not everybody is able to resolve them correctly (especially someone with a mother tongue other than English).

Acronyms were also used in the Middle Ages, especially in the East. In the Byzantine Empire a specific role is played by so-called “tetragrams.”⁵ A “tetragram” consists of four

¹ This paper is mainly based on material collected by Wolfram Hörandner and myself.

² Cf. B.H. MCLEAN, *An Introduction to Greek Epigraphy of the Hellenistic and Roman Periods from Alexander the Great down to the Reign of Constantine (323 B.C. – A.D. 337)*. Ann Arbor, MI 2002, 1.

³ R. MACMULLEN, “The Epigraphic Habit in the Roman Empire”. *The American Journal of Philology* 103 (1982) 233-246.

⁴ Cf. C. MANGO, “Epigraphy”, in: *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*. New York-Oxford 1991, 711: “A discipline of Byz. Epigraphy does not yet exist”.

⁵ The English term “tetragram” is first attested in the second half of the 19th century (cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*); it shares its main meaning with its Greek origin τετραγράμματος (first used by Philo JUDAEOS, *De vita Mosis* 2, 152), namely “the word of four letters = YHWH (i.e. Yahweh)”. The Greek noun τετράγραμμα is attested only once in a list of the names of God preserved in the 13th century codex Parisinus graecus 39, ed. J.F. BOISSONADE, *Ἀνέκδοτα. Anecdota Graeca e codicibus regiis*, IV. Paris 1832, 460. The term “tetragram” as used in the present paper is based on German “Tetragramm” which was “invented” by W. HÖRANDNER, “Visuelle Poesie in Byzanz. Versuch einer Bestandsaufnahme”. *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 40 (1990) 1-42: 16-18. Emmanuel Moutafov prefers the (more established) terms “cryptogram” and “acronyms” (acrolexa),

letters (sometimes also of four pairs of letters) which usually accompany depictions of crosses, regardless of the surface they are attached to (stone, painting, wood, textile, etc.).

The importance of the cross and its cult in Byzantium is widely known: the meaning of the cross as sign of redemption and as symbol of reconciliation between God and mankind is already discussed in the New Testament;⁶ with its apotropaic and protective function the cross is therefore regarded as the most pervasive subject in Byzantine art.⁷

The most common four pairs of letters is the famous IC XC NI KA (= Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς νικᾷ “Jesus Christ conquers”)⁸ normally inscribed in the space of the four corners of the cross. It was long believed that the earliest examples of crosses with this formula could be found in manuscripts of the 9th and 10th centuries, and indeed crosses with IC XC NI KA are depicted in, for example, the codex Parisinus graecus 510, fol. B^v and C, which dates to ca. 880.⁹ Early manuscript evidence for the cross with IC XC NI KA can also be found on fol. 2^r and 3^v of the Vatican codex Reginensis graecus 1, the famous 10th-century Bible of Leon Sakellarios (fig. 1 et 2).¹⁰



Fig. 1: P. CANART (ed.), *La Bible du Patrice Léon. Codex Reginensis Graecus 1. Commentaire codicologique, paléographique, philologique et artistique* (Studi e Testi 463). Città del Vaticano 2011, pl. IV.

cf. his latest publication on the topic: E. MOUTAFOV, “Typology and Semantics of Cryptograms and Acrolexa in the Orthodox East in the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Period”. *Inicijal. Časopis za srednjovekovne studije - Initial. A Review of Medieval Studies* 1 (2013) 49-75.

⁶ Cf. E. DINKLER - E. DINKLER-VON SCHUBERT, Kreuz I, in: *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst* V (1995) 1-219; G. Galavaris, Kreuz II, in: *ibid.*, 219-284; H.A. KLEIN, *Byzanz, der Westen und das ,wahre' Kreuz. Die Geschichte einer Reliquie und ihrer künstlerischen Fassung in Byzanz und im Abendland (Spätantike – Frühes Christentum - Byzanz, Kunst im Ersten Jahrtausend, Reihe B: Studien und Perspektiven 17)*. Wiesbaden 2004.

⁷ Chr. WALTER, IC XC NI KA. “The Apotropaic Function of the Victorious Cross”. *Revue des Études Byzantines* 55 (1997) 193–220: 194; A. Frolow, IC XC NI KA. *Byzantinoslavica* 17 (1956) 98-113; A.B. KARAGIANNE, Ο σταυρός στη βυζαντινή μνημειακή ζωγραφική. Η λειτουργία και το δογματικό του περιεχόμενο (*Byzantina Keimena kai Meletes*, 55). Thessalonica 2010.

⁸ And not “Jesus Christ conquer” (= Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς νικά) as e.g. in *Das Goldene Byzanz und der Orient* [Exhibition Catalogue, Schallaburg 2012], 259 (no. VI.4).

⁹ H. OMONT, *Fac-similés des miniatures des plus anciens manuscrits grecs de la Bibliothèque Nationale*. Paris 1902, 12f., pl. XVII, XVIII; cf. Walter (*op. cit.*) 195, 201. Devices for stamping the bread for liturgy with IC XC NI KA may come from the same period but are difficult to date: G. GALAVARIS, *Bread and the Liturgy. The Symbolism of Early Christian and Byzantine Bread Stamps*. Madison, MW 1970; cf. WALTER (*op. cit.*) 199f.

¹⁰ P. CANART (ed.), *La Bible du Patrice Léon. Codex Reginensis Graecus 1. Commentaire codicologique, paléographique, philologique et artistique* (Studi e Testi 463). Città del Vaticano 2011, pl. IV, VII; cf. WALTER (*op. cit.*) 201.



Fig. 2: P. CANART (ed.), *La Bible du Patrice Léon. Codex Reginensis Graecus 1. Commentaire codicologique, paléographique, philologique et artistique* (Studi e Testi 463). Città del Vaticano 2011, pl. VII.

However, a much earlier example of IC XC NHK[A]¹¹ is preserved on the marble head of a statue from the 2nd / 1st century BC which was “christianized” in the 5th or 6th century when the face was destroyed and replaced with a cross and the acronym (fig. 3).¹²



Fig. 3: E. PAPAVALASSIOU, in: *Transition to Christianity. Art of Late Antiquity, 3rd-7th Century AD*. New York 2011, 147 (no. 114).

The dating fits perfectly with the perception that, by the fifth century, the cross had become a universal symbol of Christian victory.¹³

The idea of the victorious Christ on the cross is of course much older than the 5th, 6th or 9th century. It is also connected with Constantine the Great’s vision of the cross and the celebrated formula τούτῳ (sc. σταυρῷ) νίκα (“with this [cross] win”) on the eve of his victory against Maxentios in 312¹⁴ and with the legend of the discovery of the True Cross by Helena, Constantine’s mother.¹⁵

¹¹ The second letter of the word is inscribed as Eta, the last letter is not visible any more.

¹² E. PAPAVALASSIOU, in: *Transition to Christianity. Art of Late Antiquity, 3rd-7th Century AD*. New York 2011, 147 (no. 114).

¹³ Cf. H.R. STORCH, “The Trophy and the Cross: Pagan and Christian Symbolism in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries”. *Byzantion* 40 (1970) 105-117.

¹⁴ Eusebius, *De vita Constantini* I 28, 2 (Winkelman).

¹⁵ One may also add the appearance of the cross in Jerusalem in 351 as described by Cyril of Jerusalem in his letter to Constantius II: E. BIHAIN, “L’épître de Cyrille de Jérusalem à Constance sur la vision de la croix (BHG³ 413)”. *Byzantion* 43 (1973) 264–296.

IC XC NI KA is not the only pair of letters inscribed in the space of the four corners of a cross or next to a cross. Other tetragrams are inscribed too, sometimes in combination with the IC XC NI KA, sometimes alone and sometimes in combination with other more or less familiar tetragrams.

In this article the following questions will be posed: what was the purpose of attaching tetragrams to Byzantine crosses? Were these combinations of letters “understood” or did they remain “secret messages” to most of the beholders?

Apart from IC XC NI KA the most common tetragram is ΦΧΦΠ. Its resolution is pretty clear because there are attestations in which this acronym is cited *in extenso*, e.g., in the Florentine codex Laurentianus pluteus 11.9, fol. 282^r,¹⁶ which can be dated to the year 1021:¹⁷ in the corners above the bar of the cross one reads IC XC ΦΩC XV and below the bar NI KA ΦΑΙΝΕΙ ΠΑCΙΝ (“Jesus Christ conquers. The light of Christ shines for all”); as one can see, other legends are also written on and next to the cross in this manuscript.¹⁸ But Φῶς Χριστοῦ φαίνει πᾶσιν is much earlier and originally not connected with the cross. The legend is already attested with dozens of examples on late antique / early Byzantine oil lamps from Palestine, which are now in Jerusalem and in the British Museum (fig. 4).¹⁹



Fig. 4: St. L. LOFFREDA, *Lucerne bizantine in Terra Santa con iscrizioni in greco* (Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Collectio Maior 35). Jerusalem 1989, pl. 2.

¹⁶ <http://teca.bmlonline.it/TecaViewer/index.jsp?RisIdr=TECA0000613562&keywords=Plut.11.09> (accessed on May 27, 2013).

¹⁷ The perhaps oldest example for ΦΧΦΠ (in the version ΦC XY ΦH ΠN) preserved on stone is to be found in a building inscription from Trapezunt dated to the year 914: W. HÖRANDNER, “Weitere Beobachtungen zu byzantinischen Figurengedichten und Tetragrammen”. *Nea Rhomē* 6 (2009) 291-304: 303, n. 51.

¹⁸ S. LAKE, *Dated Greek Minuscule Manuscripts to the Year 1200*, X. Boston 1939, 10, pl. 693; cf. WALTER (*op. cit.*) 201 (no. 5).

¹⁹ St. L. LOFFREDA, *Lucerne bizantine in Terra Santa con iscrizioni in greco* (Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Collectio Maior 35). Jerusalem 1989; *Idem*, Ancora sulle lucerne bizantine con iscrizioni. *Liber Annuus XLII* (1992) 313-329; MOUTAFOV, Typology and Semantics (*op. cit.*) fig. (after p. 58). More examples of oil lamps with ΦΧΦΠ (or similar) are kept in the British Museum, London: cf. I. BENTCHEV, *Monogramme und Akronyme als Ikonenaufschriften*:

http://www.icon-art.info/book_contents.php?lng=de&book_id=30 (accessed on May 27, 2013); G. BABIĆ, “Les croix à cryptogrammes, peintes dans les églises serbes des XIII^e et XIV^e siècles”, in: *Byzance et les Slaves. Études de Civilisation. Mélanges Ivan Dujčev*. Paris 1979, 1-13: 8.

The source of the phrase Φῶς Χριστοῦ φαίνει πᾶσιν is John 1, 9²⁰ where Christ is called the “true light”: Ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον (“That was the true Light, which lighteth every man, that cometh into the world”).²¹ In addition, the lamps and their inscriptions can also refer to the parable of the ten virgins told by Jesus and attested in Matthew 25, 1-13: five of the virgins were prudent enough to have extra oil for the lamps with them while they were waiting for the bridegroom, whereas the other, imprudent ones had none. The oldest example of the acronym ΦΧΦΠ in connection with a cross dates to the 6th century: if the dating of the processional copper alloy cross kept in the Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens (inv. no. BXM 336)²² with IC XC N K on the obverse and ΦΧΦΠ on the reverse (fig. 5) is correct, there is proof of a continuous practice of using this formula from Late Antiquity onwards.



Fig. 5: © Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens (BXM 336).

The wide circulation of ΦΧΦΠ and its resolution Φῶς Χριστοῦ φαίνει πᾶσιν can be explained by the fact that it is used in the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts (the liturgical service for the distribution of communion on the weekdays of Great Lent). Within this liturgy the following instructions are given: ... κρατῶν ὁ ἱερεὺς τὴν λαμπάδα μετὰ τοῦ θυμιατηρίου ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ χειρὶ λέγει ἐκφώνως· Σοφία, ὁρθοί, φῶς Χριστοῦ φαίνει πᾶσιν (“... the priest holding the lamp with the censer in his right hand says loudly: wisdom (of God): stand up,²³ the light of Christ shines for all”).²⁴

²⁰ On the ancient pagan origin of the light cult which was later adapted for Christianity see F.J. DÖLGER, *Lumen Christi. Untersuchungen zum abendlichen Licht-Segen in Antike und Christentum. Die Deo gratias-Lampen von Selinunt in Sizilien und Cuicul in Numidien*, in: *Idem*, *Antike und Christentum. Kultur- und religionsgeschichtliche Studien*, 5. Münster ²1976, 1-43.

²¹ Cf. also JOHN 1,4: Ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων (“In him was life; and the life was the light of men”).

²² A. TSAKALOS, in: *Transition to Christianity* (*op. cit.*) 146 (no. 112).

²³ The passage has to be understood as “This is the wisdom of God (= a word of God): stand up!”

²⁴ J. GOAR, *Euchologion sive Rituale Graecorum*. Venedig² 1730 (Reprint Graz 1960), 164.

Due to the use of Φῶς Χριστοῦ φαίνει πᾶσιν in the liturgy, the tetragram ΦΧΦΠ is a formula that was widely understood in Orthodoxy continuously from Late Antiquity until today. But what about the other tetragrams for which no such secure resolution is available? Some examples may clarify the situation.

The tetragramm EEEE is also used quite frequently; like the other tetragrams it is placed in the corners of the cross, but very often it is used together with other tetragrams. In the secondary literature different possibilities are offered to resolve this acronym. Gordana Babić in her article on crosses and cryptograms in Serbian medieval churches offers six possibilities for resolving this acronym, one of them with an anti-Jewish connotation: Ἑλένης εὔρημα Ἑβραίων ἔλεγχος (“Helena’s discovery [i.e. of the cross], refutation of the Jews”).²⁵ However, for this tetragram too a resolution is provided; two slightly different versions are preserved in manuscripts of the 10th / 11th centuries: Montecassino, codex 431 Ἑλένη ἐκ Θεοῦ εὔρημα ἐδόθη (“The discovery [i.e. of the cross] was given to Helena from God”); Athens, codex EBE 74 Εὔρημα ἐδόθη ἐκ Θεοῦ Ἑλένης (“Helena’s discovery [i.e. of the cross] was given from God”).²⁶ In the Montecassino manuscript and in the above mentioned Laurentianus pluteus 11.9 the resolved tetragram text is placed in the form of a cross.²⁷ In the Montecassino codex the resolved tetragram legend follows the end of a text²⁸ about the discovery of the cross. The Byzantine cult of the discovery of the true Cross²⁹, which was celebrated at the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross (September 14), was very popular, so the mentioned resolutions of the tetragram EEEE are to be preferred to the other possibilities proposed by Babić.

In late Byzantium and in the post-Byzantine period it becomes quite popular to equip crosses with a variety of tetragrams.³⁰ So-called “Geisterkreuze” (“ghost crosses”)³¹ are crosses that are depicted together with the holy lance, the hyssop-sponge, and (sometimes) a skull

²⁵ BABIĆ (*op. cit.*) 6.

²⁶ HÖRANDNER, Visuelle Poesie (*op. cit.*) 16-18; *Idem*, Weitere Beobachtungen (*op. cit.*) 302f.

²⁷ <http://teca.bmlonline.it/TecaViewer/index.jsp?RisIdr=TECA0000613562&keywords=Plut.11.09> (accessed on May 27, 2013).

²⁸ *Patrologia Graeca* 87/3, 4015-4076.

²⁹ KLEIN (*op. cit.*), *passim*.

³⁰ E.g. O.-H. KOST, „Ziegeleinlassungen als Christus-Verkündigung an byzantinischen Kirchen in Mazedonien“. *Hermeneia. Zeitschrift für ostkirchliche Kunst* 2 (19) (2003) 7-30.

³¹ Term used by G. SPITZING, *Lexikon byzantinisch-christlicher Symbole. Die Bilderwelt Griechenlands und Kleinasien*. Munich 1989, 203f.

referring to Adam beneath the cross, plus different tetragrams; they became extremely popular from the 16th century onwards (fig. 6).³²



Fig. 6: I.A. Eliades, Ναός Μεταμορφώσεως του Σωτήρος (Αγία Σωτήρα) Παλαιχωρίου. Ιστορία – Αρχιτεκτονική και Τέχνη / *The Church of the Transfiguration of the Saviour (Hagia Sotera). History – Architecture and Art*. Leukosia 2009, 77 (fig. 54).

A rather early example of such a cross with IC XC NI KA is inscribed on the silver-gilt back side of a 13th century glass paste icon which is now kept in the Moscow Kremlin museum.³³

What might have been the reaction of a beholder looking at such crosses and the accompanying tetragrams? The apotropaic sense must have been foremost even if the viewer could resolve only a few of the most common of the depicted tetragrams (IC XC N K, ΦΧΦΠ). In addition, the sense could have been familiar to him for a second reason: so far, it has not been noted (with the exception of Linda Safran in her article [link to her paper]) that, even today, crosses with tetragrams are also depicted on so-called μεγαλοσχήματα (megaloschemata, the “great schemata”).³⁴ Such σχήματα (or ανάλαβοι [analaboi]) equipped with crosses and tetragrams, which are worn by the highest-level and holiest monks (fig. 7),³⁵

³² I.A. ELIADES, Ναός Μεταμορφώσεως του Σωτήρος (Αγία Σωτήρα) Παλαιχωρίου. Ιστορία – Αρχιτεκτονική και Τέχνη / *The Church of the Transfiguration of the Saviour (Hagia Sotera). History – Architecture and Art*. Leukosia 2009, 77 (fig. 54).

³³ I.A. STERLIGOVA, in: *Byzantine Antiquities. Works of Art from the Fourth to Fifteenth Centuries in the Collection of the Moscow Kremlin Museums. Catalogue*. Moscow 2013, no. 53.

³⁴ Cf. GALAVARIS, Kreuz II (*op. cit.*) 239.

³⁵ Examples are depicted in Th.M. Probatakes, Ὁ διάβολος εἰς τὴν βυζαντινὴν τέχνην. Συμβολὴ εἰς τὴν ἔρευναν τῆς ὀρθοδόξου ζωγραφικῆς καὶ γλυπτικῆς. Thessalonica 1980, 295–297 and fig. 270; Chr. DAHM – L. BERNHARD, Athos. Berg der Verklärung. Offenburg 1959, 132 (fig.XXXX).



Fig. 7: Th.M. PROBATAKES, 'Ο διάβολος εἰς τὴν βυζαντινὴν τέχνην. Συμβολὴ εἰς τὴν ἔρευναν τῆς ὀρθοδόξου ζωγραφικῆς καὶ γλυπτικῆς. Thessalonica 1980, fig. 270.

must also have existed in Byzantium, although—to the best of my knowledge—none have survived. A passage in a treatise of a Maximus Confessor (7th c.) attests that the ἀνάλαβος had a cross on the front and the back side.³⁶ There is evidence from the post-Byzantine period that also so-called ἐπιτραχήλια (epitrachelia), stoles worn by bishops and priest, are equipped with a variety of apotropaic tetragrams, too, as can be seen in an example from Mt. Sinai dated to the 17th century (fig. 8).³⁷

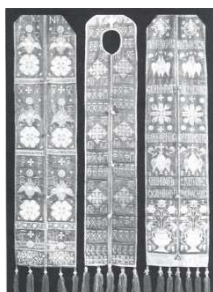


Fig. 8: M.S. THEOCHARE, 'Εκκλησιαστικὰ Χρυσοκέντητα. Athens 1986, 35 (fig. 18).

³⁶ J.H. DECLERCK, *Maximi Confessoris quaestiones et dubia (Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca 10)*. Turnhout - Leuven 1982, 156 (I 68,19): 'Ο δὲ ἀνάλαβος, ἐπεὶ καὶ ἔμπρὸς καὶ ὀπίσω τὸν σταυρὸν ἔχει ... ("The analabos because it has the cross on the front and the back side ..."). The protective function of the ἀνάλαβος is also documented in the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, F. NEYT - P. de ANGELIS-NOAH, BARSANUPHE et Jean DE GAZA, *Correspondance*, I, 2 (*Sources Chrétiennes* 427). Paris 1998, 656 (210,1-4) and in a treatise of Dorotheos of Gaza, L. REGNAULT - J. DE PREVILLE, Dorothee DE GAZA, *Œuvres spirituelles. Introduction, texte grec, traduction et notes (Sources Chrétiennes 92)*. Paris 1963, 172 (I 17,1-3).

³⁷ M.S. THEOCHARE, *Εκκλησιαστικὰ Χρυσοκέντητα*. Athens 1986, 35 (fig. 18).

Crosses with or without tetragrams are not used only in liturgical context:³⁸ crosses are sometimes depicted on city walls,³⁹ e.g. on the mid-12th-century entrance tower of the castle of Hieron (now Anadolu Kavagi) on the Bosphorus,⁴⁰ or on the city walls of Thessalonica (fig. 9).⁴¹



Fig. 9: © Andreas Rhoby.

Also in these cases their function is apotropaic and protective (against enemies). Crosses were also attached to other secular building, such as bridges, in order to secure their stability.⁴² The famous tetragram ΦΧΦΠ was even inlaid with bricks in a water mill dated to the year 1324 in Volvi (in the region of Thessalonica) (fig. 10), also in order to secure its stability.⁴³

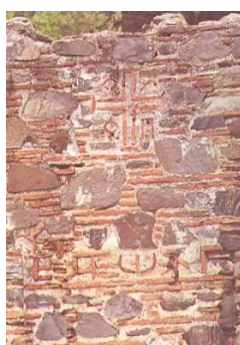


Fig. 10: Ch. SIAXABANI, in: Sl. Ćurčić - E. Hadjistryphonos (ed.), *Secular Medieval Architecture in the Balkans 1300-1500 and its Preservation*. Thessaonica 1997, 339 (fig. 5).

³⁸ On church architecture equipped with crosses (for the sake of stability) cf. Sl. ĆURČIĆ, "Design and Structural Innovation in Byzantine Architecture before Hagia Sophia", in: R. MARK - A.S. ÇAKMAK (ed.), *Hagia Sophia from the Age of Justinian to the Present*. Cambridge 1992, 16-38.

³⁹ Cf. Sl. ĆURČIĆ, "Architecture in the Age of Insecurity. An Introduction to Secular Architecture in the Balkans, 1300-1500", in: *Idem* - E. HADJITRYPHONOS (ed.), *Secular Medieval Architecture in the Balkans 1300-1500 and its Preservation*. THESSAONICA 1997, 19-51: 34.

⁴⁰ A. BABUIN, "Standards and Insignia of Byzantium". *Byzantion* 71 (2001) 5-59: 51 (no. 70), 55 (fig. 70).

⁴¹ Cf. also E. MOUTAFOV, "Krstove i kriptogrami ot krepostnite steni na srdnovekonija Solun", in: *Izkustvovedski četenija* 2007. Sofia 2008, 145-148; *Idem*, Typology and Semantics (*op. cit.*) 57f.

⁴² I thank Galina Fingarova for providing me with this information.

⁴³ Ch. Siaxabani, in: ĆURČIĆ - HADJITRYPHONOS (*op. cit.*) 339 (fig. 5), 340; another example of IC XC N K and a cryptogram on a 17th century watermill in Cyprus is discussed by E. Moutafov, in: M. GIVEN *et al.* (ed.), *Landscape and Interaction. The Troodos Archaeological and Environmental Survey Project, Cyprus, I: Methodology, Analysis and Interpretation*. Glasgow 2013, 219-222 (in print); Moutafov, Typology and Semantics (*op. cit.*) fig. (after p. 58).

An “everyday” use of some tetragrams is documented by magic recipes preserved in late Byzantine codices, such as the codex Bononiensis Universitatis 3632 copied in the 15th century. In a passage entitled Εἰς ἐχθρούς (“on enemies”) the following advice is given: Γράψον κυριακῇ, ὥρα πρώτη: ις χς ν κ, φχφπ, ττχφ, χχχχ (“Write on Sunday at the first hour (after sunrise): [four crosses with the tetragrams] IC XC N K, ΦΧΦΠ, ΤΤΧΦ,⁴⁴ ΧΧΧΧ⁴⁵”).⁴⁶ Because occult sciences and everyday magic were quite widespread in Byzantium⁴⁷ it is certainly possible that these instructions were indeed followed by those who wanted to protect themselves against enemies.⁴⁸

It seems clear that the traditional tetragrams were and are not “secret messages” but rather known ciphers, regardless of whether they could be clearly identified by the readers or not. It was not so important to decipher all of them correctly-and we may wonder if a single and “correct” resolution existed for all of them-but rather to recognize their function as apotropaic and protective signs. In my view, tetragrams functioned like signal words in not easily understandable inscriptions which sometimes opened the meaning of a text even for those who were not fully literate.⁴⁹ An interesting story about familiarity with tetragrams in a monastic community is reported by the German byzantinist Heinrich Gelzer in an article written at the beginning of the 20th century. When Gelzer asked some Athos monks to help him decipher a couple of tetragrams he had found, they were able to resolve them very quickly and precisely.⁵⁰ Proof of the omnipresence of tetragrams within orthodox society is sometimes also provided by publications of Greek colleagues, who sometimes very confidently offer resolutions of tetragrams simply because they were accustomed to one specific solution. I would not go as far as Rossitza Schroeder, who recently regarded tetragrams and other cryptic inscriptions as opportunities for mental exercise and intellectual pleasure,⁵¹ but the medieval

⁴⁴ Otherwise unknown tetragram, perhaps a mistake for well attested ΤΤΔΦ which was resolved by Walter (*op. cit.*) 212 as Τοῦτον [Τοῦτο Walter] τὸν Τύπον Δαίμονες Φρίττουσι (“The Demons are afraid of this sign [i.e. the cross]”).

⁴⁵ The fifth X was probably added by mistake: the most common resolutions for XXXX are Χριστὸς Χάριν Χριστιανοῖς Χαρίζεται and Χριστὸς Χριστιανοῖς Χάριν Χαρίζεται (both “Christ grants grace to the Christians”).

⁴⁶ A. Delatte, *Anecdota Atheniensia*, I. Liège - Paris 1927, 576.

⁴⁷ P. MAGDALINO - M. MAVROUDI (ed.), *The Occult Sciences in Byzantium*. Geneva 2007.

⁴⁸ Cf. ΜΟΥΤΑΦΟΥ, *Typology and Semantics* (*op. cit.*) 65f.

⁴⁹ On an example of signal words in a 9th century Byzantine Greek hexameter inscriptions A. RHOBY, “The Meaning of Inscriptions for the Early and Middle Byzantine Culture. Remarks on the Interaction of Word, Image and Beholder”, in: *Scrivere e leggere nell’alto medioevo. Spoleto, 28 aprile - 4 maggio 2011 (Settimane di Studio della Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo LIX)*. Spoleto 2012, 731–753: 737f.

⁵⁰ H. GELZER, *Byzantinische Inschriften aus Westmakedonien. Mitteilungen des Kaiserlich-deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung* 27 (1902) 431–444: 440f.: “... und mehrere Esfigmeniten haben mit grosser Schnelligkeit und Präcision diese Rebus, als ich sie ihnen vorlegte, aufgelöst”.

⁵¹ R. SCHROEDER, “Looking with words and images: staging monastic contemplation in a late Byzantine church”. *Word & Image* 28 (2012) 117–134: 129.

monachus ludens certainly derived pleasure from preparing messages for coming generations.⁵² In my view, there is evidence for the fashion to equip crosses not only with the traditional IC XC NI KA and ΦΧΦΠ tetragrams but also to add less common or even ad-hoc invented tetragrams, as is the case with different forms of visual poetry with which a scribe wanted to perpetuate himself.⁵³ Two examples help explain this assumption: on the penultimate page of a new manuscript of the writings of the church father Origen, the codex Monacensis Graecus 314, dated to the early 12th century,⁵⁴ a cross with the common formula IC XC NI KA is depicted.⁵⁵ The second tetragram, C Π Π I, is not attested elsewhere; thus, it could have been an ad-hoc invention by the scribe who may have had a passage of a hymn by Romanos the Melodist (6th c.) in mind when he created the tetragram that could be resolved as C(ῶτερ) Π(ῦσαι) Π(άντας) Ι(κέτας) (“Redeemer, save all suppliants”).⁵⁶ The second example is the reverse of a 14th-century icon of the Mother of God from the Vatopedi monastery on Mt. Athos (fig. 11):⁵⁷



Fig. 11: E.N. TSIGARIDAS – K. LOBERDOU-TSIGARIDA, Ἱερὰ Μεγίστη Μονὴ Βατοπαιδίου. Ὑζαντινὲς εἰκόνες καὶ ἐπενδύσεις. Hagion Oros 2006, 171 (fig. 128).

next to the familiar IC XC NI KA we see further crypto- and tetragrams that are rare or unknown and which may have been ad-hoc additions by the icon painter.

⁵² Cf. E. MOUTAFΟΥ - A. RHOBΥ, “New ideas about the deciphering of the cryptic inscription in the narthex of the Panagia Asinou (Phorbiotissa) church (Cyprus)”. *Medioevo Greco* 12 (2012) 181-187: 186.

⁵³ Hörandner, *Visuelle Poesie* (*op. cit.*), *passim*; *Idem*, *Weitere Beobachtungen* (*op. cit.*), *passim*.

⁵⁴ Several publications of L. Perrone on the codex are accessible at http://academia.edu/Documents/in/Codex_Monacensis_Graecus_314 (accessed on May 27, 2013).

⁵⁵ <http://daten.digital-sammlungen.de/~db/0005/bsb00050972/images/index.html?id=00050972&fip=193.174.98.30&no=&seite=747> (accessed on May 27, 2013).

I thank Peter Schreiner who provided me with an image of the relevant folio.

⁵⁶ If this resolution is correct it could have been influenced by the refrain of a hymnus of Romanos the Melodist, e.g. no. 2, α' 10-13 (Grosdidier de Matons): πρὶν ἐπέλθῃ οὖν ἡμῖν ἡ τοῦ τέλους ῥοπή, ἱκετεύσωμεν Χριστὸν ἐκβοῶντες αὐτῷ· Πῦσαι πάντας τῆς ὀργῆς στοργῇ σου τῇ πρὸς ἡμᾶς, λυτρωτὰ τοῦ παντός (“Before the end descends on us, let us beseech Christ shouting to him: ‘Save us all from the anger in your love to us, saviour of all’”).

⁵⁷ E.N. TSIGARIDAS - K. LOBERDOU-TSIGARIDA, Ἱερὰ Μεγίστη Μονὴ Βατοπαιδίου. Βυζαντινὲς εἰκόνες καὶ ἐπενδύσεις. Hagion Oros 2006, 171 (fig. 128).

As already mentioned, Byzantine tetragrams survived the end of the Byzantine Empire and continued to flourish, and perhaps become even more widespread, in post-Byzantine centuries. Interestingly enough, tetragrams were also used in areas that did not (or did no longer) belong to the Byzantine Empire. As Linda Safran demonstrates in her paper [link to her paper], tetragrams and other cryptic inscriptions can be found in the Salento until the 15th century, although the Byzantines had lost control over the region in the 11th century. Even more astonishing is the fact that dozens of Greek tetragrams are still preserved *in situ* in a region far away from the former centre of the Byzantine empire, namely in Georgia, in churches that can be dated prior to and after the year 1500.⁵⁸

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⁵⁸ T. Kauchčišvili, *Berdznuli c'arc'erebi sakartveloši*. Tbilisi 1951, 4, 120, 125, 126, 127, etc.; abridged version *Idem, Sakartvelos berdznuli c'arc'erebis k'orp'usi – Korpus der griechischen Inschriften in Georgien*. Zweite verarbeitete und erweiterte Auflage herausgegeben von L. Gordesiani. Tbilisi 2004.