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A Church Slavonic Graffito in Hagia Sophia, Constantinople

IOLI KALAVREZOU-MAXEINER and DIMITRI OBOLENSKY

During the summer of 1969 Barbara H. Van Nice painstakingly recorded in tracings, photographs, and copies some 2,000 graffiti found in Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. These graffiti have been scratched on the marble revetments and columns of the church during the past fourteen centuries. They are in a number of languages, reflect the diverse backgrounds of the building's visitors and, if studied together, would reveal an uncommon perspective on its history.

One of the graffiti is of particular interest, because it provides possible answers to two quite unrelated historical questions. The first involves the structural history of the systems of support for the building's main dome; the second concerns the extent of the jurisdiction of Gerasimos, metropolitan of Kiev (ca. 1433–1435).

The graffito is found in the western bay of the south gallery. It has been scratched on the northeast column approximately at eye level (1.64 m.) by a man who apparently was standing at the time. It is incised lightly into the Proconnesian marble and consists of a single line (0.52 m.; fig. 1, p. 6). The column is now partially embedded in fill that was added between the main southwest pier and the column, to increase the mass of the pier at gallery level. This fill and its marble revetment cover about two-thirds of the circumference of the column shaft, including the (now invisible) first word and part of the second word of the graffito. Thus the date of the graffito would provide a *terminus post quem* for this major alteration of the main piers, which resulted in the strengthening of the main supports of the dome at obviously weak points.

In its reconstructed form (fig. 2, p. 7), the graffito reads:

[*Gospodi pom*]ozi rabu svoemu Iakovu Grigor'eviču, pisarju Gerasima mitropolita kiev'skago, i.e., "Lord help Thy servant James, son of Gregory, scribe of Gerasimos, metropolitan of Kiev."



Fig. 1. Hagia Sophia: view of the southwest pier at gallery level, with arrow indicating location of graffito.

I

The date of the graffito can be determined fairly exactly from the facts of Gerasimos's biography. In 1432 this bishop of Smolensk, a city recently annexed to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, was sent by the Lithuanian grand duke Svidrigailo (Švitrigaila) to Constantinople, to be consecrated metropolitan. In the following year he returned from Constantinople to Smolensk, duly consecrated by Patriarch Joseph II. Gerasimos's tenure of the metropolitanate was brief: on 26 July 1435 he was arrested and burned at the stake in Vitebsk by order of Svidrigailo, on suspicion of treasonable relations with the latter's cousin and rival Sigismund, who had supplanted Svidrigailo as grand duke in Vilnius in 1432.¹

It is hardly conceivable that Gerasimos's scribe or secretary would have had an opportunity to scratch his name on a column in the south gallery of Hagia Sophia unless he was there in attendance on his master. In the late Middle Ages this gallery was often used for meetings of synods.² Our graffito, whose initial words follow exactly the conventional beginning of Byzantine invocatory graffiti—Κύριε, βοήθει τῷ σῷ δούλῳ—can thus be dated between 1432, when Gerasimos arrived in Constantinople, and the autumn of 1433, when he returned to Smolensk; the most likely date, since the words were presumably scratched after Gerasimos's consecration, is the first half of 1433.³ It is hardly likely that Metropolitan Gerasimos visited Constantinople again during the remaining two years of his life.

The date of the graffito suggests that the thickening of the piers, by filling in the formerly adjoining open bays, is most probably part of the structural work undertaken by Sinan in 1547. The construction of this filling of relatively small stones, with their joints marked by red paint, is similar to the filling used around the Byzantine windows in the tympana, which are now thought to be part of Sinan's complete consolidation.

II

What title and what jurisdiction were granted to Gerasimos by the Byzan-

¹ See M. Hrushevs'kyi, *Istoriia Ukrainy-Rusi*, vol. 4 (Kiev and Lviv, 1907), pp. 197–206; M. K. Liubavskii, *Ocherk istorii Litovsko-Russkogo gosudarstva*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1915), pp. 64–71; G. Vernadsky, *The Mongols and Russia* (New Haven, 1953), pp. 298–99.

² E. M. Antoniadis, *Ἐκφράσεις τῆς ἁγίας Σοφίας*, vol. 2 (Athens, 1908), pp. 322–23.

³ Gerasimos is unlikely to have left for Constantinople later than 1 September 1432, the day when Svidrigailo, a victim of the coup d'état engineered by Sigismund, fled from Vilnius to Polotsk.

tine authorities? A number of historians have argued that he was appointed "metropolitan of Kiev and All Rus'" (μητροπολίτης Κυέβου καὶ πάσης Ῥωσίας).⁴ Since the early fourteenth century holders of this title resided in Moscow and exercised, or at least claimed, spiritual jurisdiction over the Orthodox in Muscovy, Lithuania, and the Novgorodian lands. In recent times this was the case with the metropolitans Cyprian (1390–1406) and Photius (1408–1431). The primatial see fell vacant upon Photius's death in 1431 and—so runs the argument—the new metropolitan, Gerasimos, was unable to travel to Moscow because of the armed conflict (1433–1434) between the Muscovite ruler Basil II and Prince Iurii of Galich.⁵

This view rests on the evidence of three late medieval Russian sources: the Second Pskov Chronicle,⁶ the Third Novgorod Chronicle,⁷ and the Life of Euthymius, archbishop of Novgorod.⁸ These documents state, or imply, that Gerasimos was given jurisdiction over the entire Rus' church.

In 1900 a lone voice was raised by the Russian church historian E. Golubinskii against this reading of the facts.⁹ He argued that the Byzantine authorities, who were vitally concerned with maintaining good relations with the Muscovite ruler, would scarcely have risked jeopardizing them by appointing as primate of the Muscovite church a nominee of the grand duke of Lithuania, Moscow's traditional rival. Moreover, Golubinskii pointed out, the evidence of the above-mentioned Russian sources is suspect, for their aim is to eulogize Euthymius of Novgorod. This cleric, having fallen foul of the late Metropolitan Photius, took advantage of the vacancy in the see of Moscow to go to Smolensk, where he was consecrated in 1434 as archbishop of Novgorod by Metropolitan Gerasimos. Euthymius became a distinguished figure in the church of Novgorod, over which he presided for the next twenty-four years. His late-medieval panegyrists, faced with the blatant illegality of the Smolensk ceremony of 1434 (since only the metropolitan of "All Rus'" had the right to consecrate the

⁴ They include S. M. Solov'ev, *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen*, vol. 2 (reprinted Moscow, 1959), p. 577; A. A. Ammann, *Abriss der ostslawischen Kirchengeschichte* (Vienna, 1950), pp. 127–29; A. V. Kartashev, *Ocherki po istorii russkoi tserkvi*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1959), pp. 348–49; Vernadsky, *The Mongols and Russia*, p. 308.

⁵ On this conflict, see L. V. Cherepnin, *Obrazovanie russkogo tsentralizovannogo gosudarstva v XIV–XV vekakh* (Moscow, 1960), pp. 743–63.

⁶ *Pskovskie letopisi*, vol. 2, ed. A. N. Nasonov (Moscow, 1955), pp. 43–44.

⁷ *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei*, vol. 3 (St. Petersburg, 1841), p. 238.

⁸ *Pamiatniki starinnoi russkoi literatury*, ed. G. Kushelev-Bezborodko, vol. 4 (St. Petersburg, 1862), pp. 18–19.

⁹ E. Golubinskii, *Istoriia russkoi tserkvi*, vol. 2, pt. 1 (Moscow, 1900), pp. 416–18. Cf. J. Raba, "Evfimij II., Erzbischof von Gross-Novgorod und Pskov. Ein Kirchenfürst als Leiter einer weltlichen Republik," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 25, no. 2 (1977): 161–73.

archbishop of Novgorod), attempted a cover-up by falsely claiming that Gerasimos was then the primate of the whole Rus' church. This cover-up has deceived a number of modern historians.

Our graffito, in which Gerasimos is described by his secretary as metropolitan of Kiev, decisively vindicates Golubinskii's view. The absence of the words "and of All Rus'" from Gerasimos's title (a cross at the end of the graffito indicates that nothing followed the word "kiev'skago") proves that he was appointed by the Byzantine authorities not as a metropolitan with his see in Moscow and with ecclesiastical jurisdiction over all the Orthodox of Rus', but as head of the Orthodox church of Rus' outside of the territory controlled by the Muscovite grand prince, that is, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Halych land. Such a metropolitan had the title "of Kiev" because Kiev, the traditional primatial see of the church of Rus', lay within the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania at that time.

III

A final word about the circumstances in which the graffito may well have been scratched. The column with the graffito is just outside the marble barrier with its door that led into the middle section of the south gallery. This gallery, we have seen, was used for meetings of synods and other ecclesiastical gatherings.¹⁰ It seems likely that James, Gerasimos's secretary, spent some time outside the door, waiting for the meeting to end. A very similar graffito, written half a century or so earlier by an official of another metropolitan of Kiev, Cyprian, has been found in the east bay of the south gallery, on the frame of a door that once led to an outside staircase.¹¹ The presence of these two graffiti in the south gallery brings to mind the hours, possibly long hours, which these two men spent waiting for their masters, the one inside and the other outside the enclosed area in which the synods took place.*

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¹⁰ See fn. 2.

¹¹ C. Mango, "A Russian Graffito in St. Sophia, Constantinople," *Slavic Word* 10 (1954): 436-38.

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