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Isaac Komnenos' poem to the Virgin: the literary self-portrait of a Byzantine prince*

Valeria F. Lovato

Isaac Komnenos Porphyrogennetos, third son of Alexios I and brother of Anna Komnene, is mostly known for his plots against his brother John II and nephew Manuel I.[1] Because of his failed attempts to seize imperial power, he spent most of his life in exile and died in Thrace, in the monastery of the Theotokos Kosmosoteira that he founded in his later years. Together with Isaac's political ambitions and patronage activities,[2] this monastery and its organization have been the

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1 I am currently editing a collective volume that will provide a comprehensive picture of Isaac's life and manifold interests: see Lovato (forthcoming). For the time being, the most detailed account of Isaac's life remains Varzos 1984, 238–254, which is bound to be enriched by Maximilian Lau's forthcoming monograph on the reign of John II. Shorter overviews can be found in Chalandon 1912, passim and Jurewicz 1970, 27–38, both discussed by Varzos.

2 On Isaac's political ambitions, see the preceding footnote, along with Magdalino 2016. On his patronage activities inside and outside the capital, see e.g. Ousterhout 2016 (on the Chora Church), Ouspensky 1907 and Anderson 1982 (on the Seraglio Octateuch), Linardou 2016 (on Isaac's artistic program and self-fashioning strategies) and Rodriguez Suarez 2019 (on the Latin influences detectable in Isaac's foundations).

main focus of modern studies.[3] Despite some notable exceptions,[4] less attention has been devoted to Isaac's literary output, which, however, not only played a crucial role in his strategy of self-presentation, but was also a central component of his carefully constructed legacy. The present study seeks to partially fill this gap by focusing on one of the least known literary texts authored by Isaac: his so-called poem to the Virgin, edited by Kurtz in 1926-1927[5] and henceforth almost completely neglected by modern scholarship.

The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, I reexamine the text printed by Kurtz and present the first translation of the poem into any modern language. Secondly, I address two interrelated issues that might help us better appreciate the context in which and for which Isaac penned his invocation to the Virgin. Specifically, I first attempt to reconstruct the potential dating of the poem's composition. Subsequently, and finally, I offer an interpretation of the meaning and function of the text by comparing it to other similar verse compositions that were widely popular in Komnenian Byzantium, namely the so-called dedicatory epigrams.

1. Edition and translation

Isaac's poem to the Mother of God is composed of 41 dodecasyllables and is preserved in a single witness, the famous *Baroccianus graecus* 131.

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[3] On the architectural and artistic aspects of the Kosmosoteira monastery, see e.g. Orlandos 1933, Ševčenko 1984 and 2012, Sinos 1985 and Ousterhout-Bakirtzis 2007. The monastery's administration has been studied, among others, by Kaplan 2010 and Chatziantoniou 2019. On the Kosmosoteira *typikon* see Petit 1908 (the first edition of the text), Papazoglou 1994 (a new edition with commentary, based on a 16th-century manuscript not available to Petit) and Thomas & Constantinides Hero 2000 (with an English translation by N. Ševčenko, based on Petit's edition).

[4] Isaac's Homeric works have attracted, more than any others, the attention of modern scholars: see e.g. Kindstrand 1979 and Pontani 2007. Isaac may also have penned three paraphrases of Proclus' now lost treatises on Providence. However, the authorship of these texts is disputed: see e.g. Dornseiff 1966, who thinks that they were authored by Alexios' brother, also named Isaac. For a convincing counterargument, see Aglae Pizzone's chapter in Lovato (forthcoming).

[5] Kurtz 1926–27.

This miscellaneous manuscript contains a wide variety of texts, from rhetorical pieces to imperial chrysobulls and medical, meteorological and theological treatises, most of which are transmitted anonymously.[6] It has been argued that the Baroccianus, along with other comparable manuscripts, was composed at the behest of the court of Nicaea, with the aim of preserving the intellectual and cultural inheritance of the (temporarily) lost Byzantine empire.[7]

In the Baroccianus, Isaac's poem features quite unexpectedly between a letter by Simeon Magistros[8] and an excerpt from Anastasius of Sinai's *Quaestiones et responsiones*, which deals with the ornamentation of the *ephod* (shoulder piece) of the high priest of Israel. The text is not preceded by any kind of title or introduction, and this might explain why Coxe's catalog mistakenly defined it as "versus jambici in imperatorum Isaacii et Alexii matrem".[9] It was Kurtz who, based on the text's concluding lines, first identified it as a composition by Isaac Komnenos, son of emperor Alexios I and brother of John II.

The few scholars who examined the poem never questioned Isaac's authorship. However, we know that the *sebastokratōr* commissioned verse compositions written in his persona to a renowned court poet such as Theodore Prodromos.[10] So why should our text have been penned by Isaac and not by a Byzantine intellectual following his instructions? A first element that may confirm Isaac's authorship is the rather convoluted syntax of the poem, which, along with some stylistic features, is reminiscent of other texts that are generally attributed to Isaac, such as the paraphrase of the *Letter of Aristeas*. As I hope to show in what follows, these observations are strengthened by the similarities between the poem and another text that was undoubtedly penned by Isaac, that

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[6] For a description of the manuscript, see Wilson 1978 and, more recently, Schiffer 2011.

[7] Pontikos 1989, xi–xii.

[8] Symeon Magistros, *Letters* 89, 150, 1–151, 42 (Darrouzès).

[9] See Kurtz 1926-27, 44.

[10] See Theodore Prodromos, *Carmina Historica* XL–XLII (Hörandner), first edited by Kurtz 1907, 107–110. Prodromos also wrote a prose encomium for the *sebastokratōr*: see Kurtz 1907, 112–117 and, most recently, Op de Coul 2007, 209–223 and 390–397.

is, the *typikon* of the Kosmosoteira monastery.[11] In turn, the affinities between poem and *typikon* may point to a late dating of the former text, which, if confirmed, would be an additional argument in favor of Isaac's authorship.

Before delving further into its dating and possible function, it is worth reading and briefly analyzing the text of the poem to the Virgin. For simplicity's sake, I discuss my proposed corrections to Kurtz's edition in the relevant footnotes.

Ζάλη με δινῶν κυματοστρόφων στρέφει, (1)
δέσποινα μῆτερ τοῦ Βασιλέως ὅλων,
οἰκτρῶς δαμάζει πασσάλῳ δυσθυμίας
τὸν ὄντα παντάπασιν ἠπορημένον,
πολλοῖς παραπτώμασι κατεστιγμένον· (5)
καὶ γὰρ τὰ κῆλα τῶν ἐμῶν ἁμαρτάδων
φρικτῶς ἀκοντίζοντα τὸν ξένον ξένως
ὠθοῦσιν εἰς βρύχοντα πόντον ἀθρόως
καὶ ῥοῖζον οἰκτρὸν εἰσφέρουσι φεῦ φρίκης
δεινῶς κλονούσης καὶ κατασπώσης κάτω. (10)
αἰ αἰ βλοσυρᾶς τῶν στροφαλίγγων κάκης,
αἷς παντὸς ἐκπέπτωκα λιμένος μόνος
πάτρης τε φίλης, καὶ βίου δυσπραγίας.
ἀλλ᾽ἐν κλόνῳ, δέσποινα, τῆς τρικυμίας
τὴν σὴν ἀρωγὴν προσκαλοῦμαι σὺν πόθῳ, (15)
φίλοικτε, κυδήεσσα καὶ θεοκράτορ,
κρατουμένη μάλιστα παιδὸς δυνάμει,
κἂν χείρες αἱ σαὶ συνέχωσι τὸ βρέφος
σεμνῶς θ᾽ὑπανέχωσι τὸν πλάστην ὅλων,
ὦ φρικτὸν ἀντάλλαγμα, μητροτεκνί[α]. (20)
ναὶ ναὶ δυσωπῶ δακρύοις πολυστόνοις
τὴν αὐτοπαράκλητον εἰς δυσωπίαν,
ἀντιλαβέσθαι τῆς ἐμῆς δυσποτμίας·
καὶ γὰρ σὲ συνέκδημον ἐν μεταστάσει
πρὸς βῆμα πανόψιον εὔχομαι φέρειν (25)

[11] All subsequent references to the Kosmosoteira *typikon* (henceforth *KT*) are based on Papazoglou's edition.

καὶ λύσιν εὑρεῖν ἀμπλακημάτων τότε,
ὅταν ἐρίφων καὶ προβάτων ἡ στάσις
πάντων καταπλήξειεν ἡμῶν τὸν νόον,
δίκην ὑποπτήξοντα τὴν φρικαλέαν
καὶ Ταρτάρου στόμιον ἠγριωμένον. (30)
ἴλαθί μοι, πάναγνε, σπλαγχνίσθητί μοι
φευκτῶς δακρυχέοντι παρ᾽ὅλον βίον·
δός μοι ταχινὴν τὴν μεσιτείας χάριν
τῇ πρὸς τὸν υἱὸν εὐμενεῖ δυσωπίᾳ,
σκαίροντα μητρὸς ἀγκάλαις ἀκηράτοις. (35)
καὶ τῶν φρενῶν μοι τήνδε τὴν στιχουργίαν
δέχοιο, πανόπτρια μῆτερ τοῦ λόγου·
δακρυρροῶν σοι ταῦτα καὶ πενθῶν λέγω.
Ἰσαάκιος στυγνὸς οἰκτρὸς οἰκέτης,
Ἀλεξίου παῖς Ἀυσόνων βασιλέως, (40)
ὁ πανόδυρτος ἐν τραγῳδίαις βίου.

B (= *Bar. gr.* 131, f. 178^{v})
1 δινῶν Kurtz: δεινῶν B || 6 κῆλα scripsi: κύκλα B Kurtz || 8 ἀθρόως Kurtz: ἀθρό $^{ως\ ον}$ B || 11 βλοσυρᾶς B: βλασυρᾶς Kurtz || 31 σπλαγχνίσθητι scripsi: σπλαχνίσθητι B, σπλαγνίσθητι Kurtz || 32 φευκτῶς B: φρικτῶς Kurtz || 33 μεσιτείας Kurtz: μεσιτείαν B || 34 εὐμενεῖ Kurtz: εὐμενῇ B || 35 ἀγκάλαις ἀκηράτοις Kurtz: ἀγγάλαις ἀκηράταις B || 39 οἰκέτης B: ἱκέτης Kurtz.

A storm of sea-twisting whirlwinds tosses me around,[12]
O Lady, Mother of the King of All,
and pierces me piteously with the spike of despair,
I who am completely at a loss
and bear the marks of numerous mistakes. (5)
For the darts[13] of my own sins,

[12] For a comparable image, see e.g. Manganeios Prodromos 98, 13–14 (first edited by Miller 1883, 40): Κἀγὼ πρὶν ἐν κλύδωσι καὶ πόνων ζάλαις | ἄγκυραν εὗρον τὴν σκέπην σου, Παρθένε (ἄγκυραν is Elizabeth and Michael Jeffrey's emendation for Miller's ἀργυρᾶν).

[13] I propose to emendate κύκλα ("cycles"), the *lectio* preserved by B and printed by Kurtz, to κῆλα ("darts"), which better fits the context. Indeed, κῆλα is a more suitable subject for ἀκοντίζω ("to transfix") and is in perfect agreement with the imagery

transfixing me, the stranger, in a strange and frightening way,
banish me incessantly[14] to the devouring sea
and bring upon me a piteous rush. Oh! the terrible, shivering fear
that agitates me and drags me under! (10)
Oh! the vortex of frightful wickedness,
which had me banished, alone, from every port
and from my beloved homeland! Oh! the adversity of life!
But, O Lady, from the turmoil of the waves
I invoke your help with deep yearning, (15)
O merciful, glorious Lady, you who reign with godly authority,
but are nonetheless subordinate to the power of your Son,
even if it is your hands that hold the new-born Child
and solemnly carry the Creator of all things,
O awe-inspiring paradox, mother and daughter at the same time.[15] (20)
Aye, aye, with my sorrowful tears I beseech you,
who are ready to succour those who implore you,
to assist me in my misfortune.
And I pray that I might take you with me as fellow traveler
also in my final voyage towards that tribunal for all to see, (25)

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employed in this passage: consider e.g. the expression πασσάλῳ δυσθυμίας ("spike of despair") at l. 3 and the verb καταστίζω ("to brand or mark with a pointed instrument") at l. 6. Moreover, the use of a rare and 'epic' term such as κῆλα would be in tune with Isaac's style and literary interests.

[14] As noted in the apparatus, the copyist of B added the desinence -ον right next to the abbreviation for -ως, without indicating his preferred reading. I chose to follow Kurtz in printing ἀθρόως not only because ἀθρόον is the *lectio facilior*, but also because ἀθρόως fits with Isaac's predilection for assonances and symmetry. By ending with ἀθρόως, l. 8 would almost perfectly echo the sounds and structure of the preceding line.

[15] μητροτεκνία is an integration proposed by Kurtz, who could only read the letters μητροτεκ… . A closer look at the ms. seems to confirm his suggestion. Immediately after the final *kappa,* it is indeed possible to see the faint traces of a *nu*; moreover, the two dots that are visible to the upper right side of the *nu* may have signaled the presence of an *iota*. As noted by Kurtz, the closest parallel for this otherwise unattested term features in Theodore the Studite, *Epitaph on his mother* 15, 511 (Pignani), where we find the *hapax* μητρότεκνος ("mother and daughter at the same time"). For another possible parallel, see again Theodore the Studite, *Letters* 458, 73 (Fatouros) (ἀδελφομητρότεκνον, "a daughter who is also a spiritual sister and mother", referred to an abbess).

so that I find deliverance from my sins on the day
when the division of the sheep and the goats[16]
strikes the mind of us all,
our mind that will cower before the formidable justice
and the cruel mouth of Tartarus. (30)
Be gracious to me, O All-pure One, pity me,
for my whole life has been marked by tears and exile.[17]
Grant me soon the grace of your mediation,
through your benevolent supplications to your Son,
who frolics in the pure embrace of his Mother. (35)
May you accept this poem which flows from my heart,
O All-seeing Mother of the Word.
It is between tears and lamentations that I, Isaac,
your abhorred and pitiable servant, [18]
son of Alexios, Emperor of the Ausonians, (40)
and most lamentable in the tragedies[19] of life, address these words to you.

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[16] Matt 25: 33.

[17] As noted in the apparatus, Kurtz emendates B's φευκτῶς to φρικτῶς. However, considering that the copyist had already encountered the forms φρικτῶς and φρικτόν at ll. 7 and 20 respectively, it is difficult to explain the subsequent confusion between the familiar (and current) adverb φρικτῶς and the otherwise unattested φευκτῶς. Thus, given Isaac's predilection for neologisms, I decided to print φευκτῶς, which I tentatively interpret as a reference to Isaac's life-long wanderings. However, since the corresponding and well-attested adjective φευκτός generally has a passive meaning, the adverb φευκτῶς may also allude to Isaac's isolation (see also στυγνός, "abhorred", at l. 39): should this latter interpretation be correct, Isaac would rather state that he spent the entirety of his tearful life being shunned.

[18] Kurtz's emendation of οἰκέτης to ἱκέτης seems unnecessary. Not only is οἰκέτης well-attested in Byzantine dedicatory epigrams, but it is prosodically and stylistically more appropriate (see e.g. Rhoby 2010, 316, on an epigram where the locution οἰκτρὸς οἰκέτης appears in the same metrical position as in Isaac's poem).

[19] For a similar image see e.g. Manganeios Prodromos 92, 1–2 (first edited by Miller 1883, 35): Τραγῳδίας ἄξιον οὐδὲν ἐν βίῳ | οὗ πεῖραν, ἀπείρανδρε μῆτερ, οὐκ ἔχω.

2. Isaac as a *xenos*: the many exiles of an ambitious Komnenian prince

Now that the text of the poem has been presented and discussed, it is time to focus on the circumstances of its composition. My analysis will take its cue from the motif of exile, which is quite prominent throughout the poem and deserves further consideration. At l. 7 Isaac characterizes himself as a *xenos* at the time of writing and at ll. 11–13 he seems to hint at previous mistakes that not only led to his past exiles, but are also the reason for his *current* one (see the use of the perfect ἐκπέπτωκα at l. 12). If we accept my tentative interpretation of the *hapax* φευκτῶς (l. 32), we may consider it as a further reference to Isaac's life-long wanderings. These allusions to the author's exclusion from his homeland, and especially his self-designation as a *xenos*, have led some scholars to conclude, rather vaguely, that Isaac wrote this short composition when in exile.[20] While this observation is most likely correct, it is not very informative, especially if we consider that the *sebastokratōr* spent most of his life far from Constantinople.

It would thus be crucial to determine during which of his many exiles (if any) Isaac composed his poem to the Virgin. Based on Byzantine and non-Byzantine sources, we know that Isaac was sent away from the capital at least twice. According to Niketas Choniates, the longest exile stemmed from a 'minor' disagreement (μικρολυπία) between Isaac and his brother John,[21] which seems to have occurred around 1130. Our sources also relate that, during his travels in Asia Minor and the Near East, Isaac tried to gain the support of foreign leaders against his brother.[22] These diplomatic efforts were facilitated by the presence of Isaac's elder son, also called John, who was personally involved in his father's plans, as testified by his short-lived marriage with the daughter of the Armenian king Leo I.[23] During this first exile Isaac also visited the Holy Land, where he converted a couple of Jews and built an aqueduct for

[20] Kurtz 1926-27, 45 and Ševčenko 1984, 137 n. 9.

[21] Niketas Choniates, *Annals*, 32, ll. 6–13 (van Dieten).

[22] Varzos 1984, 239–243.

[23] Varzos 1984, 241, based on Michael the Syrian's *Chronicle* (see the French translation by Chabot 1905, 230–231).

the Monastery of John the Forerunner on the River Jordan. After many years (probably in 1138), Isaac finally reconciled with his brother and returned to Constantinople. As soon as he was back in the capital, he commissioned a poem to Theodore Prodromos, who duly celebrates the pious deeds that the *sebastokratōr* accomplished while in Palestine.[24] Our sources also recount that, shortly after his return, Isaac was once again sent away from the capital. This time, his destination was to be Heraclea Pontica, on the shores of the Black Sea. This event appears to be somehow connected to the treason of his elder son John, who defected to the Turks. However, if we are to believe John Kinnamos, this second exile must not have been a particularly distressing experience: to quote Kinnamos' very words, Isaac was sent to — and stayed in — Heraclea Pontica οὐ ξὺν ἀτιμίᾳ ("with no dishonor").[25] Finally, we have ample evidence that, at the end of his life, Isaac retired to his estate in Thrace. Here, he rebuilt the Monastery of the Theotokos Kosmosoteira, for which he also penned an extensive foundation charter or *typikon*. Unfortunately, the circumstances surrounding Isaac's final move to Thrace remain unknown. However, some passages of the *typikon* suggest that this final separation from Constantinople had not been voluntary.[26]

In summary, Isaac was forced to leave Constantinople on at least three occasions. But during which of his many 'exiles' did he compose his invocation to the Virgin? The long, first exile in Asia Minor and Palestine seems to be a rather implausible candidate and so does the second one in Heraclea Pontica. In the first case, Isaac was still quite young and rather resourceful — not to mention hopeful. The resigned tones of the poem to the Virgin, the estranged protagonist of which can only hope for salvation in the afterlife, do not seem to fit into this picture. Indeed, after reconciling with his brother and returning to Constantinople, Isaac does not put on the mask of the repented and desperate sinner, who has nothing to wait for but the Final Judgement. As mentioned, in one of the poems he commissioned to Theodore Prodromos soon after his return, Isaac almost celebrates his exile and the pious deeds he accomplished

[24] Theodore Prodromos, *Carmina Historica* XL (Hörandner).

[25] John Kinnamos, *Deeds of John and Manuel Komnenos*, 32, ll. 11–13 (Meineke).

[26] See especially *KT* 2, 39–40, along with the discussion infra.

while in the Holy Land. After all, he was the first of the Komnenoi to visit Jerusalem and this seems to have played an important role in his self-presentation strategies.[27]

Let us briefly consider the second exile, which, as noted, may have been triggered by Isaac's son's defection to the Turkish armies. If, as it seems, this forced stay in Heraclea Pontica occurred soon after 1138, Isaac must not have been much older than he was when he commissioned the aforementioned poem to Prodromos. Moreover, according to our sources, this second and shorter exile was not a particularly distressing event.[28] Thus, just as the first exile in the East, the one in Heraclea Pontica seems quite incompatible with the picture painted by the prayer to the Virgin,[29] where exile is almost presented as an existential condition. Seen in this light, the many references to a life of endless suffering, coupled with the conventional – but particularly emphatic – insistence on the fear of the Day of Judgement, would be more appropriate for an older and disillusioned Isaac. Equally, the poem's recurrent allusions to Isaac's countless sins and his need for the Virgin's quick intermediation would make more sense if written in his later years. If, as it seems, Isaac considered his final move to Thrace as a veritable exile, the most likely timeframe for the poem's composition would thus be the years he devoted to the foundation of his monastery.

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[27] As shown by the paraphrase of the *Letter of Aristeas,* which Isaac seems to have composed as an introduction to the Seraglio Octateuch. According to Anderson 1982, 86 this manuscript dates from the years of Isaac's return to Constantinople after his travels to Palestine. If correct, this dating would strengthen the idea that the paraphrase, with its remarkable focus on Jerusalem, was a crucial component of Isaac's self-fashioning strategy (for further details, see Lovato 2021).

[28] This exile must have started sometime after John's defection to the Turks (dated to 1139 by Varzos 1984, 244) and it certainly ended before Manuel's coronation in 1143. According to John Kinnamos, *Deeds of John and Manuel Komnenos*, 32, ll. 20–22 (Meineke), as soon as he returned to Constantinople after his father's death, Manuel freed his uncle and welcomed him back to the capital.

[29] Both Kinnamos and Choniates report that, even after 1143, the overly ambitious Isaac still harbored the hope of becoming emperor (see Varzos 1984, 244–246). Their negative depiction of Isaac may be influenced by their respective authorial agendas. However, the fact that the *sebastokratōr* was likely forced to move to Thrace around the 1150s may imply that his presence in the capital was still perceived as a threat.

3. The poem to the Virgin and the Kosmosoteira *typikon*

So far, I have attempted to date Isaac's poem based on the information provided by Byzantine and non-Byzantine historiographical accounts. In this section, I will compare Isaac's invocation to the Virgin to another work that the *sebastokratōr* devoted to the Theotokos, namely the *typikon* of the Kosmosoteira Monastery. Since Isaac authored this monastic charter around the end of his life, any differences or similarities between the two texts may provide further clues as to the dating of the poem. Furthermore, this comparison will afford a clearer picture of Isaac's strategy of self-presentation and, more specifically, of the role that his devotion to the Virgin played within it.

Certainly, a parallel reading of the poem and the *typikon* cannot disregard the different form and aim of these two texts. While the *typikon* takes up 119 prose paragraphs of varying length, the poem is composed of 41 dodecasyllables. More broadly, whereas the poem has an occasional nature and depicts a specific moment in Isaac's life, the *typikon* aims to regulate the organization of the monastery and ensure that the memory of the founder is preserved for generations to come. What is more, if the differences between poem and *typikon* are likely connected to their 'genre' and occasion, the commonalities linking them may partly stem from Isaac's overarching self-fashioning agenda. Indeed, some of the thematic affinities that I will explore in what follows recur also in other works composed by or for Isaac. However, as I hope to show, there are some features that seem to be specific to the two texts under examination and may thus help us illuminate their potential connections.

Let us begin our comparative reading by considering the way in which the speaking 'I' is represented in both texts. The poem's *persona loquens*, a lonely sinner who has been wandering for most of his life and whose only hope is to obtain salvation in the afterlife, may seem quite at odds with the nuanced voice of the founder of the Kosmosoteira monastery. Despite being at the end of a troubled and sinful life, the Isaac of the *typikon* seems to oscillate between regret and hopefulness, between sorrow over his past mistakes and pride for his new foundation. As noted, these discrepancies are undoubtedly connected to the different form and purpose of the two texts. What is more, the *typikon* was like-

ly composed in numerous sittings, with the author often going back to topics and themes he had already treated in former sections.[30] Thus, the fluctuating tones of the monastic charter may also be a consequence of its convoluted editorial process.

This said, a close examination shows that the two texts do share some commonalities, which emerge especially if we compare the poem to the most 'autobiographical' sections of the *typikon*.[31] As expected, some of these themes perfectly conform to Isaac's self-fashioning strategy and emerge also in his other works. A case in point is the emphasis on the *sebastokratōr*'s refined education. Like his sister Anna, Isaac was proud of his *paideia*, which he considered a crucial component of his public persona. This must have held true also in the final years of his life, as demonstrated by the Kosmosoteira *typikon*. Far from being a dull imitation of former monastic charters, this text is characterized by a refined style and a wealth of classical and scriptural references.[32] The importance that Isaac attributed to his own literary achievements, and to education more broadly, is also attested by some of the *typikon*'s provisions. Indeed, not only did Isaac endow the monastery with a library, to which he bequeathed a copy of his own writings,[33] but he also encouraged the election of literate monks.[34] If we now look at the poem to the Virgin, we will remark that even the protagonist of this humble supplication seems to subtly draw attention to his own literary skills. Towards the end of

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[30] See Ševčenko 1984, 135–136 n. 2 and Thomas & Hero 2000, 785–786.

[31] When I speak of the 'autobiographical' nature of some passages of Isaac's *typikon*, I refer to the sections that are more or less explicitly concerned with the dramatization of the speaking 'I'. This said, it is worth recalling Drpić's caveat against interpreting dedicatory epigrams as "direct reflections of autobiographical reality", a warning that applies also to monastic *typika*, including the apparently idiosyncratic charter authored by Isaac (Drpić 2016, 88). On monastic *typika* as 'autobiographical' documents see also Hinterberger 1999, passim and especially 183–201.

[32] See e.g. Petit 1908, 18 (on the classicizing and Homeric overtones of the document), Varzos 1985, 247 (on the Sophoclean references characterizing the description of the monastery's site) and Ševčenko 1984, 137 n. 9 (on the ekphrastic passages of the *typikon*). For a new and comprehensive appreciation of the *typikon* as a literary work, see Margaret Mullett's contribution in Lovato (forthcoming).

[33] *KT*, ch. 106, 1921–1926.

[34] *KT*, ch. 3, 62–65.

the text, the speaking 'I' states that the gift he is offering to the Virgin in exchange for her intercession is nothing but the very poetic composition (*stichourgia*) to which he is now entrusting his prayer for salvation. Notably, it is in this very same passage that Isaac chooses to address Mary as the mother of the divine Word (*Logos*). Considering the context in which it appears, this epithet may be read as an allusion to the multiple meanings of the word *logos*, which could indicate the divine Word made flesh, but also, more generally, concepts such as 'word', 'discourse' and 'literary or rhetorical work'.[35] By presenting his *stichourgia* as a suitable offering to the Virgin and by simultaneously hinting at the polysemy of the term *logos,* Isaac suggests that no gift could be more fitting for the Mother of *Logos* than the very words (*logoi*) of his poem. If my interpretation is correct, this combination of a typical motif of Byzantine dedicatory epigrams with the widespread theme of the 'gift of words'[36] is meant to further highlight the author's literary merits.

Another set of themes that surfaces in both the poem and the *typikon* concerns Isaac's position within the imperial family. While the *sebastokratōr* emphasizes his connection with his parents,[37] in neither text does he mention his offspring. Certainly, the former behavior is quite natural for a member of the Komnenian dynasty and is a pervasive motif in most of Isaac's preserved works. The deliberate silence concerning his descendants seems instead to be specific to the two texts under examination and may point to Isaac's isolation from his *genos* in the final stages of his life. Admittedly, when it comes to the poem it is hard to determine whether the lack of references to Isaac's progeny is the result of an intentional authorial choice. This absence may be due to the 'generic conventions' of Byzantine epigrams, which only allowed for short *sphragides* meant to quickly outline the social status of the speaking 'I'. Isaac's exclusive focus on his father may thus be simply ascribed to lack

[35] See e.g. Drpić 2016, 23. On the Byzantines' use of the expression οἱ λόγοι to refer to virtually any kind of contemporary discursive practice, see also Bernard 2014, 41–47.

[36] On the motif of the 'gift of words' see e.g. Bernard 2012.

[37] For Isaac's representation of his relationship with his parents in the *typikon*, see e.g. *KT* ch. 54, 1009–1920 (commemoration rituals in honor of Eirene and Alexios) and 89, 1697–1699 (Isaac wants their portraits to be placed at one end of his sarcophagus).

of space. However, there is another passage of the poem that may hide an allusion to Isaac's estrangement from his descendants. At ll. 24–25, Isaac presents the Virgin as his desired *synekdēmos* ("fellow-traveler"). This term appears also in the poem where Theodore Prodromos celebrates Isaac's pilgrimage in the Holy Land. In this latter text, however, the word refers to Isaac's son John, who is presented as his father's faithful "fellow-traveler" and "fellow-wanderer" (*synekdēmos kai symplanētēs*).[38] Interestingly, the same locution appears also in Niketas Choniates' account of Isaac's exile to the East: once again, the terms *synekdēmos* and *symplanētēs* designate the young John.[39] Considering that Choniates often used Komnenian court poetry as a source, the similarities between his account and Prodromos' poem may not be a simple coincidence. Would it be possible to establish a comparable interplay between the poem to the Virgin and Prodromos' composition? Unfortunately, differently from Choniates, Isaac only employs the (not uncommon) term *synekdēmos* and it is thus hard to determine whether this word may hide an allusion to Prodromos' description of John. If so, by presenting the Virgin as his *synekdēmos* Isaac would not only be stressing his exclusive relationship with the Theotokos, but he would also be suggesting that he has lost the support of his son, who has renounced his role as his father's fellow-traveler.

While the poem does not afford enough elements to draw a definitive conclusion, the *typikon* is considerably more explicit as to Isaac's relationship with his descendants. Despite being grateful for the assistance of his faithful 'men' Michael and Leo Kastamonites,[40] Isaac presents the Theotokos as his main interlocutor and ally. It is the Virgin who has supported him throughout his tumultuous life and it is to her that he now entrusts both his monastery and his salvation. Not only are Isaac's descendants conspicuously absent from the monastery's memorial ceremonies, but, at the beginning of the *typikon*, the *sebastokratōr* explicitly presents himself as a 'barren and senseless shoot'.[41] This self-depiction

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[38] Theodore Prodromos, *Carmina Historica* XL, 52–54 (Hörandner).

[39] Niketas Choniates, *Annals* p. 32, ll. 7–8 (van Dieten).

[40] See especially *KT*, ch. 12, 259–264.

[41] *KT,* ch. 2, 34–35.

reverses the images of vegetal fertility and luxuriance that were employed to celebrate one's position within the imperial *genos*.[42] Indeed, as he implies in other passages of the *typikon*, Isaac has no descendants apart from his newly founded monastery, which he considers to be his only 'offspring' and legacy.[43]

This feeling of isolation is strengthened by another theme shared by both texts, that is, the many references to Isaac's estrangement from his "sweet homeland". As noted, in the poem Isaac represents himself as a wanderer who has spent most of his life in exile and is still tossed about by a real and metaphorical 'tempest'. While lacking the marine imagery of the poem, the first sections of the Kosmosoteira *typikon* equally depict the founder as a man who, due to his countless mistakes, is forced to spend his last days far from his homeland, even as he is consumed by a terrible illness.[44] Similar themes occur in another emotionally charged section of the *typikon*, namely the chapters where Isaac describes the future layout of his tomb. Here, the reader learns that the *sebastokratōr* had originally planned to be buried in Constantinople, in the church of the Chora monastery that he had restored while still living in the capital. Now, however, he has changed his mind and wants his tomb to be placed in the Thracian monastery he has just founded.[45] The mention of the City that he will likely never see again, together with the thought of his impending death, elicits one of the most pathetic passages of the entire document. Once again, Isaac remembers the misfortunes (δυσπραγία) that have kept him far from his homeland for most of his life (πατρίδος γλυκείας μοι τὸν πλείονα χρόνον τῆς ἐμῆς βιοτῆς ἀλλότριος γέγονα).

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[42] See e.g. the recurrence of expressions such as πορφύρας βλάστημα, πορφυράνθητος κλάδος/ῥόδον, ὄρπηξ πορφύρας in most contemporary courtly literature, including dedicatory epigrams. On this imagery and its implications for imperial propaganda see also Andriollo (forthcoming).

[43] See e.g. *KT* 117, 2128, where Isaac encourages his 'men' Leo Kastamonites and Michael to take care of the monastery and to consider it as something that lives in place of its founder (ἀντ' ἐμοῦ ταύτην ὡς ζῶσαν συνορᾶν καὶ λογίζεσθαι). On Isaac's isolation from his *genos*, see also Stanković 2011, 63–64.

[44] *KT,* ch. 2, 39–34: καὶ ἐγγωνιάζων, οἷς ὁ Θεὸς ἐπίσταται κρίμασιν, ἐκτὸς τῆς πατρίδος μου βαρυαλγήτῳ νοσήματι.

[45] *KT,* ch. 89, 1675–1681.

Now that he is ailing alone in a dark corner, estranged from the fame of his glorious ancestors (ξένος συγγενικῆς εὐκλείας) and about to fall into oblivion (εἰς λήθην ἤδη πεσὼν καὶ μνήμης ἀνθρωπείας), he finds solace in thinking that, after his death, his remains will be guarded by the mosaic icon of the Virgin Kosmosoteira, who will perpetuate for eternity his prayer for the remission of his many sins (ὡς μένειν ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τούτῳ ἐφεδραζομένην εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα τὸν σύμπαντα ἀναλλοιώτῳ διαμονῇ πρὸς μεσιτείαν τῆς ἐμῆς ἀθλίας ψυχῆς).[46]

Before concluding my analysis, I would like to focus on a last detail that may further illuminate the relationship between our two texts. In both the poem and the *typikon* Isaac addresses the Virgin with a rather unusual epithet, that is, *panoptria*, "all-seeing". While this term features in some works of 12th-century court literati, such as Theodore Prodromos and Constantine Manasses,[47] it is quite uncommon. More significantly, Isaac seems to be the only author to explicitly refer it to the Mother of God. As it has been demonstrated, the Komnenians ascribed considerable political and symbolic value to the epithets they attributed to their holy patrons, especially when it came to their majestic monastic foundations.[48] If we consider that, in Komnenian times, the cult of the Theotokos played an increasingly central role in discourses of imperial legitimacy,[49] Isaac's original choice will appear all the more remarkable.

This impression is strengthened by the fact that, in both the poem and the *typikon*, *panoptria* is employed only in particularly meaningful passages. In the former text, the epithet is part of the last invocation to the Theotokos, which immediately precedes the concluding *sphragis* finally disclosing both the identity of the speaking 'I' and his imperial ancestry. As concerns the *typikon*, the reader or listener encounters this rare term in the first and last chapters only. Notably, in this last instance,

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[46] *KT,* ch. 90, 1709–1721.

[47] See e.g. Theodore Prodromos, *Rhodanthe and Dosicles* 4, 69 (Marcovich), Constantine Manasses, *Verse Chronicle* 4039 (Lampsides) and *Itinerary* 1, 96 (Chryssogelos).

[48] According to Stanković 2011, Isaac's choice of the epithet *panoptria* was intended as a reminder of his imperial status. Inter alia, the *sebastokratōr* aimed to connect his Thracian monastery with the church of Christ *Pantepoptes* ("All-seeing") founded by his paternal grandmother Anna Dalassene.

[49] See e.g. Pentcheva 2006, 165–187.

not only does *panoptria* open Isaac's final prayer to the Virgin, but it is also coupled with the other epithet that was meant to define and single out the holy patron of his monastic foundation, namely *kosmosōteira*, "savior of the world". Given the rarity of *panoptria* — and its even rarer association with the Theotokos — the epithet's occurrence in significant passages of both the poem and the *typikon* can safely be interpreted as a deliberate authorial choice.

In summary, despite the undeniable dissimilarities that stem from the different aims and form of the two texts, both the poem and the *typikon* present a speaking 'I' who, while being proud of his refined education and illustrious ancestry, fashions himself as a lonely exile, isolated from his homeland and — at least according to the *typikon* — from the rest of his *genos*. In both texts, the narrating voice ascribes his long wanderings to the many mistakes he has made throughout his life and contemplates the end of his existence as well as his destiny in the afterlife. His only hope is the mediation of the Virgin Mary, who is presented as his closest companion and ally. In both cases, moreover, Isaac seems to consider his exile as a permanent condition. However, while the *persona loquens* of the poem is still looking for a safe haven, the author of the monastic charter appears to have found some solace in his peaceful Thracian monastery. If we add that the poem does not make any mention of the illness that torments Isaac in the *typikon*, we are tempted to conclude that the monastic charter was penned at a later stage than the poem. Whatever the case, the two texts are not only likely to both date from the final stages of Isaac's life, but they are also part of a consistent devotional and self-fashioning project, which revolves around the figure of the Theotokos. This is confirmed by the pointed use of the unusual epithet *panoptria*, which Isaac wanted to be associated with 'his' Theotokos and with the foundation that he considered to be his main legacy. However, if the *typikon* was meant to convey this message to the Kosmosoteira monks, it is not as easy to understand who the intended recipients of the poem may have been. The following section explores this last issue by situating Isaac's poem into the broader context of Byzantine dedicatory epigrams.

4. A dedicatory epigram for a beloved icon?

Even if they take up different forms and are preserved by different media, dedicatory epigrams can be described as poetic compositions that were meant to accompany, introduce and enrich different kinds of gifts, from a book, a sword or a precious item of clothing to a sacred object offered to one's holy patron.[50] However, since most dedicatory epigrams have been preserved only by manuscript sources, it is often difficult to ascertain the circumstances of their composition and/or performance, especially when the texts are not introduced by a title or a prefatory description.[51] This applies also to Isaac's poem: the copyist of the Barocc*ianus did not provide it with any manner of introduction and inserted it between two apparently unrelated clusters of texts. However, as I hope to show, a comparison with the broader 'genre' of dedicatory epigrams may help us formulate some hypotheses as to the function and audience of our text.[52]

The poem to the Virgin presents many characteristics that are commonly associated with dedicatory epigrams.[53] For one, the text is meant to fulfill two different and complementary purposes: not only does it convey a pathetic and intimate prayer to the divine patron of the speaking 'I', but it also provides the audience with a carefully staged portrait of the *persona loquens*. To fulfil this double agenda, Isaac's composition follows the structure of a canonical *ethopoiia*: after describing the present situation of the suppliant, the poem briefly focuses on his past and eventually expresses a heartfelt wish for the future. As noted by modern scholars,[54] this rhetorical structure is a conventional feature of dedicatory epigrams, as is the short *sphragis* that closes the poem to

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[50] For a comprehensive repertoire of inscriptional dedicatory epigrams and a presentation of the different objects/artifacts on which they can be found, see Rhoby 2009–2018. For an overview of Byzantine epigrammatic poetry with updated bibliography, see now Drpić & Rhoby 2019.

[51] See e.g. Lauxtermann 2003, 150–151, Drpić 2016, 25–27 and Spingou (forthcoming).

[52] On the literary epigrams as a standardized 'genre' see e.g. Lauxtermann 2003, 151 and Spingou 2012, 178–222.

[53] For the conventional features and structure of Byzantine (inscriptional) epigrams, see Rhoby 2010.

[54] Drpić 2016, 88–89.

the Virgin. Even Isaac's allusion to the polysemy of the word *logos* is a conventional motif within this literary genre. Finally, and more significantly, like many dedicatory epigrams Isaac's poem seems to refer to a figurative representation of the holy patron it addresses. If we go back to the sections of the text that are devoted to describing the Virgin and the 'paradox' she embodies (ll. 14–20; 33–35), we will notice that the unfathomable relationship between the Mother of God and her Son, who is also her Father, is presented through a series of almost pictorial images.[55] Reading these lines, one can visualize the Virgin who lovingly holds her Child in her arms, while the latter wriggles in her embrace. Even if the poem does not provide any details as to the Virgin's posture and does not make any direct mention of an icon, we can quite safely conclude that Isaac had in mind a specific representation of the Mother of God, most likely belonging to a widespread iconographic type (such as that of the Virgin *brephokratousa*).

In light of these remarks — and considering the similarities between the poem and the Kosmosoteira *typikon* — I would like to suggest that this prayer to the Virgin was conceived as a dedicatory epigram for one of the numerous depictions of the Theotokos that Isaac dedicated to the Kosmosoteira monastery. Notably, while in most *typika* the icons of the foundation's holy patron(s) are mentioned cursorily only in the strictly normative sections or in the final inventories, the Kosmosoteira *typikon* devotes much space to the holy images placed inside and outside the monastery's enclosure. If we limit ourselves to the Theotokos, the *typikon* describes at least six different depictions of the Mother of God.[56]

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[55] The presence of descriptive elements does not mean that Isaac's poem can be defined as an *ekphrasis*. On the differences between *ekphraseis* and dedicatory epigrams, see the discussion infra along with Lauxtermann 2003, 160 and Spingou (forthcoming).

[56] 1. The mosaic icon of the Virgin Kosmosoteira, to be placed at one end of Isaac's tomb (chapters 1, 45; 89, 1698–1699; 90, 1716–1717; 109); 2. one of the two *proskynēsis* icons located in the *katholikon* (chapters 7, 123–124; 9, 166–173; 12, 280–282; see also Ševčenko 2012, 89); 3. the mosaic representation of the Dormition of the Virgin to be hung above the main entrance of the *katholikon* (ch. 65, 1190–1191); 4. a stone panel with the image of the Theotokos situated on the bridge for the veneration of passersby (ch. 67, 1214–1215); 5. a mosaic image of the Theotokos placed above the entrance to the monastery's enclosure (ch. 84, 1605–1606); 6. the *enkolpion* that

Amongst these, we may single out two representations of the Virgin to which Isaac seemed to be particularly attached: the *enkolpion* of the Mother of God and the mosaic icon (διὰ μουσείου εἰκόνισμα) of the Theotokos Kosmosoteira. Both were to play an important role in the layout of Isaac's resting place: while the former had been set in silver so as to be fixed onto the lid of the *sebastokratōr'*s marble sarcophagus, the mosaic icon of the Kosmosoteira was to be placed at one end of said sarcophagus, along with an icon of Christ.[57] Even if we are unable to determine how the Virgin was represented on either of these objects, I am inclined to think that the mosaic icon would have been a more likely candidate for the composition of a dedicatory epigram.

First, apart from one exception,[58] this icon of the Theotokos is the only one that the *typikon* consistently associates with the epithet *kosmosōteira*, which, as noted, was meant to single out Isaac's monastery from other foundations dedicated to the Virgin. More significantly, in the first lines of the *typikon*, the monastery's holy patron is introduced first and foremost *through* her icon, something that, to my knowledge, is not to be observed in any other monastic charter. This holy representation is so meaningful to both Isaac and the fate of his foundation that the entire monastery seems to revolve around it.[59]

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conventional would be fixed onto Isaac's sarcophagus (ch. 89, l. 1693–1695). The *typikon* mentions an icon of the Virgin that was to be kissed by newly appointed officials (chapters 34, 752–755 and 35, 767–768), but it is not clear to which of the abovementioned icons these passages refer to. The icon of the Theotokos that was to be carried out in procession on the feast of the Dormition (ch. 6, 1182–1183) may be the mosaic icon of the Kosmosoteira. As for the icon placed inside the hospital (ch. 70, 1214–1215), the *typikon* does not provide any information about its subject.

[57] On the layout of Isaac's tomb, see Ševčenko 1984. For a different perspective, see now Ousterhout-Bakirtzis 2007, with further bibliography.

[58] *KT*, ch. 9, 165–166, where the epithet *kosmosōteira* is referred to one of the *proskynēsis* icons in the *templon* area. See however ch. 90, 1715–1718, where Isaac seems to imply that only the mosaic icon that he found in Rhaidestos could legitimately be called *kosmosōteira*.

[59] *KT*, ch. 1, 1–5 (Τυπικὸν ἐμοῦ τοῦ [σεβαστοκράτορος] Ἰσαακίου (…) ἐπὶ τῷ καινισθέντι παρ' ἡμῶν νεοσυστάτῳ μοναστηρίῳ (…), ἐν ᾧ καὶ καθίδρυται τὸ τῆς κοσμοσωτείρας μου καὶ Θεομήτορος καὶ ἐν πολλοῖς εὐεργέτιδος διὰ μουσείου εἰκόνισμα). This mosaic icon of the Theotokos is the most prominent amongst all other depictions of

The *typikon* also informs us that Isaac had acquired this icon in a 'miraculous' way some time before, while he was in Rhaidestos.[60] Even if we are not told when this extraordinary event took place, we learn that Isaac had already prepared an icon stand for this sacred image in the Chora Church in Constantinople, where he originally meant to be buried.[61] While they do not provide a precise chronological sequence of events, these passages seem to indicate not only that Isaac had been carrying this icon with him for quite some time, but also that he had it with him when he left the capital for good. If read along with Isaac's poem to the Virgin, these details seem to perfectly match the latter text's description of the Theotokos as a faithful fellow-traveler. As a matter of fact, this interpretation might even help to explain the peculiar use of the verb *pherō* at l. 25 of the poem, where Isaac wishes he may 'take' the Virgin with him (εὔχομαι φέρειν) also in his final voyage to the Hereafter. By using a verb that would apply better to an inanimate object than a holy figure, Isaac may be alluding to the double role that the Virgin plays in this text: she is at the same time the divine agent who has assisted him in his misfortunes *and* the sacred representation of this same divine agent. In his final journey to the Hereafter, Isaac wants to have both with him: the presence of the Rhaidestos icon next to his tomb will ensure the presence of the Theotokos by his side on the Day of Judgment.

Admittedly, we are now in the realm of speculation and, while the evidence discussed above may be enough to refute the identification of the poem with one of the lost *ekphrases* is composed by Isaac,[62] we should consider other interpretations. For instance, instead of being a prayer addressed to an icon of the Virgin, Isaac's poem may have been composed for one of the many religious feasts connected to the Theotokos.[63] Dedicatory epigrams penned for such occasions were quite widespread in 12th-century Byzantium and, being sometimes inspired by iconographic representations of the events they celebrated, they could

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the Virgin and it features again in chapters 89, 90 and 109.

[60] *KT*, ch. 90, 1716–1717.

[61] *KT*, ch. 89, 1698–1699.

[62] As tentatively suggested by Ševčenko 1984, 137 n. 9.

[63] I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer who pointed this out.

display distinctly descriptive tones, comparable to those of Isaac's composition. In our case, the poem's focus on Mary's 'paradoxical motherhood' could point, for instance, to the feast of the Annunciation. If we accept the possibility that both the poem and the *typikon* were penned in the final stages of Isaac's life, we may even go as far as to suggest that the former might have been inspired by the decorative cycle of the Kosmosoteira's *katholikon*, even though the *typikon* only mentions a mosaic representation of the Dormition.[64] This said, Isaac's poem seems to lack some features that characterize most epigrams composed for religious feasts. For one, this kind of epigrams generally allude to the event they commemorate,[65] while our text does not refer to any specific celebration connected to Mary's life. What is more, the 'image' described by Isaac does not seem to represent any recognizable scene or episode, but, as noted, is closely reminiscent of widespread icon types with the Theotokos holding her Child. Finally, the structure and contents of Isaac's invocation to the Virgin call to mind contemporary epigrams penned for the dedication (or the renovation) of holy icons.[66] Thus, while it may be impossible to identify the specific event for which Isaac composed his prayer to the Virgin, interpreting the poem as a dedicatory epigram addressed to an icon remains the simplest solution.

Before concluding my analysis, I would like to briefly discuss the potential occasion for the poem's performance, as well as its subsequent material and textual transmission. Due to lack of evidence, this is necessarily the most hypothetical section of my study. However, a comparison between our text and a dedicatory epigram that was undoubtedly linked to the Kosmosoteira monastery will allow us to at least make some educated guesses.

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[64] See Ševčenko 2021, 89 (with n. 22), who convincingly argues that the fresco decoration as it is currently visible in the Kosmosoteira church did not belong to the decorative program originally conceived by Isaac.

[65] A relevant parallel is Manganeios Prodromos 69 (partly edited in Miller 1881, 511). As attested by its title, this composition was performed on the feast of the Annunciation, to which it makes explicit references throughout (see e.g. ll. 1–18 and 56–57).

[66] See e.g. Theodore Prodromos, *Carmina Historica* XXI and LVII (Hörandner) and Nicholas Kallikles, *Carmina Genuina* 15 and 20 (Romano). The latter two poems are translated into English and thoroughly discussed by Andriollo (forthcoming).

The famous *Marcianus Graecus* 524 preserves a short composition that was likely authored by one of Isaac's closest collaborators, namely the loyal *grammatikos* Michael whom we have already encountered in the Kosmosoteira *typikon*.[67] As we learn from the epigram itself, Michael wrote this short poem to accompany the dedication of a silver lamp to the church of the Kosmosoteira monastery: the artifact was offered as a token of gratitude to Saint Nicholas, who had saved Michael's son from a grave illness and had recently rescued Michael himself from an attempt on his life. In her analysis of the text, Foteini Spingou argues that, due to obvious space constraints, the twelve lines making up the poem could not have been inscribed directly on the lamp. For this reason, she proposes to consider the composition as a performative dedicatory epigram, to be read in occasion of the donation of the object and/or in other suitable circumstances. For instance, the donor might have presented the epigram at refined social gatherings attended by a selected group of literate friends. Spingou also suggests that, after such performances, a written copy of the epigram may have been somehow attached to the object that it was meant to accompany, so as to perpetuate the wishes and prayers of the donor.[68]

However it was disseminated, Michael's epigram must have been accessible long enough to be copied and inserted into the collection of the Marcianus. Its performance(s) in local literary circles may have been enough to ensure its preservation, but the text might also have been somehow available to the visitors of the Kosmosoteira monastery, who perhaps could read it next to the sacred offering it described. Are we to imagine a similar scenario also for the poem to the Virgin, which, if our previous analysis is correct, may be the only other dedicatory epigram from the Kosmosoteira monastery that has survived up to our times? Considering its length, the poem could hardly have been inscribed on the silver and gold frame that Isaac dedicated to his beloved Rhaidestos

[67] See Spingou 2012, 165–166 and 93. This epigram is discussed also by Drpić 2016, 96–98.

[68] Spingou 2012, 175.

icon.[69] A *podea* or an *encheirion* are equally unlikely to have provided a large enough surface for the embroidering of the *sebastokratōr*'s plea to the Mother of God. In addition, the fact that the poem itself is presented as an offering to the Virgin may indicate that it was composed first and foremost with a performative aim in mind. More specifically, given its likely reference to an icon of the Theotokos, its insistence on the fear of the Final Judgement and its plea for the Virgin's intercession, this heartfelt prayer to the Mother of God may have been meant to be performed (and possibly displayed) in the presence of the mosaic icon of the Kosmosoteira, which was to be placed next to Isaac's tomb so as to permanently mediate for his 'wretched soul'.[70] Considering the similarities between the poem and the Kosmosoteira *typikon*, we may even imagine that Isaac's epigram was intended to be read regularly just as his monastic charter, maybe on occasion of the annual commemoration of the founder.[71] Such a periodical performance would not only have perpetuated Isaac's prayer to the Theotokos, but it would also have guaranteed the survival of his legacy, thus dispelling the fear that seemed to haunt him almost as much as his dread of the Final Judgement: that of being forgotten.

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[69] *KT*, ch. 90, 1718. Incidentally, the renovation and/or adornment of an icon's frame would have been an ideal occasion for the composition and performance of a dedicatory epigram.

[70] On the performance of dedicatory epigrams in churches, often in front of the related icon(s), see Spingou 2012, 143 and 164–165.

[71] In discussing the annual recitation of the Pantokrator's hexametric inscription, Spingou observes that "in some cases, the texts of verse inscriptions were read aloud from a manuscript in order to commemorate the donors" (Spingou 2012, 174). Even if we were to conclude that Isaac's poem was never inscribed on or next to the Kosmosoteira icon, we may imagine for it a similar scenario to that described for the Pantokrator inscription.

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