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The Opening of Hagia Sophia — A note on a note

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In his book on the mosaics of Hagia Sophia in 1962, Cyril Mango studied the western arch of the Great Church, which the emperor Basil ii had repaired after its collapse due to the great earthquake on 26 October 989. More specifically, Mango argued that the repairs of the arch and its mosaics were finished in AD 994 and stated “There is some reason to believe that the ceremonial opening of St. Sophia, after the completion of the repairs, took place on Sunday, May 13, 994.” This date is based on a note in the Greek manuscript Firenze BML, S. Marco 304, which Mango discussed at length in a footnote.¹

S. Marco 304 contains, among other texts, the *Etymologicum genuinum* and the note appears after this text. Klaus Alpers devotes several pages to a discussion of the note² which, according to him, places the manuscript in Constantinople in AD 994; this date is accepted by other scholars,³ even if the note is not a regular subscription at the end of the manuscript and thus only dates the preceding text.

More recently, Ekaterina Kovalchuk has interpreted the note as if a rededication, or *encaenia*, of Hagia Sophia in the late tenth century were arranged to coincide with the “Birthday” (γενέθλια) of Constantinople on 11 May. She also writes “Another proof that some of the medieval *encaenia* of St Sophia might have been timed with 11 May is derived from

¹ Mango 1962, 78 and note 256.

² Alpers 1991, 527-530; my thanks are due to Klaus Alpers for discussing the note with me. I am also grateful to the many colleagues who have commented on this text, especially Barbara Crostini and Andrew Wade, and to Laura Höger for her interest and patience.

³ E.g. F. Pontani, “Scholarship in the Byzantine Empire (529-1453)”, in: *Brill’s Companion to Ancient Greek Scholarship*, i, 2015, 338: “Laur. San Marco 304, copied in 994”.

the later Russian tradition (...) to celebrate church dedications on 11 May, which must have been introduced in Kievan Rus in obedience to practice inherited from Byzantium”.⁴ However, rather than the *encaenia* of Hagia Sophia, the Russian tradition may have to do with the alternative name for Constantinople’s birthday feast, sometimes called *encaenia* of the City.

This highly discussed note is situated between the texts of *Etymologicum genuinum* and *Etymologicum parvum*, it is written in the middle of a page and embellished with a line ornament above and below. It runs:

ἐτελειώθη σὺν θ(ε)ῶ μη(νὶ) μαῖω γ’ ἡμ(έ)ρ(α) κυριακῆ ὥρ(α) τῆς
ἡμ(έ)ρ(α)ς ὅτε ἤνυξ(εν) ἡ μ(ε)γ(άλ)η ἐκκλη(σία)

<the above was> completed with God’s help on 13 May, a Sunday, in the hour of the day when the Great Church opened⁵

The note mentions the date, the day of the week and the time of the day, but not the year. So how and when did the year 994 come up?

In 1897, in his study of the Greek *etymologica*, R. Reitzenstein used this note to try and establish a connection to Photios, patriarch of Constantinople in the late ninth century, and he presented a list of the 26 years, from the late ninth to the mid-eleventh centuries, when 13 May fell on a Sunday; four of these were in the late ninth century: 865, 882, 893, and 899.⁶ He concluded that “the Great Church” of the note was Hagia Sophia, an identification that may not have been self-evident to a western scholar at the time, and to Reitzenstein’s mind this placed the note and its scribe in the close surrounding of the patriarch, something one would not necessarily do today. He—correctly—identified the word ἤνυξ(εν) as

⁴ Kovalchuk 2010, 335-336.

⁵ Quoted from Mango and Alpers, and compared with the image provided by Alpers, Fig.2, which unfortunately is not easily legible; Alpers writes ἡμ(έ)ρ(η)ς. Translation taken from Mango, with a few changes.

⁶ Reitzenstein 1897, 68-69.

ἤνοιξεν, with a banal misspelling often seen in the ninth and tenth centuries; he then made the connection to ἀνοίξια (opening), the technical term for (part of) the consecration of a church, or its re-consecration after repairs, and he stated that this term also covers the yearly commemoration of the re-dedication of Hagia Sophia (in 562) by Justinian, after the cupola had been damaged by an earthquake.⁷ This sent him on the search for earthquakes that had damaged the Great Church, and he landed on the repairs made by the emperor Basil i (867–886) and the year 882. But the manuscript is clearly later than the ninth century, which forced him to suggest that the scribe of S. Marco 304 had copied an older note from his ninth-century *Vorlage*. Reitzenstein's theory was soon contested by Papadopoulos-Kerameus, who maintained that the note was contemporary with the manuscript and instead proposed the restoration of Hagia Sophia done by Basil ii Bulgaroktonos (976–1025) and the year 994, when 13 May fell on a Sunday. Mango accepted this date and argued that it fits with the damage made to the western arch by the great earthquake in 989,⁸ and Alpers added further arguments in favour of this date. No scholar seems to have contested Reitzenstein's interpretation of the note as pointing to a dedication ceremony of Hagia Sophia.

However, this interpretation seems liturgically impossible. We know from liturgical manuscripts from the tenth century onwards⁹ that the *anoixia* of the Great Church to which Reitzenstein referred was 22 December, as indeed it still is today, and not 13 May. It is impossible that the same church celebrated its *anoixia* on two different dates in the same year: once a church has been re-dedicated, it stands to reason that the old date disappears in favour of the more recent one, just as the dedication of Justinian's original building in late December 537 was superseded by the re-dedication just before Christmas 562.¹⁰

7 Text in parentheses added by me.

8 See the thorough discussion in Mango 1962, 77.

9 Already the evangelion Sinai gr.215, dated by Clark to the 9th century, has *anoixia* of the Great Church on 22 December.

10 To my knowledge, the date of the first dedication of Hagia Sophia is not mentioned

The term *anoixia* is relatively rare and it signifies a highly ritualized part of the consecration ceremony, where the procession stands outside the locked church and sings “Lift up our gates, oh rulers! Be lifted up, eternal doors, and the King of glory will enter” (Ps. 23.7), while those inside the church respond “Who is this King of glory?” (Ps. 23.8); this is repeated three times before the doors are opened and the procession enters the church.¹¹ The rite of *anoixia* goes back, at least to the consecration of Justinian’s restored Hagia Sophia in 562, which took place on 24 December. Later the yearly commemoration (*encaenia*) of Hagia Sophia was held 23 December and the *anoixia* on the eve. To my knowledge, there is no trace of an *anoixia* or *encaenia* feast in Hagia Sophia in May in any liturgical manuscript and, anyway, the idea, that the date could have switched from December to May in the late tenth century and almost immediately back again to December is entirely without merit.

The note says that the scribe finished copying the text on Sunday 13 May, but instead of the exact hour he writes “the hour of the day when the Great Church opened (ἤνοιξεν)”. The verb ἀνοίγω has the general meaning ‘to open’, and while it is true that—in the relevant context—it can take on the specialized meaning ‘to ritually open (a church)’, this is not what happens here: there is nothing in the note to suggest consecration and when Reitzenstein (mis)translates the verb ‘wieder eröffnet wurde’ (‘was re-opened’), he reads too much into the verb in order to bolster his own interpretation of the note. Reitzenstein was a classical philologist who specialized in Hellenistic and early Christian beliefs, but he does not seem to have been interested in medieval Greek orthodoxy and its rites, a subject that was not as easily accessible back then as it is today.

A consultation of Mateos’s edition *Typicon de la Grande Église* will show that Hagia Sophia opened and closed every day, normally both in

in liturgical manuscripts.

¹¹ See e.g. the entry Ἀνοίξια by Fountoulis.

the morning and in the evening,¹² and there is no need to suppose that the ‘opening’ mentioned in the note is more than that, a specification of the time of day, as indeed the scribe says himself. If he had meant the solemn re-dedication of Hagia Sophia after several years of repair, he would have referred to the year, or the day, when the church re-opened, not to the hour of the day. Instead, he is simply referring to the daily opening of the church and rejoicing in the fact that he has finished copying in time for the service. While the note seems to place the scribe in Constantinople,¹³ it does not give us a clue to the year, except that it must be one of the twenty-six years, enumerated by Reitzenstein, when 13 May was a Sunday, and probably one of the fourteen years in the tenth century when this happened.¹⁴ It could of course be AD 994, but there are thirteen other options, and the dating of the western arch of Hagia Sophia, and of the manuscript San Marco 304, must rely on other criteria. There is no reason to believe that the note has anything to do with consecration, nor that the date of the *anoixia* of the Great Church was ever changed, once it had settled on 22 December.

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12 See e.g. the evening of Wednesday of Cheesefare week: ἑσπέρας (...) μετὰ τὴν ἀνοιξίν τῆς ἐκκλησίας (in the evening after the opening of the church), Mateos ii, 4 lin.25.

13 The editors of the *Etymologicum* are convinced that the manuscript was written in South-Italy, see Lasserre-Livadaras, p.v and note 2, in which case the ‘Great Church’ of the note would have to be, not Hagia Sophia, but a different church, located in Italy. Theoretically, the Great Church might even be that of Thessaloniki or Edessa.

14 Reitzenstein 1897, 69: AD 904, 910, 921, 927, 932, 938, 949, 955, 960, 966, 977, 983, 988, and 994.

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