

The Sound of a Thousand Tongues: Visitors to Constantinople from the Eastern Provinces in the Sixth Century

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Pending their return to Egypt, we can imagine Apollos the monk and Victor the priest as country bumpkins gawking around in the Byzantine capital, attending Mass at the recently rebuilt Hagia Sophia, strolling down “Main Street,” the *Mesê*, and catching the panoramic view of the city from the top of column of Arcadius, much like the Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta centuries later, but without need for an interpreter; and we can imagine (before this) the impression made on them by the capital’s skyline as they sailed toward it through the Sea of Marmora for the first time, “a view [to quote Glanville Downey] never to be forgotten.”¹

This is how the papyrologist James Keenan imagined the long stay in Constantinople of two inhabitants of the Middle-Egyptian village of Aphrodito who had brought to Constantinople a case for the imperial tribunal. On January 7, 541, when they contracted a loan of twenty gold coins,² they must have been in the capital for several months already, waiting for their case to be judged. Keenan’s passage raises several questions on which to reflect.

Such long stays were the norm for those coming to the capital on business, especially of a judicial nature, as the imperial tribunal was overbooked.³ From the village of Aphrodito alone, we have evidence of this trip by Apollos and his nephew Victor, followed in 548/549 and 551 by two trips by his son, the better-known Dioskoros, who was also accompanied by several others.⁴ Probably a little earlier, a certain Diogenes, from the Middle-Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchos, found himself in Constantinople, where he seems to have spent quite some time, and borrowed large sums of money from another Egyptian, who represented a monastery in the vicinity of Oxyrhynchos and happened to be in the capital, as well. Diogenes also borrowed money from Flavius Strategios, the father of the future consul Apion, who was also from Oxyrhynchos but a resident of Constantinople.⁵ In the 570s, another Oxyrhynchite, Flavia Christodote, threatens to go to the capital and obtain justice in a dispute involving a considerable sum of money.⁶

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1 James G. Keenan, “A Constantinople Loan, A.D. 541,” *The Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 29, no. 3/4 (1992): 177, quoting Glanville Downey, *Constantinople in the Age of Justinian* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 3; Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta, a Muslim Traveler of the 14th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 171–172.

2 *P.Cair.Masp.* 67126, written in Constantinople. The sum would have bought them several houses back in their village of Aphrodito, but much less in the larger city of Arsinoë—and Egyptian prices were certainly much lower than those of the capital. Keenan suggests it would have covered the rest of their stay and their return fare to Alexandria.

3 To the point that Justinian felt the need to legislate on the subject: *Nov.* 80 of 539, translation in David Miller and Peter Sarris, *The Novels of Justinian*, v. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 551–557.

4 On Dioskoros’s stays in Constantinople, see Jean-Luc Fournet, “Des villageois en quête de lettres officielles: le cas des pétitionnaires d’Aphrodité (Égypte, VI^e s. apr. J.-C.),” in *Official Epistolography and the Language(s) of Power: Proceedings of the First International Conference of the Research Network Imperium & Officium*, ed. Stefan Procházka, Lucian Reinfandt, and Sven Tost (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2015), 255–266; Fournet, “Les tribulations d’un pétitionnaire égyptien à Constantinople: révision de *P.Cair.Masp.* III 67352,” in *Proceedings of the 25th International Congress of Papyrology*, ed. Traianos Gagos (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 243–252; Fournet, “Les Égyptiens à la capitale ou Quand la papyrologie s’invite à Constantinople: édition comparée des *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67024–67025,” in *Constantinople réelle et imaginaire: autour de l’œuvre de Gilbert Dagron*, Travaux et mémoires 22/1, ed. Cécile Morrisson and Jean-Pierre Sodini (Paris: ACHCByz, 2018), 595–633.

5 See Jakub Urbanik, “P.Oxy. LXIII 4397: The Monastery Comes First, or Pious Reasons before Earthly Securities,” in *Monastic Estates in Late Antique and Early Islamic Egypt: Ostraca, Papyri, and Essays in Memory of Sarah Clackson* (*P. Clackson*), ed. Anne Boud’hors, James Clackson, Catherine Louis, and Petra Sijpestein (Cincinnati, OH: American Society of Papyrologists, 2009), 225–235.

6 *PSI* I 76 (Alexandria, 572/73); translated in Jane Rowlandson, *Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), no. 151; see James G. Keenan, “The Case of Flavia Christodote: Observations on *PSI* I 76,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 29 (1978): 191–209.

180 Very few sixth-century documents produced in Constantinople have come down to us in their original form, and they have been preserved not locally but in Egypt, where the climate allowed papyrus to survive. Other Egyptian documents refer to trips to the capital undertaken by local inhabitants. Their matter-of-fact mention of such trips clearly indicates that they were common, and that even simple village elites would be ready to engage in one when enough was at stake. We have the documents from the family of Dioskoros thanks to a chance find, but they were certainly not the only family whose members visited Constantinople on at least three occasions within a decade. Justinian's *Novel 80* addresses his concern that too many rural inhabitants were roaming in Constantinople, and implies that they came in large groups to wait for their cases to be heard.⁷

The sixth century, especially the years of the construction of Hagia Sophia and the decades following it, saw many other provincials visit the capital on business of various sorts. Merchants, soldiers, and slaves, of course, provided the constant background of non-locals in any city, so much so that sources rarely mention them. Others are well identified by contemporary authors.⁸ In 451, the bishops who met at the Council of Chalcedon had made decisions that lastingly compromised Christian unity. Many bishops in the eastern provinces, especially Syria and Egypt, were opposed to the line taken by the council and upheld by most emperors.⁹ Although ultimately siding with the Chalcedonian position, Justinian attempted to reconcile the two sides, while his wife Theodora actively supported the anti-Chalcedonians. In the 530s, as a consequence of the new flare in the controversy, a number of Syrian anti-Chalcedonian refugees had fled to Constantinople under the protection of Theodora and were housed in the palace of Hormisdas, in close vicinity of what was then a huge building site.¹⁰ The second half of the decade saw several important anti-Chalcedonian figures come to the city. From the 540s onwards John of Ephesos spent most of his time there, where he wrote in Syriac his *Ecclesiastical History* and his *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, and where under Justinian he acted as representative of the city's anti-Chalcedonians—which probably included the “refugees” initially installed in the palace of Hormisdas.¹¹ John was also in the city in 536, when Justinian had summoned a synod with leaders of ecclesiastical institutions to discuss a number of sensitive issues in his attempts to reconcile the two sides of the conflict. One decision among those of the synod was to condemn the anti-Chalcedonian leader and bishop of Antioch, Severus, and the Syrian monk Zooras, who was visiting Constantinople at that time and eventually became the subject of a biography by John.¹² Severus himself had been to the capital on negotiation a couple of years earlier with a group of followers and had taken residence in one of the imperial palaces.¹³

There is little or no evidence on the city's incoming merchants in the sixth century, but it is not unreasonable to assume that the tenth-century *Book of the Eparch* describes a situation very similar to that which existed in the sixth century, at least in terms of the diversity of origin and the practices it attempts to regulate.¹⁴ One of the *Book's* aims was to limit the time spent in the city by “importers” to three months. Many traders came from the hinterland, the villages of Thrace and Bithynia, others from much further afield—and they were no doubt

7 *Nov. 80*, prelude and par. 1, translation in Miller and Sarris, *The Novels*, 1:551–552.

8 This multicultural presence in the sixth century is described as a given by Glanville Downey, *Constantinople*, 21–23; for the high and late medieval periods, see Claudia Rapp, “A Medieval Cosmopolis: Constantinople and Its Foreign Inhabitants,” in *Alexander's Revenge: Hellenistic Culture Through the Centuries*, ed. Jon Asgeirsson and Nancy Van Deusen (Reykjavik: University of Iceland Press, 2002), 153–171; see also Gilbert Dagron, “Formes et fonctions du pluralisme linguistique à Byzance (VIIe–XIIIe siècle),” in *Idées byzantines*, v. 1 (Paris: ACHCByz, 2012): 233–264 (a synthesis of two earlier articles of his).

9 On this council and its aftermath see Richard Price and Mary Whitby, eds., *Chalcedon in Context: Church Councils, 400–700* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009).

10 Jonathan Bardill, “The Church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus in Constantinople and the Monophysite Refugees,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 54 (2000): 1–11, with a systematic review of previous bibliography.

11 Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and the Lives of the Eastern Saints* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 28–30 and *passim*.

12 On the context of the synod, see Fergus Millar, “Rome, Constantinople and the Near Eastern Church under Justinian: Two Synods of C.E. 536,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 98 (2008): 62–82; Millar, “Linguistic Co-existence in Constantinople: Greek and Latin (and Syriac) in the Acts of the Synod of 536 C.E.,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 99 (2009): 92–103; on Zooras and the broader context, see Millar, “The Evolution of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Pre-Islamic Period: From Greek to Syriac?,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 21 (2013): 43–92.

13 Pauline Allen and C. T. R. Hayward, *Severus of Antioch* (London: Routledge, 2004), 16.

14 Johannes Koder, *Das Eparchenbuch Leons des Weisen* (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1991).

the ones who overstayed their welcome. In the sixth century, for instance, the trade in spices was already well developed and to a large extent was carried out by Egyptian merchants on Egyptian ships with their crews and owners, who also spent a large amount of time in the capital waiting for a return cargo or for the weather to ease.

Most of the visitors, whether short- or long-term, relied on networks of their compatriots already established in the capital. The loan contracted by Apollos with which we started was witnessed by three individuals, one of whom was Flavius Sōnos, a shipowner. Keenan tentatively suggested he could have been the owner of the ship that brought the two Aphroditans to Constantinople, and then introduced them to the Flavius Anastasios, who lent them the twenty solidi. Anastasios himself had an agent in Alexandria.¹⁵ When Apollos's son travelled to the capital some years later, he was given the names of people to contact for help in what was for them a real megalopolis. One of them was the former dux Theodoret, who lived in the quarter of the Rhabdos.¹⁶

The Oxyrhynchite Diogenes also clearly knew where to go when he needed to borrow eighty solidi. He found a man from the same city, Theophilos, who was acting in the name of the Oxyrhynchite monastery of Apa Hierax.¹⁷ It appears from the document that Theophilos was also temporarily in Constantinople, and his monastic connections could mean that he was residing at the “monastery of the Egyptians,” headed around that time by a certain Kyriōn, who was a signatory at the synod of 536. There were also in the 530s a monastery of Bessi from Thrace, two monasteries of Syrians, two of Lycaonians, one of Armenians, one of Cretans, in addition to seven Roman ones.¹⁸ Such monasteries would have worked as connectivity hubs between the visitors from the respective areas and the settled inhabitants of the capital who came from the same provinces.

Visitors, especially those seeking justice from the imperial tribunals, would also have established connections with useful locals, such as experienced bureaucrats and scribes well versed in the rhetoric and formal features of imperial documents. Thus when Dioskoros and three other Aphroditans came to the capital in the name of their village to obtain an imperial rescript, they had prepared a draft of the document as was the habit. To ensure that it was done according to all the norms, however, they had someone experienced with the imperial administration produce a clean and edited copy of their draft before submitting it.¹⁹ Such individuals may well have been of provincial origin or have had special connections with one or the other of the provincial communities of the capital.

Another point Keenan makes in the passage quoted above is that most provincial visitors would not have needed interpreters. What he means is that they all understood Greek, being as they were the elites in their rural constituencies and functioning, for all official business, in Greek. This does not mean, however, that when they were between themselves, walking along the Mese or visiting the monastery of their region, they also spoke Greek; it is almost certain that they spoke their local languages: Aramaic, Coptic, Armenian, or Arabic.²⁰ Even native Greek speakers would have had a large variety of accents and used very different registers even from the Constantinopolitan street idiom—let alone the refined language of the elites. Like in a modern metropolis, even though Greek was understood by almost everyone, the streets would have echoed the sounds of a large variety of languages and dialects.

For our purposes here, the question that follows is this: did all those visitors enter Hagia Sophia? Did they bring with them the sounds and noises of their remote lands? We know

15 Keenan, “A Constantinople Loan,” 177–179.

16 Fournet, “Les tribulations,” 247.

17 *P.Oxy.* LXIII 4397 (Oxyrhynchos, 545).

18 Millar, “Linguistic Co-existence in Constantinople,” 101–102; Peter Hatlie, *The Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople, ca. 350–850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 458–470.

19 Fournet, “Les Égyptiens à la capitale,” 630–631.

20 Even if the story that Jabala ibn al-Ayham, the last Ghassanid king, fled to Constantinople after the Muslim conquest is only a later legend, it highlights the existence, since at least the sixth century, of a Christianized Arab population in the Levant, who could have come with grievances to Constantinople like everyone else. On the traditions about Jabala, see Julia Bray, “Christian King, Muslim Apostate: Depictions of Jabala ibn al-Ayham in Early Arabic Sources,” in *Writing “True Stories”: Historians and Hagiographers in the Late Antique and Medieval Near East*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou, Muriel Debié, and Hugh Kennedy (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 175–203.

little on the rules, other than purely religious ones, that governed who could be admitted to the liturgy in urban churches, and even less on the possibility of visiting them out-of-hours. The suggestion made by Cyril Mango that the church of Saints Sergios and Bacchos was built for the anti-Chalcedonian refugees rests on the probably correct assumption that they would not have wanted to—or would not have been admitted to—follow the Chalcedonian service.²¹ But that does not mean they would not have visited the church, especially when they had spent several years seeing it (and probably hearing it!) being built.

When business brought them to the capital and they had to wait for a substantial amount of time, visitors in the 540s would have been attracted to the gigantic and luxurious new church, even if they were anti-Chalcedonian. We know from graffiti throughout the empire at the time that a form of tourism was already common, and people visited monuments only because they were famous. The many graffiti left in Hagia Sophia in later centuries are a fascinating window on the variety of language groups that entered it.²² In the early decades after its construction, on the other hand, it is not surprising that no one thought of engraving their name in the shiny new marble: its fame and splendor were no doubt intimidating. That fame soon reached the provinces, and it is likely that the sixth-century spike in the name Sophia in the papyri should be attributed to the celebrity of the new church.²³

Even non-Christians may have entered the Great Church. Even if the many miracle stories of Muslims and Jews entering churches and insulting icons were primarily intended to demonstrate the holiness of those icons, they may well reflect a reality where churches—and especially beautiful ones—were visited on non-religious reasons out of mere curiosity. At the very least, they would have been heard in the area around the church, where they “could gather in the out-of-doors Mediterranean social life,” to quote Downey again.²⁴ Thus like the stones that composed its decoration, so its visitors came from all over the empire and beyond.

Like another tower of Babel, Hagia Sophia was most certainly born in a multilingual soundscape. The builders needed to complete it in five years, even if they were not the tidy 10,000 men and 100 foremen of later traditions, were certainly numerous enough to have been brought in from various parts of the empire, as were the workers building the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem almost two centuries later.²⁵ Different groups of workers would have spoken different languages between them, staying alert for any instructions that would have come in Greek.

In the last decade, the sounds of Hagia Sophia have made a lot of noise, so to speak.²⁶ Attempts to reconstruct the aural and sensory experience of the Byzantine church-goer have offered profound insights into the full religious experience of the Byzantine liturgy, involving

21 Cyril Mango, “The Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus at Constantinople and the Alleged Tradition of Octagonal Palatine Churches,” *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 21 (1972): 189–193; on the debate around that suggestion, see Bardill, “The Church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus.”

22 Attention has been paid mostly to Slavic and Scandinavian graffiti. For Scandinavian, see James E. Knirk, “Runer i Hagia Sofia i Istanbul,” *Nytt om runer* 14 (1999): 26–27; Elena A. Mel’nikova, “A New Runic Inscription from Hagia Sophia Cathedral in Istanbul,” *Futhark: International Journal of Runic Studies* 7 (2016): 101–110; Thomas Thomov, “Drekar from Hagia Sophia,” in *Scandinavia and the Balkans: Cultural Interactions with Byzantium and Eastern Europe in the First Millennium A.D.*, ed. Oksana Minaeva and Lena Holmquist (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2015), 123–137; Thomov, “Four Scandinavian Ship Graffiti from Hagia Sophia,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 38 (2014): 168–184. For Slavic, see Cyril Mango, “A Russian Graffito in St Sophia, Constantinople,” *Word* 10 (1954): 436–438; Ioli Kalavrezou-Maxeiner and Dimitri Obolensky, “A Church Slavonic Graffito in Hagia Sophia, Istanbul,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 5/1 (1981): 5–10; Savva M. Mikheev, “Two Short Glagolitic Graffiti in St. Naum’s Monastery near Ohrid and in Hagia Sophia in Istanbul,” *Slověne = Словѣне. International Journal of Slavic Studies* 2 (2013): 52–63; Thomas Thomov, “Един графит за престъпление и покаяние от „Св. София“ в Константинопол,” *Palaeobulgarica / Старобългаристика* 38 (2014) 61–72; Thomov, “In the year of 6905: A Graffito from Hagia Sophia in Constantinople,” *Bulgaria Mediaevalis* 6 (2015): 171–181; Thomov, “Три надписа-графити от храма „Св. София“ в Константинопол,” *Palaeobulgarica / Старобългаристика* 39 (2015): 94–109.

23 Between the fourth and the seventh century, there are on average twenty occurrences of the name each century, except for the sixth, when there are fifty-one.

24 Downey, *Constantinople*, 23.

25 See Max Küchler, “Moschee und Kalifenpaläste Jerusalems nach den Aphrodito-Papyri,” *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 107 (1991): 120–143.

26 See Bissera V. Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia: Sound, Space, and Spirit in Byzantium* (College Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), which caught the attention of the international press.

all the senses,²⁷ and have given new meaning to contemporary descriptions of liturgical chant as being sung in choir with the angels.²⁸ The recordings of those reconstructions have an ethereal quality, however, which is purified of background noise.²⁹ Yet background noise, from coughs to restless children to short whispers among members of the assembly, or the rustle of hundreds of people moving imperceptibly, are inseparable from the sound of the chant itself. And outside the time of the liturgy, when the church was no longer in full ceremonial mode, what constituted that background noise returned to the foreground, becoming louder and more distinct. One could hear a thousand different voices in languages, dialects, and idioms that were far removed from the angelic sound of the choirs. They, too, would have resonated in a very characteristic and recognizable manner³⁰ and would have been served by the architecture in varied ways—much less easy to reproduce today because they were more fluid and multiple than the well-defined ceremonial chant. We should not forget that this other polyphony was as much part of the Great Church’s soundscape as the liturgy itself.

27 Pentcheva, “Performing the Sacred in Byzantium: Image, Breath and Sound,” *Performance Research* 19 (2014): 120–128.
 28 Spyridon Antonopoulos, Sharon E. J. Gerstel, Chris Kyriakakis, Konstantinos T. Raptis, and James Donahue, “Soundscapes of Byzantium,” *Speculum* 92, no. S1 (2017): S321–S335; Gerstel, Kyriakakis, Raptis, Antonopoulos, and Donahue, “Soundscapes of Byzantium: The Acheiropietos Basilica and the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Thessaloniki,” *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 87 (2018): 177–213; see also Sharon E. J. Gerstel, “Images in Churches in Late Byzantium: Reflections and Directions,” in *Visibilité et présence de l’image dans l’espace ecclésial, Byzance et Moyen Âge occidental*, ed. Sulamith Brodbeck and Anne-Orange Poilpré (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2019).

29 For Hagia Sophia, see “Hagia Sophia: Sound, Space, and Spirit in Byzantium,” accessed October 14, 2020, <https://hagiasophia.stanford.edu/>; for churches of Thessaloniki, see “Speculum: Soundscapes of Byzantium,” accessed October 14, 2020, <https://soundcloud.com/chris-kyriakakis/sets/speculum-soundscapes-of-1>.

30 During the coronavirus-related lockdown in spring 2020 in Oxford, the Bodleian Libraries tried to console their frustrated readers by offering them online the recordings of four different reading rooms: “Sounds of the Bodleian,” accessed October 14, 2020, <https://www.ox.ac.uk/soundsofthebodleian/#radcam>. The difference is striking and the rooms quite recognizable from their background noise alone—even though in principle what reigns in the Bodleian Libraries is “silence.”