

without the Greek text (pp. 7, 14–15, 81, 107, 108, 110 and 133). Notwithstanding, M's study of compunction as a liturgically performed emotion in Byzantium is an important contribution to Byzantine hymnography and the history of emotions.

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Rico Franses, *Donor Portraits in Byzantine Art: the vicissitudes of contact between human and divine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xiii, 247, 64 figs.
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In *Donor Portraits in Byzantine Art*, Rico Franses analyses representations of persons who have commissioned a manuscript or an icon, or constructed or decorated a church, in which the patron appears in the company of holy figures, whether Christ or a saint.

Such portraits are of particular interest in that they visualize a direct confrontation between an actor in the physical world with an actor, or actors, in the spiritual realm, a situation which for the modern viewer is an apparent impossibility. The emphasis of the study is on the post-iconoclastic period, although some pre-iconoclastic examples are selectively considered. Drawing on theology and structuralist anthropological theory, together with symbol and metaphor theory, the five densely argued chapters aim to achieve a new and more complex understanding of the issues of interpretation that these images present, stressing their productive role as active proponents in the creation of meaning. The book is well documented and generously provided with illustrations, which for the most part are reproduced clearly, with occasional indistinct exceptions.

Chapter 1 argues that not all scenes commonly called 'donor portraits' are properly portraits of donors, in that many do not represent the act of giving with an image of the gift, such as a book or a model of a church. Instead, F. suggests that the term 'contact portrait' should be used for the class of images that he is considering in his book, with 'donor portraits' being a subset restricted to those cases in which a gift is specifically portrayed. He sees 'donor portraits' as illustrating donations for the forgiveness of sins, whereas the others, which he terms 'non-donation contact portraits' may convey additional meanings. For example, the imperial *ktetor* portrait can be interpreted as a 'mitigated form of the full imperial image', in that it may act as a statement of command and ownership of a building.

Chapter 2 seeks to shift the traditional focus of interpretation from the identity of the donor, or supplicant, to the overall significance of the image. Here F. takes as his focus the well-known mosaic in the narthex of Hagia Sophia depicting an unnamed emperor kneeling before the throne of Christ, discussing previous scholarship and suggesting an

alternative ‘interpretative strategy’, based not just on the personal intentions of the depicted emperor, but more on the reception of the composition by viewers at large and on how they might have interpreted a portrayal of a ruler in *proskynesis* before Christ in the context of Hagia Sophia and its rituals. In Chapter 3 F. turns to the Byzantine conception of the afterlife, with its conflicting ideas of sin, punishment, mercy and salvation. He sees these ideas as central to the interpretation of Byzantine donor portraits, describing the gifts as ‘one technique amongst many by which salvation might be accomplished’. Some of the ground in this chapter has been covered from a different perspective in the book by Vasileios Marinis, *Death and the Afterlife in Byzantium: the Fate of the Soul in Theology, Liturgy, and Art* (Cambridge 2017).

Chapter 4 engages with earlier theories of gift exchange, including those of Claude Lévi-Strauss, George C. Homans, and Pierre Bourdieu, which the author finds to be not entirely applicable to situations in which the donors are ordinary humans and the recipients supernatural. Linking the gift to the granting of salvation, the author argues that it is not an equal exchange, but an acknowledgment of the absolute power of god, a giving of honour to the divinity. The gifts are given in exchange (for the benefit of salvation), and also as tokens of respect. The element of respect, which is enhanced by the humility frequently conveyed by the donor’s size and posture, disguises the quid-pro-quo mechanism of the gift exchange. In his own words, the author describes the donation as ‘something like a magic box, the site where that drive of the donor is transformed, leaving in place something much less coercive than when it started, something softer that will not clash with the autonomy of divinity’.

The final chapter addresses the question of whether the contact between human and divine expressed by the contact portraits was understood as literal or symbolic. After considering earlier interpretations of the scenes as records of actual real-world donations to churches, or as illustrations of actual ceremonials, F. turns to metonymical and metaphorical interpretations, before concluding that the images were generating, rather than merely expressing, beliefs about the interactions of the physical and the supernatural worlds; he sees them as privileged ‘sites of symbolic transformation’ where ‘religious belief is generated’.

This brief summary hardly does justice to the complexity of this book, which raises many interesting questions and examines them in thought-provoking ways. The scope of the enquiry is necessarily broad, but even so, perhaps inevitably, it leaves some questions unexplored. For example, one class of texts that receives relatively little consideration is the evidence of the saints’ lives, where many encounters between real life characters and supernatural beings are described, especially in dreams and in visions. These texts surely have a bearing on the question of the literal or symbolic status of the encounters, since they are often concerned with proving the ‘veracity’ of the dreams or visions through their recording of physical markers, such as the facial features of the spiritual beings seen in the ‘contacts’. Chapter 5 begins by declaring that ‘The coming together of holy and lay figures, in the way that it is represented [in contact portraits], is plainly a

fiction’, and later asserts that ‘a physical interaction between human and divine is, of course, literally impossible. The pictures are representing literally something that is itself inherently symbolic.’ But is the contact between earthly and supernatural actors impossible only for us today? In their dreams, the Byzantines received operations from doctor saints, which resulted in actual cures and left actual scars on the body from the surgical knife. These encounters were experienced as real; they were not mere symbols or metaphors.

Much of the discussion in Chapters 3 and 4 assumes that the gifts were intended to obtain benefits in the afterlife. But one wonders whether some may also have been purposed to operate in this life, either to give thanks for benefits already received, or to guard against future physical problems involving the body, family, or property. The prayer of the patron Leo, inscribed on the painting of the Virgin Arakiotissa in the church of Lagoudera on the island of Cyprus, explicitly expresses the desire that he and his family should not only ‘receive a death similar to those saved’, but also ‘find a happy conclusion to the rest of their life’.¹ Of course, if one sees present misfortune as a result of sin, then much of the theory concerning the roles of sin and punishment in the afterlife still holds. Nevertheless, when a material gift is given for material benefits, a more immediate and somewhat simpler exchange is involved than one which was directed at salvation after death, and perhaps this needs to be theorized in a different way.

Another of the questions raised by the many stimulating discussions in this book is that of realism in portraiture. Only in the consideration of the frontispiece miniatures in MS. Coislin 79 in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, in which the facial features of Michael VII were slightly altered to represent Nikephoros Botaneiates, do we find an engagement with the question of the degree or realism in portraits of individuals. This manuscript indeed was a special case, but it would be interesting to know to what extent donors in general were represented by individualized portraits in Byzantine art, as were many saints, and to what extent the donor portraits were generic, like those of most emperors.

Finally, there is the problem of nomenclature, which the book addresses on several occasions. Anyone who sets out to analyse the ways in which Byzantine art worked will encounter the difficulty of finding the right terminology, for there is a lack of agreed vocabulary in English with which to define the various kinds of engagement with the supernatural encoded in Byzantine images. This problem leads F. to unwieldy constructions such as ‘non-donation contact portrait’. Of course, the term ‘contact portrait’, which is suggested for the whole class of images discussed in his study, in its literal meaning could also include contact with non-holy figures. Even in the case of holy figures, ‘contact portraits’ obviously could cover many more categories of portrait than those associated with patronage or donation – for example, the scenes to which

1 P. A. Agapitos, ‘The Word as Animated Image: Inscribed Texts in the Frescoes of the Church of the Virgin Mary at Laghouderá, Cyprus (AD 1192)’, in A. Papageorghiou, Ch. Bakirtzis, and Ch. Hadjichristodoulou (eds.), *The Church of Panagia tou Arakos* (Nicosia, 2018) 93–4.

the first chapter alludes of Christ crowning imperial figures. Thus, strictly speaking, the portraits that are the focus of this book would have to be called ‘contact portraits depicting patrons of buildings or works of art’, or some such formulation. Perhaps in the future, when more studies of this nature have been made, an agreed terminology will be found.

Such problems and questions may not be fully resolved; nevertheless, the reader must thank F. for raising them. His text is complex, and at times difficult, but always rewarding.

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Ingela Nilsson, *Writer and Occasion in Twelfth-century Byzantium: the authorial voice of Constantine Manasses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. x, 222.
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This book is set to become a trendsetter, and anyone interested in early, middle, or later Byzantine literature should read it. Pushing back against the strictly contextual reading of literature that has dominated Byzantine studies for decades, Nilsson proposes a fresh, thought-provoking approach to Byzantine texts. N. views a literary text written in medieval Greek as a balancing act between fiction and reality. Arguing that a thorough understanding of a Byzantine text as a purely historical event is unattainable (given that it was created in irretrievably lost historical contexts), N. invites modern readers to employ current theoretical strategies to approach medieval texts. N. reads the work of Constantine Manasses (c.1115–after 1175) from different theoretical angles, as a test case for her approach. Manasses was a typical Constantinopolitan author of his time who composed many kinds of occasional texts on behalf of different patrons or instigators. It is not Manasses’ biography that N. seeks to uncover but his authorial voice: the author’s recognizable style or ‘brand.’ That authorial voice is composed of recurring motifs, images, and allusions, and can be adjusted to confer different meanings on different occasions. In the process of uncovering the authorial voice of a pre-modern author, N. challenges modern assumptions that works created on demand for a particular occasion are pretentious or dull and argues that ‘writing on command privileges originality and encourages the challenging of conventions’ (p. 4).

The seven chapters focus on well-defined thematic strands and specific works from the voluminous corpus attributed to Manasses. Chapter 1, ‘The authorial voice of occasional literature’ (pp. 1–24), introduces the reader to Manasses’ work and maps out the methodological approach followed in the book. Chapter 2, ‘Praising the emperor, visualizing his city’ (pp. 25–57), scrutinizes encomiastic accounts that Manasses’ authorial voice wove for Constantinople and Manuel I Komnenos (r. 1143–1180). The