Article

Sacred Theatres: Listening to Homilies and Experiencing the Holy Beauty in 9th- and 10th-Century Byzantine Churches

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Abstract: Although John Chrysostom is critical of the theatre, delivering a homily was never a tiresome monologue of the preacher in Byzantium; it was a theatrical performance combining text-reading and multiple ceremonies, during which spaces, lights, and materials were manipulated to create marvellous spectacles and enslave the audience spiritually and emotionally. At times, orators described the physical features of the venues where they spoke, as did Leo VI the Wise for two newly founded churches and Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus for the second most important church of the Empire, the Holy Apostles. But in most cases, the performance aspect of their speeches could only be known indirectly from two ceremonial handbooks, *Kletorologion* and *De Ceremoniis*. It is also necessary to indicate that the spectacles in homilies were not always real and present; they sometimes came to exist in listeners' minds through picturesque descriptions (*ekphraseis*) and fictional figures (*ethopoiiai*) composed by preachers.

Keywords: homilies; churches; sacred theatres; *ekphrasis*; *ethopoiiai*

1. Introduction

The Church Fathers, intending for their audience to gain spiritual profits through their words, were cautious of all things that could bring about sensual pleasures. One reason for John Chrysostom's severe criticism of the theatre is that it encouraged the congregation to regard preaching as entertainment rather than instruction ([Leyerle 2001](#), pp. 42–74). Traditional theatre irreversibly declined along with Christianisation, but the performing arts, broadly defined, found shelter in religious liturgies, political ceremonies, and public readings of texts ([Odorico 2006](#), pp. 25–46). To catch the audience's attention, preachers had to imbue their homilies with various physical elements, thus creating an overall experience that was simultaneously aural and visual. The divine, despite its invisible nature, was embodied in various delights and could be called "holy beauty".

Since Late Antiquity, Byzantine authors, such as Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–ca. 395), John of Damascus (ca. 675–749), and Patriarch Nikephoros (ca. 758–828), explicitly pointed out strong connections between words and images ([Millet 1960](#), pp. 1–3). During Iconoclasm, numerous iconophile preachers referred to sight and other senses to defend Incarnational theology ([Tsironis 2011](#), pp. 179–96). After the restoration of the cult of icons, churches decorated with lights and mosaics that reproduced biblical histories were the most suitable places for preaching. There, images and sermons worked together. They "surrounded Byzantine Christians with sacred narrative, situating them in the midst of the Gospel" ([Krueger 2014](#), p. 218). Moreover, two official ceremonial books, the *Kletorologion* of Philotheos (9th–10th C.) and the *De Ceremoniis* of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (905–959), show that the 9th and 10th centuries saw an institutionalisation of religious rituals in Constantinople. Under these circumstances, a sermon prepared for a feast day or a saint was barely an isolated piece but rather part of a spectacle where architecture, decor, clothing, music, and even choreography played determinant roles. Its delivery became a performance and would make the venue a sacred theatre where the audience not only understood the theological content intelligently but also experienced the holy beauty spiritually and emotionally.

Obviously, homilies were not plain texts we read in manuscripts but rather were truly performed texts accompanied by various other elements, although they tended to lose their performance aspect once put to paper (Lauxtermann 2019, p. 92). Recently, there has been a tendency to apply performance theory to analyse Byzantine religious texts. Some researchers, such as Damaskinos Olkinuora, Andrew Mellas, and Thomas Arentzen, concentrate on texts and attach importance to the interactions between orators and listeners during the performance, claiming that their distinction was blurred as listeners actively took part in the communication under the guidance of the orators' words. Byzantine hymnographers, exemplified by Andrew of Crete (ca. 660–740), John of Damascus, Kassia (ca. 800/805–before 867), and Romanos the Melodist (?–after 555), all sought to render biblical histories present, engage their audience in the sacred dramas performed through their works, and transform them from spectators to protagonists (Olkinuora 2019, pp. 7–31; 2020, pp. 78–114; Mellas 2021, pp. 124–38; Arentzen 2016, pp. 1–11). Art historians take the magnificent Hagia Sophia as an example and examine visual elements used in churches, natural and artificial light in particular, and their effects on churchgoers (Schibille 2009, pp. 27–46; 2014a, pp. 31–43; Dimitriadou 2013, pp. 147–58; Parani 2013, pp. 159–84). For some of them, however, Byzantine churches were designed for another purpose: to enhance acoustical properties. Especially in several academic works by Bissera V. Pentcheva, visiting the Great Church has been reconstructed as a multisensory experience (Pentcheva 2010; 2011, pp. 93–111; 2014, pp. 120–28; 2017). Some Byzantinists strive to combine texts and their theatrical settings. Henry Maguire generally indicates that many images in churches were very likely reproductions of earlier sermons without mentioning, inversely, how Byzantine preachers took advantage of these images to enhance the effectiveness of their speeches (Maguire 1981). Nadine Schibille and Ruth Webb show that Paul the Silentiary's sixth-century *ekphrasis* of Hagia Sophia was not a simple description of this edifice's visual features but revealed some spiritual meanings that were invisible but more real for Byzantines (Webb 1999, pp. 59–74; Schibille 2014b, pp. 17–19, 27–32). Liz James and Roland Betancourt, referring to the *Homily on the Image of the Virgin in Hagia Sophia* by Patriarch Photius (ca. 810–ca. 895), point out that the *ekphrasis* of this mosaic was inviting the audience to gaze upon this image in the apse and go beyond the sensual world to gain access to the higher reality (Betancourt 2021, pp. 31–34; James 2004, pp. 529–34). All these works briefly shed light on the guiding function of homilies for understanding the hidden values of visual elements but fail to situate each homily in its proper theatrical setting. Consequently, the complicated interrelationships among sermons, churches, and audience experiences remain to be studied.

This article will systematically investigate this question by considering different churches besides the most important one. In these spaces, the audience could experience sacred beauty with the help of three kinds of sensual spectacles indicated by orators. First, familiar with the effects of splendid buildings on visitors, orators often reminded their audience to pay attention to the church's visual beauty or led them to observe light features and images by composing *ekphraseis*. Second, speakers and listeners were part of the spectacle, as they dressed and acted according to the rules stipulated in *Kletorologion* and *De Ceremoniis*. In their homilies, preachers frequently called on their audience to behave together, thus emphasising the concept of uniformity and creating a sublime beauty. Finally, sometimes orators, mastering their language, set before the audience's mind's eye imaginary scenes in which they conjured not only beautiful views, grandiose buildings, and solemn rituals but also divine figures who were invisible so as to make them present.

2. The Beauty of Visual Elements in Churches

The Byzantines knew well the effect of a magnificent building on its visitors. Emperor Leo VI the Wise (866–912), in his *Homily on the Dedication of a Church in the Monastery of Kauleas*, said that people assembled in a sacred house would "reach a divine condition" (ἱερᾶς γίνονται καταστάσεως) (Leo VI the Wise 2008, p. 423). In the *Typikon* issued by Gregory Pakourianos (?–1086), the author praised the church whose decoration, fragrance,

and music could lead monks to conjecture the beatitude (*The Typikon* 1984, p. 55). Orators used two different ways to impress on the audience the visual beauty of churches: some emphasised the sacred atmosphere but did not enumerate all physical elements, for they regarded the splendour as a whole as superior to details (Spieser 2019, pp. 46–47); others recited *ekphraseis*, showing architectural structures and decorations to their audience, especially in newly built churches, as Leo VI said in a homily delivered for the inauguration of the Church of Stylianos: "It is time that words go around this artwork in the company of sights." (Leo VI the Wise 2008, p. 472).

As the most important and magnificent church in the Empire, Hagia Sophia was always one of the favourite places for orators. However, detailed descriptions of this sacred place have not survived in any speeches of this period, likely because it played an essential role in religious rituals and regularly appeared before the eyes of the audience. Only the homily by Arethas of Caesarea (ca. 860–after 932), delivered on the occasion of the arrival of St. Lazarus' relics, refers to its visual beauty. The author mentioned rituals, hymns, and lamps to give his audience an impression of the joyful atmosphere. He would like to draw his audience's attention to them by using not only the imperative form of the verb "behold" (σκόπει) but also perennial "aural suggestions" (Silk 1974, pp. 191–93; Stone 2007, pp. 419–28). The whole sentence, notwithstanding its length, has a simple structure, multiplying adjectives as well as present and past participles to modify the object, that is, the church (ναόν). The *homoioteleuton* -ον and -οντα (as well as its variants -ουντα/-ωντα) effect a pleasant rhythm and help the audience concentrate. The uniqueness of this allusion to the spectacle also comes from the personification of the church, which was likened to an "animate and generous innkeeper" (ἔμψυχον πανδοχέα καὶ μεγαλόψυχον) (Arethas of Caesarea 1972, p. 9). It was not a lifeless theatre any longer, but an actor who used these elements to perform exuberantly.

Why did Arethas emphasise the spectacle of the Great Church while his contemporaries unanimously ignored it? One possible reason is that he prepared this work to celebrate the translation of relics. During this period, all speeches of this type had much in common. A short sermon *On the Translation of the Holy Tile* mentions in passing "the ecclesiastical elite and clergy who carried lamps and sang the Troparion" (τῶν τῆς μεγάλης ἐκκλησίας λογάδων καὶ κληρικῶν λαμπαδηφορούντων καὶ ᾀδόντων τὸ τροπάριον) (Anonymous 1963, p. 259). In other words, although no rhetorical handbooks provided a formula for this literary genre, orators composed homilies for the translation of relics by following certain *topoi*. This concentration/exclusivity does not mean that the spectacle was insignificant for others who preached in the same space. No matter what a sermon's topic is, Hagia Sophia could impress the audience with its sacred and sublime ambience, thus enhancing the effect of the address. Because of the acoustic "waterfall" effect caused by the structure of this church (Woszczyk 2018, p. 83), the audience naturally raised their eyes and noticed the images in the apse.

Patriarch Euthymius (ca. 834–917) delivered his *Homily on the Deposition of the Virgin's Girdle* in the Church of Chalkoprateia, which had traditionally been destined for the cult of the Theotokos as a supplement or rival to the Marian church situated in the Palace of Blachernai (Krausmüller 2011, pp. 219–45). Again, in such a church with which the inhabitants of Constantinople were familiar, it was unnecessary to repeat the scene stretching before the audience. Euthymius did not read aloud any *ekphrasis* but opted for a short phrase—"as you see" (ὡς ὁρᾶτε)—to draw the audience's attention to the visual beauty. Then, he led them to contemplate the higher reality, stating that the church was "not inferior to the place above the heavens" (μηδὲν ἀποδέοντι τοῦ ὑπερουρανίου χωροῦ) and made those who entered it feel that they were "in the Third Heaven" (ὡς ἐν οὐρανῷ τρίτῳ) (Euthymius, Patriarch of Constantinople 1922, pp. 505, 511). We do not know much about the Chalkoprateia's structure and appearance except that, according to Theophanes Continuatus, Emperor Basil I (?–886), who considered this building to be low and dark, erected arches on both sides to support the higher ceiling and give it more light (*Theophanes Continuatus* 1838, p. 339). Although the dates of renovation and speech delivery are unclear, the interval between

them is certainly short. In this case, the elevated, enlarged, and refurbished church could stun the audience.

Euthymius dedicated more words to the appearance of the girdle and its reliquary: "In the astounding and shining coffer where this valuable girdle is stored, we have found an inscription that reads: 'Under the reign of the orthodox Arcadius, son of the great Theodosius, who was conspicuous for his virtues, this girdle was deposited here on the 31st day of the last month.' As you see, the girdle has remained clean, intact, and immaculate until now and has not lost its purity, brightness, or colour; on the contrary, it shines more brightly than the snow, and its scarlet tint is fresh just like it has recently been woven." (Euthymius, Patriarch of Constantinople 1922, p. 511). The orator spoke behind the altar on which the girdle lay (Janin 1969, p. 241); the audience that listened to his words saw the relic simultaneously. This sentence has a more profound significance because it does not concern the venerable object itself but the unnatural phenomenon that it can always keep its original beauty. In saying so, Euthymius told his audience that a miracle was on stage. Byzantine authors often referred to the scene where lights surrounded relics. In his *Homily on the Anniversary of the Translation of the Hand of John the Baptist*, Theodore Daphnopates (ca. 890–ca.963) proclaimed that "the holy and divine relic stored in the tower of innumerable lights (τῇ τῶν ἀπείρων φρυκτωρίᾳ φώτων) surpasses (παραμιλλᾶται) heavenly spectacles" (Theodore Daphnopates 1910, p. 33).

In these sermons, Arethas and Euthymius did not describe the visual beauty in detail when preaching in the churches that had existed for centuries. But Leo VI's *Homily on the Translation of the Relics of John Chrysostom* and Constantine VII's *Panegyric on the Relics of Gregory the Theologian* are two exceptions, for both include an *ekphrasis* of the Holy Apostles, the second most important church in the Empire, where the emperors spoke. By contrast, Arethas' praise of the beauty of Hagia Sophia is just a brief reference. Leo VI mentioned the overall architecture and splendour of the church, praising its cross-like structure, brilliance, and precious materials used for decoration, and then turned his attention to the arches and various columns. The visual beauty led the orator to assimilate the church to another Paradise (παράδεισος) or heavenly chamber (οὐράνιος θάλαμος) (Leo VI the Wise 2008, p. 584). It is evident that Constantine VII wrote his work following his father, as the subject and content of these texts have visible similarities, especially two fictive letters (Flusin 1998, pp. 148–50). However, his *ekphrasis* includes more details than his father's and explains why this space resembles Paradise. Mosaics of various animals and other beings and columns arranged in a circle duplicated another place filled with flowers and trees, clearly referencing the Garden of Eden, although the author did not use this term explicitly (Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus 1999, pp. 44–45). Heaven here is not an abstract idea that the audience could access only through their passions stimulated by the temporal spectacle, but a place they could visualise when listening to words and gazing upon images.

Compared to Hagia Sophia, the Holy Apostles, and other long-standing religious sites, Byzantine preachers preferred reciting *ekphraseis* in newly established churches. After Paul the Silentiary, the tradition of composing *ekphrasis* was suspended until Photius rediscovered it. In his *Homily on the Inauguration of a Church in the Palace*, the Patriarch developed his description as a journey, imagining a visit from the exterior to the interior, just as the Silentiary had in his description of Hagia Sophia (Webb 1999, p. 68). Preceding the details of the church, Photius said that the audience might regard it as a work of divine power rather than human hands (Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople 1959, p. 100). This fundamental concept that there was a miracle rather than a worldly building before their eyes determined the development of the *ekphrasis* as a process of unfolding the divine mystery. The atrium, whose façade was covered with pure white marble slabs, gave an illusion of a single piece of stone—"a new and most pleasant miracle to see" (θαῦμα καινὸν καὶ ὁραθῆναι καὶ ἥδιστον). Before detailing the internal beauty, the preacher claimed that a spectator who looked into the church would be astonished as if he had entered heaven and, confused by the intensity of aesthetic experience, envisaged himself as "the object" (τὸ ὁρώμενον). He then proceeded to enumerate the gold and silver covering the greater

part of the church, the pavement decorated with tesserae, and the images of various holy figures in the cupola (Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople 1959, pp. 100–3). Gleaming marble slabs, gold and silver works, and coloured mosaics—all these light-reflected things could transport the audience into Another World.

Photius' *ekphrasis* of the mosaic of Mary carrying her Child in Hagia Sophia is of particular interest, as it was drawn after the triumph of the Iconophiles. In this circumstance, what really matters is not the visual beauty the audience saw with physical vision but the higher truth they grasped through such an intellectual and spiritual vision (James and Webb 1991, pp. 1–17). Nevertheless, bodily eyes continued to be important because only through them could the "rational part of the soul" (τὸ νοερὸν τῆς ψυχῆς) put forward "the most exact vision of truth" (τὴν τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἀκριβεστάτην θέαν) (Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople 1959, p. 167). The mosaic proclaimed that Christ came to the world corporeally in pictures, and the teaching of the Incarnation was seen but not heard by spectators. According to Photius, eyes, compared to ears, were more efficient media for receiving spiritual teachings. Even if words and images introduced each other, the comprehension coming about through sight offered much more than the teaching penetrating through ears (Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople 1959, p. 170).

As a student of Photius, Leo VI continued to insert *ekphraseis* into his homilies delivered for new churches. At the beginning of the *Homily on the Dedication of a Church in the Monastery of Kauleas*, he shed light on the joy the cooperation between consecrations of churches and praises for saints can bring about (Leo VI the Wise 2008, p. 423). Then, he developed his *ekphrasis* naturally, beginning with the pavement, the first thing appearing before the audience. After praising its purity and simplicity, he invited spectators to lift their heads and look at the apse mosaics filled with holy figures. Finally, he ended his description with a brief reference to the polychrome slabs that covered the other parts of the church (Leo VI the Wise 2008, pp. 425–26). This contrast could guide the audience to focus more on images and contemplate their sacred meanings, although the orator declared that he would spend time introducing the artwork's beauty and not touch the celestial nobility (Leo VI the Wise 2008, p. 424).

However, the same author clarified that his speech was devoted to God in his *Homily on the Dedication of the Church of Stylianos*: "Exactly like offering this church to the Divinity, we bring the honour paid to this edifice by words to God. Because of this, I do not think it is appropriate to neglect the charming appearance of this beautiful artwork in silence, and I prefer speaking to being reticent." (Leo VI the Wise 2008, p. 471). Then, he disclosed the hidden meanings of various images dwelling in the dome: the portrait of Christ symbolises that the Creator never left the world after his incarnation; "angels with many eyes" (πολυόμματα) signify "the divine intelligence which can penetrate all things" (τὴν ἐπὶ πάντα διήκουσαν θείαν κατάληψιν); "angels named after their six wings" (ἕτεροι τοῦ ἀριθμοῦ τῶν πτερύγων), who cover their visages and feet with their wings, mean that God, who has no beginning and no end, is "completely inconceivable and invisible" (ἀκατανόητον πάντη καὶ ἀθέατον), whereas others with spread wings imply that God gives to "those whose souls are neither infirm nor stubborn" (τοῖς μὴ τὸν νοῦν ἀναπήροις καὶ ἀκινήτοις) the opportunity to understand Him (Leo VI the Wise 2008, pp. 472–74). Theological explanations distinguish this *ekphrasis* from others, which, although concerning spiritual benefits for the audience, provide mystical and extraordinary experiences instead of intelligible knowledge for them.

Senses, especially sight, could build a bridge between the physical and spiritual worlds. In either brief references or detailed descriptions of churches' visual beauty, orators tried to lead listeners, or more appropriately, spectators, to experience the sacred beauty through sensual pleasures. Liz James concludes that "in the Byzantine church, the total sensory programme disturbs the world in an unexpected fashion, for it seeks to reveal God to man" (James 2004, p. 525). However, the *ekphraseis* of Leo VI for the church established by Stylianos and of his contemporary, the clerk Gregory Referendarius (9th–10th C.), for the Church of St. Demetrius have one more concern, namely to manifest the imperial

dignity. The former compared the image of God and his angels to the imperial court; the latter analysed the construction of the church sponsored by the imperial power as a recreation of the world (Leo VI the Wise 2008, p. 473; Gregory Referendarius 2015, pp. 52–53). Establishing a parallel between the heavenly sovereign and the worldly monarch, both authors invited spectators to appreciate the solemnity of temporal and eternal powers at the same time.

3. The Beauty Created by Group Gatherings

Regardless of the social standings, thoughts, and interests of the individuals who went to the church and listened to sermons, a group gathering, as shown by Hagit Amirav's socio-anthropological analysis of the Council of Chalcedon, could always give an illusion of homogeneity and help suppress for some moment the awareness of difference (Amirav 2015, pp. 70–77). In such a Christian congregation, Byzantines reinforced their view of themselves as subjects of God, as Derek Krueger noted for the liturgy (Krueger 2014, pp. 216–18). Except for monastic catecheses, all homilies, whose subjects were newly founded churches, feasts, or translations of relics, were delivered on related days. The institutionalisation of religious festivals in the 9th and 10th centuries caused their incorporation into various religious rituals, although *De Ceremoniis* only mentions the emperor's allocution at the beginning of Lent (Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus 2020b, p. 65). Consequently, despite the existence of sermons delivered to the public, most authors preached before a limited audience, including only ecclesiastical and aulic elites.

In some cases, orators indicated listeners' social identities in their sermons. The audience of Leo VI's *Homily on the Ordination of the Patriarch Stephen* consists of three categories: the first one is obscurely called "fathers" (πατέρας) or "aged fathers and other friends of Christ" (πατρικὴ πολιὰ καὶ τὸ ἄλλο φιλόχριστον πλήρωμα), the second one is "the venerable group of bishops" (ἀρχιερέων αἰδέσιμος σύλλογος) or "the most holy assembly of bishops of God" (ἀρχιερέων Θεοῦ ἱερωτάτη ὁμήγυρις), and the third one has only one person, namely the new Patriarch Stephen (Leo VI the Wise 2008, pp. 299–302). José Grosdidier de Matons believes that the first listeners were senators, although the word "fathers" usually referred to churchmen (De Matons 1973, pp. 198–99). Whoever they exactly were, they must have been part of the social elite. In the *Panegyric on the Relics of Gregory the Theologian*, Constantine VII characterised his audience as "you, men of eloquence, servants of the altar, who devote yourselves to contemplation and who devote yourselves to practical life" (ὑμεῖς δέ, ὅσοι τοῦ λόγου καὶ ὅσοι τοῦ βήματος, ὅσοι τῆς θεωρίας καὶ ὅσοι τῆς πράξεως) (Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus 1999, p. 43). It is evident that these epithets, respectively, referred to rhetors, ecclesiastics, theologians, and monks. Gregory Referendarius also mentioned the presence of two emperors, Leo VI and his brother Alexander, as well as "court and church officials" (ὅσοι τοῦ βήματος καὶ ὅσοι τῆς τάξεως) (Gregory Referendarius 2015, p. 55).

Such ceremonial contexts prepared these participants from highly ranked groups to act in unison. Vladimir Ivanovici pays attention to the phenomenon of iconic persons in Roman culture, arguing that "one's body, deportment, and behaviour had long been used to ascertain character" from Antiquity (Ivanovici 2023, p. 183). Although he focuses on those who could render the divine visible through their bodies, his idea can be applied to preachers and listeners, as their bodies were also constructed as iconic during ceremonies.

First, preachers and listeners had to follow strict dress codes. When the emperor was present as an orator or listener, he always wore gorgeous costumes, such as *loros*, *skaramangion*, *sagion*, *chlamys*, and *divitision*. In a description of the Aretai palace and its garden, John Geometres (ca. 935/940–ca. 1000) regarded the emperor as "a beauty of beauties in this place, a light of lights, and a joy of joys" (κάλλος δὲ μᾶλλον κάλλεσι τοῖς ἐν τόπῳ, λάμπουσι λαμπτὴρ, τερπνοτήτων τερπνότης) (John Geometres 1990, p. 210). Other preachers and listeners, in most cases members of the ecclesiastical or imperial hierarchy, also had to wear corresponding attire. In this case, the participants dressed in ceremonial costumes were part of the visual beauty and created a spectacle to manifest

the fulfilment of the essential ideology of the Empire, the "order" (τάξις). Since this word means reproduction of the celestial hierarchy in Byzantium, the audience could frame a vision of Paradise and experience a sacred atmosphere. The positions occupied by auditors could also reflect hierarchical solemnity. Although we are not informed about this, *Kletorologion* and *De Ceremoniis* show that congregants were not allowed to wander around during all ceremonies. Before the emperor delivered an address at the beginning of Lent, listeners had come on stage at the behest of the *praipositos*. To either side of the stairs, from top to bottom, the *asekretai* and notaries stood in line; up on the top step and to the right side stood the logothete, *protoasekretes*, and the protonotary (Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus 2020b, pp. 65–67). While listening to other homilies in other churches, the auditors also had to find their places according to some rules.

Apart from preachers and listeners, other groups existed in churches, forming part of the aesthetic experience. Several homilies mention the choirs that impressed the audience with pleasant melodies and beautiful forms. In the *Homily on the Birth of the Virgin* and the *Homily on the Presentation of the Virgin*, Leo VI mentioned a choir composed of young girls and characterised it as "beautiful" (καλή) and "delightful" (τερπνήν) (Leo VI the Wise 2008, pp. 230, 268). As many Byzantine authors witnessed the existence of women's choirs, this reference is not likely to be literary fiction (Gu 2023, p. 16). In the *Homily on the Deposition of the Virgin's Girdle*, Patriarch Euthymius referred to some "choirs of pious and learned men" (χοροὶ εὐλαβῶν καὶ πολυμαθῶν ἀνδρῶν) who "stood line by line" (στοιχηδὸν παρειστήκεισαν) (Euthymius, Patriarch of Constantinople 1922, p. 513). Like preachers and listeners, members of these choirs ought to be in costume and stand in the right place, although historical sources lack precise information about this topic.

Besides their uniforms and positions, the audience had to react to the orator unanimously to show a harmonious atmosphere. The first thing they had to do was keep silent when required. Silence did have a practical function because, according to Niketas-David Paphlagon, it could enhance orators' "vigour and eagerness" (εὐτονίαν καὶ προθυμίαν) and was a prerequisite for the success of any homilies (Niketas-David Paphlagon 1931, p. 60). But at the same time, it had a ceremonial function, being able to create an ambience of harmony and solemnity. Photius began his *Homily on the Inauguration of the Image of the Virgin Mary* by uttering the verb "to be silent" (σιγᾶν) that, although not in the imperative, could reinforce the quiet atmosphere in the church. This utterance served as a marker for the significance of the following speech, thus admonishing the congregation to lend their ear to him. Since the structure of Hagia Sophia could prolong the reverberation and enhance the sound considerably, Roland Betancourt suggests that "Photius might have allowed the 'Silence' of Σιγᾶν to resonate under the structure's reverberating domes before moving on to the next word" (Betancourt 2021, p. 32).

When an emperor preached, silence would have become more strictly ritualised. At the beginning of Lent, the emperor delivered his allocution at a *silention* held at the Magnaura but did not open his mouth until complete quiet settled on the assembly (Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus 2020b, pp. 65–67). The term σελεντίον, derived from the Latin *silentium* that precisely means silence, refers to a solemn session where nobles assembled and a eunuch titled "silentiary" imposed silence in the presence of the emperor (Christophilopulu 1951, pp. 79–85). Although the *praipositos* controlled the proceedings according to *De Ceremoniis*, he was very likely accompanied by a silentiary, as with the celebration of Epiphany (Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus 2020a, p. 265). The ceremonial handbook does not include information about other *silentia*, but the emperor's oration always created a *silention*. Before either emperors or other preachers, the audience's manifestation of silence was sacred because sermons went beyond human words to become divine instructions, as Leo VI invited the Holy Spirit to put words into his mouth in the *Homily on Pentecost* (Leo VI the Wise 2008, p. 70).

However, silence was not always obligatory during the speech delivery, since preachers frequently called upon their listeners to react to their words. Of course, this does not mean free reactions; the audience acted and spoke only with the orator's permission

and in unison. Therefore, spectators ceased to be passive participants and became actors in the sacred theatre. Crying aloud is a reaction several orators asked listeners to give. Leo VI in the *Homily on the Annunciation* and Euthymius in the *Homily on the Deposition of the Virgin's Girdle* repeatedly called their auditors to "cry aloud" (βοῶμεν/βοήσωμεν) (Leo VI the Wise 2008, p. 8; Euthymius, Patriarch of Constantinople 1922, p. 514). Both authors used first-person plurals of this verb, sharing the ecstasy among all participants and making it erupt in an extreme form. Especially when the emperor gave a speech, these utterances were ritualised and became official acclamations. At the beginning of Lent, the emperor's allocution was preceded and followed by acclamations shouted at a sign from the *praipo-sitos* (Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus 2020b, p. 67). Additionally, whenever a *silention* was held, an acclamation in a set form of words was recited (Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus 2020a, p. 335).

More frequently, preachers solicited the audience's participation in the choir. In the *Homily on the Inauguration of a Church in the Palace*, Photius urged "the rest of the pious congregation" (ὅσον ὑπόλοιπον καὶ φιλόθεον ἄθροισμα) to "rejoice and join the choir" (χαίρετε δὲ καὶ συγχορεύετε) (Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople 1959, p. 104). In the *Homily on the Image of the Virgin in Hagia Sophia*, the same preacher also tried to engage his audience in the choir and utter "those prophetic messages" (τὰς προφητικὰς ἐκείνας φωνὰς) with them (Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople 1959, p. 169). In the *Homily on the Presentation of the Virgin*, Leo VI recommended his audience "take part in the choir" (συμμετασχεῖν τῆς χορείας) composed of young girls (Leo VI the Wise 2008, p. 268). Two versions of Constantine VII's *Panegyric on the Relics of Gregory the Theologian* refer to the assembly singing. At the end of the short one, the emperor invited the audience to "strike up the ode and sing with intelligence" (τὴν ᾠδὴν ἀνακρούσατε ψάλλοντες ἐν συνέσει). The long one does not include such an appeal, but the audience definitely sang together because the orator begged the theologian to notice "the choirs of us Nazarenes and the harmony of the singing of Psalms" (τὰς τῶν καθ᾽ ἡμᾶς Ναζιραίων χοροστασίας, ψαλμῳδιῶν ἁρμονίας) (Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus 1999, pp. 79, 81).

Theodore Daphnopates put both measures in place to animate his audience. At the beginning of the *Homily on the Treaty between Byzantines and Bulgarians*, he used a series of verbs in the imperative to invite participants to "leap" (σκιρτήσατε), "join the choir" (συγχορεύσατε), and "shout in unison" (ἀλαλάξατε) (Theodore Daphnopates 1978, p. 254). He also proclaimed the necessity of praising God's blessings, requesting the audience to "raise their voices and hearts, both in loyal worship" (τὰς φωνὰς μετὰ τῆς γνώμης ὑψώσωμεν, καὶ μετ᾽ εὐνοίας ἀμφότερα) (Theodore Daphnopates 1978, pp. 262–65). Unlike Leo VI and Euthymius, Theodore detailed the content he wanted his audience to declaim. Although the audience reaction cannot be known with certainty, the orator possibly suspended his speech for a moment to give way to acclamations.

Apart from explaining the visual beauty and its hidden meanings, the *ekphrasis* also aimed to create a sacred experience of harmony and solemnity for spectators. Once spectators entered a new church, they would be distracted by countless physical elements and neglect some important ones, just as Photius said about a new church settled in the palace: "In one respect only do I consider the architect of the church to have erred, namely that having gathered into one and the same spot all kinds of beauty, he does not allow the spectator to enjoy the sight in its purity, since the latter is carried and pulled away from one thing by another, and is unable to satiate himself with the spectacle as much as he may desire." (Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople 1959, p. 102; translation in Mango 1958, p. 187). In this case, the orator's minute descriptions served to control spectators' sights.

Although the names of structures or images themselves could remind the audience to look at them, orators sometimes used specific words or sentences to turn their eyes to relevant objects. After describing the inaugurated church's atrium, its overall beauty, and the silver and gold ornament, Photius designed one sentence to precede the *ekphrasis* of the mosaic in the cupola as an attention-catching device: "But something has escaped me, although it should have been said first (for the wonder of the church does not permit the

orator to do his own task fairly even in words), so it shall be said now." (Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople 1959, p. 102; translation in Mango 1958, p. 187). In Leo VI's *Homily on the Dedication of the Church of Stylianos*, the description of the images of Christ and angels around him and that of other mosaics are interrupted by the following sentence: "The top of the temple is adorned with these images; the scenes of Christ's life decorate the remaining part." (Leo VI the Wise 2008, p. 474). The emperor also inserted a sentence between the description of the upper part and that of the lower part of the church: "Such are decorations of the superior part of the church, completely executed with golden mosaics. What does the inferior part look like?" (Leo VI the Wise 2008, p. 476). Additionally, he used locative adverbs ἐκεῖ and ἐνταῦθα to locate objects. For instance, he employed ἐκεῖ twice to introduce the "reflection of lights" (φώτων ἀνταύγεια) and the inferior part of the church when describing the Holy Apostles (Leo VI the Wise 2008, p. 584). The locative adverbs ἐκεῖ and ἐνταῦθα also served to introduce some scenes of Christ's life in the Church of Stylianos (Leo VI the Wise 2008, p. 475). Since these words cannot indicate precise positions, one must imagine that Leo VI may have shifted his sight and spoken when gazing upon or pointing at these images.

In brief, listeners of homilies, wearing ceremonial costumes, occupying positions assigned to them, reacting with one accord, and enjoying the beauty under the guidance of preachers, were not spectators of the beauty anymore but became part of the beauty themselves. The harmony and solemnity they created strengthened their consciousness as subjects of Christendom and made the church a mirror of Heaven.

4. The Beauty before the Audience's Mind's Eye

Although Byzantine authors admitted the significance of sight for revealing inner truths, the beauty set before the audience's eyes did not equal the whole sacred experience. First, invisible spectators and actors existed in this theatre. Sometimes, preachers briefly mentioned their presence or took advantage of *ethopoiiai*, composing speeches or dialogues to make the audience feel their presence. Second, since the visual spectacle was limited by physical space and time, preachers usually attempted to introduce the sacred scene that did not exist in the theatre into auditors' minds through language. It means a visualisation rather than an imagination because relevant rhetorical skills, particularly *ekphrasis* and its subcategories, always aim to visualise objects or events as if they were before the audience's eyes (Webb 2009, pp. 87–130).

Preachers first addressed all sermons to one or several invisible participants, namely Christ, the Virgin, angels, and saints. In all homilies, they almost invariably begged for their blessing or protection as if they were present. These invisible figures sometimes did not have corresponding images in churches. After describing the church dedicated to St. Demetrius, Gregory Referendarius begged the saint to cast a glance at the "crown of praises" (στέφος εὐφημιῶν) prepared for him, quit the "celestial residence" (οὐρανίους θαλάμους) for a while, and come to them (Gregory Referendarius 2015, p. 55). At the end of the *Panegyric on the Relics of Gregory the Theologian*, Constantine VII asked the saint to "behold" (ἔπιδε) the participants, "come" (γενοῦ) to them, and "look at" (ἴδε) their choirs and celebrations (Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus 1999, p. 79). But this case is a little bit different. Although the Holy Apostles did not contain any image of the theologian, the reliquary of his relics was not just a symbol but proved that he was there (Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus 1999, p. 67).

However, in most cases, invisible participants had their corresponding images in churches. Euthymius mentioned that the "armies of angels" (ἀγγέλων στρατιαί) were circling the reliquary of the girdle (Euthymius, Patriarch of Constantinople 1922, p. 512). Even if the mosaics of the Church of Chalkoprateia cannot be known with certainty, angels seem to have been an indispensable element in all churches. One can reasonably imagine how they might be painted on the chapel's vault and surround an image of the Virgin under which the relic lay. In the *Homily on the Inauguration of a Church in the Palace*, Photius believed that David and Jacob, two figures in the apse, were crying out their sayings recorded in the

Bible ([Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople 1959](#), p. 103). In the *Homily on the Inauguration of the Image of the Virgin Mary*, the same preacher did not just describe the form and colours of the mosaic but told his audience what was happening: Mary was not looking at her Child but "turning her eyes on him" (τὴν ὄψιν πρὸς τὸ τεχθὲν ἐπιστρέφουσα) "with the love of heart" (τῇ στοργῇ τῶν σπλάγχνων) and "with compassion" (συμπαθῶς); her lips had been made so fleshly that one who saw the image might think she was capable of speaking ([Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople 1959](#), p. 167). Leo VI expressed the same as his instructor while describing Mary's mosaic in a church in the Monastery of Kauleas: "You would believe that you see her lips open up and talk to the child." ([Leo VI the Wise 2008](#), p. 426) When it comes to the image of Christ, he also regarded it as "Christ himself" (αὐτὸν ἐκεῖνον) rather than a "work of art" (τέχνης ἔργον) ([Leo VI the Wise 2008](#), p. 425). In the *Homily on the Dedication of the Church of Stylianos*, the imperial preacher also invited viewers to look at and listen to the holy figures: "Now a creature come down from heaven and converse with a young virgin [CHECK QUOTE]. You would say that these images are not devoid of speech because the artist has applied a natural colour and character on their visages, which persuade the viewer to feel that a certain sensation of speech colours these images." ([Leo VI the Wise 2008](#), p. 474). The figures who could speak made the pictorial representation of Christ's life a sacred drama. Additionally, Leo VI always used the words ἄρτι and νῦν and the present tense of verbs to enact biblical histories as ongoing realities happening before viewers ([Leo VI the Wise 2008](#), pp. 474–76). Constantine VII also used his words to animate sacred images. In the *ekphrasis* of the Holy Apostles, he regarded the image of Christ in the apse as "alive" (ἔμπνους). He also described the joyful atmosphere in the church where "the heavenly powers" (τὰς οὐρανίους δυνάμεις), "the whole choir of righteous men" (πάντα χορὸν δικαίων), and "the whole group of saints" (πάντα ἀγίων σύλλογον) got together, Gregory of Nazianzus celebrated the feast with apostles, and Christ, "through his eloquent tongue" (διὰ τῶν ἐνάρθρων χειλέων), addressed the assembly ([Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus 1999](#), pp. 47, 67).

A few scholars show that some Byzantine authors composed speeches or dialogues for holy figures, thus including *ethopoiiai* in their works ([Cunningham 2003](#), pp. 101–13; [Lieber 2015](#), pp. 327–55; [Olkinuora 2019](#), pp. 16–22). In the *Homily on the Inauguration of the Image of the Virgin Mary*, Photius personified the Great Church as a bride who "cast off the sullenness" (ταύτην ἀποτιθεμένη τὴν σκυθρωπότητα) to "beautify herself with all her property" (τοῖς οἰκείοις πᾶσιν ἐνωραϊζομένη), "appearing prominent with ornaments" (διαπρέπουσα ἀγλαΐσμασι) and "displaying her rich dowry" (τὸν πλοῦτον αὐτῆς προικοφοροῦσα). After praising the "bride" who had escaped blows and regained her beauty, the preacher imagined a dialogue between God and Hagia Sophia ([Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople 1959](#), pp. 168–69).

Besides a broader participation, including invisible actors and spectators, the sacred drama, although performed in the limited space of a church, had a vaster stage. Spectators could not see it with their own eyes, but with the help of the orator's words, especially his *ekphrasis*, they could have a clear view of it. The orator generally did not refer to the beauty of other churches except for the one where he spoke, but there was an exception. In the *Panegyric on the Relics of Gregory the Theologian*, Constantine VII briefly mentioned other "sacred temples" (τὰ ἱερὰ τεμένη) that joined the Holy Apostles to celebrate the arrival of the relics together ([Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus 1999](#), p. 47). He did not recite any *ekphrasis* for this joint celebration, but for the audience who had toured the capital with the procession held for the translation, a brief reference was enough to help them recall the spectacle.

For any Byzantine preacher, behind the visual theatre always hid an invisible stage, namely Heaven. As we have seen in the first part of this article, all references to the visual beauty, either brief or detailed, were aimed at making the audience prone to believe that they were in Paradise. Consequently, there was no need to repeat the heavenly view reflected by the worldly beauty. In Leo VI's opinion, the "immaterial majesty" (τὴν ἄϋλον εὐπρέπειαν) mixed with "material beauties" (καλλοναῖς ταῖς ἐνύλοις) in the new church

in the Monastery of Kauleas and the Church of Stylianos was an imitation of Heaven (Leo VI the Wise 2008, pp. 424, 477). However, some orators composed an *ekphraseis* of the garden, a scene deemed to be similar to Heaven. The vision of Paradise resembling a garden exists in numerous hagiographic and apocalyptic texts, of which *The Life of St. Andrew the Fool* is a good case (Timotin 2006, pp. 404–20; 2011, pp. 389–402). Nice weather, beautiful trees and flowers, and birds singing pleasantly—all these elements tie this literary *topos* closely to another one, the *ekphrasis* of spring. Spring is a constant theme in the Byzantine literature on several festivals because it symbolises renewal, but the lovely scenes it brings to the world can also be a mirror of Paradise, where it reigns perpetually (Maguire 1981, pp. 42–52; Loukaki 2013, pp. 77–106).

In the *Homily on the Dedication of the Church of Stylianos*, Leo VI compared the church with the spring scenery. The four columns that supported the arch were adorned with vegetation, and the white pavement was enclosed with plenty of polychrome mosaic cubes that imitated all kinds of flowers. This view of blossom not only resembled the actual spring but surpassed it, and bees would collect pollen from these images of flowers once they entered the church (Leo VI the Wise 2008, pp. 476–77). In the author's opinion, the flowers that decorated the pavement, more beautiful than those on earth, belonged to Heaven. Leo VI's *Homily on the Dedication of a church in the Monastery of Kauleas* also detailed the spring scenery, including all relevant subjects, such as a starry sky, blooming flowers, a calm sea, active animals, and chirping birds (Leo VI the Wise 2008, pp. 427–28). This *ekphrasis* did not mention the similarity between spring and Heaven, but in such a cultural environment, it could easily evoke the scene of Paradise in the audience's minds. Various subjects of the description of spring have one common core—the deliverance of all creatures from the hardness of winter. The striking parallel with the salvation of human beings would naturally have led the audience to compare spring and Heaven by themselves.

Preachers of the 9th and 10th centuries often delivered speeches to commemorate the arrival of relics. Although *De Ceremoniis* does not include any relevant ceremonial frame, the Byzantines celebrated these days with grand processions. Given that, in most cases, the ceremony had ended on the occasion of speech delivery, the orator preferred reciting an *ekphrasis*. Arethas of Caesarea is a good case in point. He composed two homilies on St. Lazarus' relics, one to welcome their arrival and the other to celebrate the anniversary. The former did not say much about the ritual process, naturally, because the audience had just witnessed the event with their own eyes. But in the latter, delivered after one year, the preacher inserted a long "description of the sacred procession" (ἔκφρασις πομπῆς ἱερᾶς) that would be "a reminder for those who had been there and a beneficial instruction for those who did not know it" (τοῖς μὲν εἰδόσιν ὑπόμνησις, τοῖς δ᾽ ἀγνοοῦσι καλὸν δίδαγμα) and as "the most effective remedy against forgetting under the power of time" (τῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ χρόνου λώβης δραστικώτατον φάρμακον) (Arethas of Caesarea 1972, pp. 11–12).

Several homilies on the translation of relics have survived; they include almost identical subjects regardless of subtle nuances: the emperor who leads the procession, the royal ship that conveys relics, smooth waves on the sea, escorts bearing torches and singing hymns, and fanatical spectators. These elements can lead the audience to experience the sacred mystery in two ways.

First, as mentioned above, the calm sea and active creatures are two of the main subjects in the *ekphrasis* of spring and could create an image of Paradise in the audience's mind. In order to turn the natural sweetness into a holy spectacle, preachers deliberately described these scenes as miracles. In Arethas of Caesarea's *Ekphrasis of the Holy Procession of the relics of St. Lazarus*, the sea "hastened to embrace the imperial ship when it set sail and escorted it when it returned", and fishes "leapt and bounded like a choir or delightful sight, and struck together according to their races and flocks, generating a sound similar to a hymn" (Arethas of Caesarea 1972, p. 12). These incredible phenomena could give the audience the impression that they were possible only under divine influence. Constantine VII described the emperor standing in the bow as walking on the sea because of the "higher power" (κρείττονι δυνάμει) (Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus 1999, p. 61).

Second, preachers always regarded the reliquary of relics as a new ark and used biblical archetypes to explain the significance of the translation. In his long *Ekphrasis*, Arethas of Caesarea successively compared Leo VI with Aaron, who had entered the inlet and gone behind the curtain in front of the sea, as well as Moses, who had descended from the mountain and brought the tablets written by God to those around him, and David, who had deposited the ark in the house of Abeddara (Arethas of Caesarea 1972, pp. 12–15). Constantine VII repeated the parallel between the relics of Gregory the Theologian and the ark David had brought to Jerusalem. Moreover, he compared himself to Moses: "Moses had built an ark according to the model shown to him because the things at that time were only the sketch of stable realities. But our new Moses built this spiritual ark loaded with holy things." (Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus 1999, pp. 63, 75). Through these parallels, preachers declared that the Byzantines, repeating biblical histories, were chosen people like Israelites, and their city was the New Jerusalem (Flusin 2000, pp. 51–70).

By referring to invisible actors and spectators in churches and describing the spring scenery and the ceremony of the translation of relics, preachers broke through the limitation of time and space and placed the audience in a vaster theatre where they could enjoy sacred dramas played by various holy figures, including God, the Virgin, angels, and numerous saints; appreciate a beautiful view of Paradise; and participate in the solemn procession prepared for greeting the arrival of relics. Compared to the church constructed and decorated with the hands of architects, this theatre, brought to life with the words of preachers, could provide a much wider space for displaying sacred beauty.

5. Conclusions

In the 9th and 10th centuries, Byzantine preachers deliberately combined their homilies with many performative elements, either material or immaterial, to turn their works from soporific monologues into attractive performances. Listeners following sermons and gazing upon the beauty of churches became spectators. What they saw were not images but dramas where all sacred figures ceased to be static and came to life. Consequently, actors and spectators in the sacred theatre multiplied. Theatres, though confined to physical churches, were enlarged by the *ekphraseis*. Under the guidance of orators, spectators were liberated from restrictions of time and space, enjoying both visible and invisible spectacles. However, orators' words were simultaneously functional and ceremonial because they helped control spectators' actions, utterances, and sights, thus creating a harmonious and solemn atmosphere. This effect would be further enhanced by participants' costumes and positions. In short, the audience's experience of sacred beauty did not equal images of holy figures and biblical stories but synthesised several elements at once.

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