

“Epigraphy, Liturgy, and Imperial Policy on the Justinianic Isthmus”
Delivered at the conference ““Half a Century on the Isthmus”
June 14-17, 2007
Athens, Greece

Introduction

One of the central strains emerging from the last half century of archaeological work on the Isthmus is the idea of the Isthmus as a cultural, economic, and even (at times) political crossroads. The idea of the Isthmian crossroads appears in the goals of several recent projects: The Eastern Korinthia Archaeological Survey and the Kenchreai Cemetery Project, for example, both emphasized the Isthmus as a significant point of contact between the Roman East and West. David Pettegrew’s recent dissertation argued that the idea of the Isthmus as a crossroads appears in the literature of the Roman period. The growing corpus of ancient and later fortifications on the Isthmus reinforces the liminal status of the place through time. My contribution to the study of the Isthmus will continue in this tradition by considering how the idea of the Isthmus as a crossroads informs our reading of one very specific piece of archaeological evidence: the well-known Justinianic inscription found at Isthmia and now displayed in the Corinth museum.

+Φῶς ἐκ φωτός, θεὸς
ἀληθινὸς ἐκ θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ,
φυλάξῃ τὸν αὐτοκράτορα
Ἰουστινιανὸν καὶ τὸν
πιστὸν αὐτοῦ δοῦλον
Βικτορίνον ἅμα τοῖς
οἰκούσιν ἐν Ἑλλάδι τοὺς κ(α)τ(ὰ) Θεῶν
ζῶντας. +

“Light of Light, True God of True God, guard the emperor Justinian and his faithful servant Viktorinos along with those who dwell in Greece according to God.”¹

The text has several distinct characteristics: namely it is one of a relatively small number of Justinianic inscriptions from the Late Roman Achaia and surrounding

¹ T.E. Gregory, *Isthmia V: The Hexamilion and the Fortress* (Princeton 1993) 12-13, no. 4.

provinces, and it would seem to confirm some of the activities reported in book 4 of Procopius' *Buildings*. It names a certain Victorinos, a figure known from inscriptions elsewhere in the Balkans. At the same time, its opening lines employ characteristically creedal language – most likely a quote from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed. As far as I know, this is the only monumental inscription that employs this text suggesting that it may have had particular significance in the context of the Isthmus.

The specific object of this paper, then, is to determine the significance of this well-known inscription in the cultural, religious, and, political context of the Late Roman Isthmus. At no time, perhaps, is the position of the Isthmus between east and west more significant than in Late Antiquity. The growing cultural differences between the eastern and western Mediterranean basin followed their divergent political fates and the increasingly invasive nature of imperial – that is Constantinopolitan – contact with the Roman west. The Isthmian inscription offers a glimpse of the conflicted margins of imperial authority in the Eastern Mediterranean at a period when the basis for this authority was being reinterpreted and articulated in fundamentally different terms. The following analysis will argue that the Isthmia text sheds light on the way in which Justinian projected imperial authority in the ambivalent, liminal, and peripheral space of the Corinthian Isthmus. This analysis will not only propose “imperial” motives for the language in the text– that is motives that are associated with the emperor, although not necessarily directed by him – but also will consider how the expression of imperial authority in this text reflects local concerns and may preserve, under close scrutiny, the faint echoes of an Isthmian voice.

The Justinianic text from the Isthmus counts as one of the earliest known inscriptions from the Isthmus with its first edition, so to speak, being in a 15th-century Byzantine Short Chronicle which testified to the discovery of the text during the reconstruction of the Hexamilion Wall in 1415 during the reign of Manuel II. Monceaux rediscovered the text in 1883 near the South Gate to the fortress in loose fill. The size, content, and shape of the inscription suggests that it was probably built into the gate, perhaps above the arch, as was relatively common elsewhere in the Mediterranean.²

² Pringle, See plates: XIa, Lb.

Scholars have traditionally dated the text to the period between the death of Theodora in 548 because she is not mentioned in the inscription, and the reconstruction of the Hexamilion Wall which was recorded in Procopius' *Buildings* between 553-560.³

While the date of the text is reasonably secure, the author of the inscription is another matter. As the text is commonly associated with Justinianic efforts to refortify the Isthmus, the sentiment expressed in the text has led it to be attributed to Justinian or his representative as opposed to some local source of authority seeking to attach himself to imperial power. The presence of Viktorinos' name in the inscription perhaps offers a valuable hint as he appears in an inscription from Epirus Vetus which credits him with reconstructing fortifications in Thrace, Moesia, and among the Scyths.⁴ Victorinos, then, appears to have been an individual of prominence in the Eastern Empire and does not appear to have any particular local ties. The dearth of any local individuals in this text – except in the general “those who dwell in Greece according to God” – reinforces the interpretation of the text as an expression of imperial authority rather than a locally directed effort of an individual patron who sought to tie his authority to that of the emperor. Imperial authorship – or at very least imperially directed authorship – would coincide well with the inscription's placed on a fortification which Procopius viewed, in a general sense, as an expression of imperial power.⁵

Interpreting the Texts

If we accept this inscription as an expression of imperial authority on the Isthmus, the language of the text provides an avenue for exploring *how* the emperor (or his

³ As an aside, there is, however, an intriguing, if unlikely, possibility that the inscription could date to earlier than 548. Theodora was not well-liked in the West – as is evident in the accounts of the *Liber Pontificalis* where she is regarded as a heretical meddler in Papal affairs. There is a possibility, then, that her name was excluded from this text as a concession to its place in a province under the command of the Papacy. There is, however, little evidence for the exclusion of Theodora elsewhere in the West.

⁴ Unfortunately, there is some dispute over the identity of Viktorinos. Feissel has argued that he was an architect for Justinian while other commentators on the text, including Gregory, have proposed that he was more likely an imperial official, perhaps the Praetorian Prefect of Illyricum (Gregory, xxx). While arguments for Victorinos' position as an architect are not necessarily persuasive (as it would be unprecedented), it is equally unlikely that Victorinos served as the Praetorian Prefect of the Illyricum Orientalis. First, it is not clear whether Achaia is part of Illyricum Orientalis at this time (Bon, 8; Avramea, et c.). Moreover, in another Victorinos text from Byllis, ancient Apollonia, in Epirus, he claims to have constructed fortifications in Thrace, Moesia, and among the Scyths – which were by the middle years of the 6th century no longer parts of the Praetorian Prefecture of Illyricum.

representative) sought to articulate this authority. It is now widely accepted that inscriptions are integrative texts that draw upon a wide variety of genres to communicate meaning. Public monumental inscriptions expected the reader both to understand the logic within the text itself and to recognize how the inscription created a distinct time, space, and authorial voice by drawing together allusions to a wide variety of external sources and genres ranging from other inscriptions, to public rituals, the Bible, Classical literature, and law. The generically heteroglot composition of inscriptions combines with their typically compact length to produce texts dense in meaning and interpretative potential.

The most striking feature of the Isthmia text is the opening lines. This phrase, derives from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed. This text was not particularly well-known in either the East or West until the early 6th century when it appeared in the liturgy of the Eastern capital. It seems likely, then, that the primary context for this phrase was, in fact, the liturgy rather than a familiarity with a rare reference to the symbol of the 318 Fathers at Nicaea outside a ritual context. Unfortunately, our understanding of the liturgy in Late Roman Greece is rather poor, and its relationship with the liturgy of Constantinople obscure. No early text survives aside from various short inscriptions with possible allusions to or fragments of the Christian ritual. Consequently the primary source for understanding the structure of the liturgy remains the architecture of the numerous Early Christian basilicas excavated over the past century. Soteriou, Orlandos, Pallas and others have endeavored to use the remains of these buildings to propose a distinctive shape to the Greek liturgy emerging from the confluence of both Western and Eastern influences. Putting aside the methodological problems associated with such a functional interpretations of the Early Christian archaeological remains, it nevertheless seems likely that the liturgy in Greece had its own unique style.

During the 6th century, in particular, it would appear that the Eastern Capital sought to expand its influence over the ecclesiastical affairs of Greece perhaps to the detriment of both local liturgical practices and those promulgated by the Western church. On the Isthmus the massive Lechaion basilica, for example, shows indications of being

⁵ Pringle, 89-91 for a discussion of the role of the emperor in the process of building fortifications. Procopius 4.2.17

built with substantial imperial support, if not under imperial direction. The generous use of Proconessian marble, the brilliant and costly *opus sectile* floors, and its imposing size recommend imperial wealth. More telling, however, is its ambo placed in the center of the nave and linked to the bema by an elevated solea presumably with a low parapet screen. This organization of space in the nave has strong parallels with the centrally placed ambos of Constantinople and is distinct from the ambos elsewhere in Greece which tend, when there is solid evidence, to be offset to the north or south of the nave's central axis.⁶ The centrally placed ambo linked to the bema by a solea makes the most common reconstruction of the Greek liturgy difficult to understand. Most scholars have quite rightly suggested that the congregation sat in the aisles. The central nave separated from the aisles by raised stylobates and intercolumnar parapet screens remained open for the liturgical movements of the clergy. There would be little need, then, for the solea which functioned to protect the reader of the gospels from the press of the congregation in the nave as he made his way to the ambo for the reading. The presence of this feature in the Lechaion basilica, then, suggests that the design of this church either served to evoke similar churches in Constantinople or to accommodate a different liturgy perhaps one that drew important characteristics from the liturgy of the capital.

The architecture of this nearby church, then, provides us with a context for the appearance of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the generally liturgical tone of our text. The presence of the Creed in the liturgy of the Capital during the reign of Justinian evokes the liturgy in the inscriptions opening lines. This reading complements the final phrase of the text – **ama tois oikousein en Eladi** (all those who live in Greece) – which Deissman and Feissel saw as evoking the language of the diptychs of the living in the 7th century Constantinopolitan liturgy attributed to St. John Chrysostom. The link between the reference to the creed and the later text from the diptychs of the living forms a parallel with the structure Christian ritual in Late Antiquity. In many liturgies the Creed is followed by the diptychs at the conclusion of the pre-anaphoral rites.⁷

There is some reason, then, to see this inscription, in conjunction with local archaeological evidence, as evidence for the presence of the Constantinopolitan liturgy in

⁶ Mathews, *Churches of Constantinople*, 117-125.

⁷ Taft. *The Great Entrance*, xx

Greece by the mid-6th century. Moreover the signs of imperial patronage both at the Lechaion basilica and in this inscription encourage us to see Justinian's use of liturgy as a means of expanding and interweaving religious and political authority.

Corinthia in the 4th and 5th Centuries:

The use of liturgical language in the context of expanding imperial authority was particularly suitable for the Isthmus. The Isthmus and the province of Achaia stood within the political control of the Eastern Capital possibly within the Prefecture of Illyricum Orientalis.⁸ At the same time, Achaia and its bishop at Corinth remained within the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the papacy and under the authority of the Archbishop of Thessaloniki who served as the Papal vicar for the distinct ecclesiastical province of Illyricum of which Achaia remained a part. The two distinct spheres of authority, ecclesiastical and political, in the region had created difficulties as early as the 5th century.⁹ When a contested election of the bishop of Corinth in 419 led to the calling of a council under the authority of the bishop of Thessaloniki and the Pope, a group of dissatisfied clerics appealed the decision to the emperor Theodosius II and bishop of Constantinople. In response, Theodosius issued a law placing Illyricum under the jurisdiction of Constantinople, but shortly thereafter conceded papal authority as well.

In the late 5th and early 6th century during the so-called Acacian Schism further aggravated the conflict between papal and imperial jurisdiction. The roots of this controversy derived from imperial efforts to find compromise between the increasingly divergent Christological views of the late 5th and 6th centuries. The Emperors Zeno and Anastasius sought to forge reconciliation between orthodox and monophysite positions within the framework of a document issued by Zeno called the *Henotikon*.¹⁰ Satisfying neither the opponents of Chalcedon nor its staunch supporters in the West, this policy resulted in the Acacian schism and ultimately drove a wedge between Constantinople and the Pope in Rome. The impact of this schism seems to have been particularly violent in

⁸ By the middle years of the 6th century the province of Achaia may have been separated from the prefecture of Illyricum as part of Justinian's larger efforts to reorganize the provincial administration of the empire. (Bon, Avramea, Jones)

⁹ See recently Liberis 2005. But also Pietri xxxx, Charanis xxxx.

Illyricum, which as we have seen already chafed at the conflicting jurisdiction of Constantinople and Rome. The tension was further aggravated by increasing tendency for the papal representative in Illyricum Orientalis, the Bishop of Thessaloniki, to side with the proximate power of Constantinople even when it placed them at odds with his ecclesiastical superior in Rome. This divided allegiance during the Acacian Schism led 40 bishops of Illyricum Orientalis under the leadership of Alkison of Nikopolis to ask for admittance into direct communion with Pope Hormisdas in 515.¹¹ The clash between the two sides was not resolved until Justin renounced the Henotikon in 519.

Even after 519, however, similar clashes continued throughout the 6th century with Balkan bishops consistently appearing among those who sided with the arch-Chalcedonianism of the Pope against Justinian's efforts to seek doctrinal unity across the Mediterranean basin. Almost contemporary with our texts, in fact, was the "Three Chapters Controversy." This theological dispute focused on the Origenist character of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Ibas of Edessa and Theodoret of Cyrrhus, again made clear the incompatibility of imperial religious unity and the passionate, if not always consistent, Chalcedonianism of the Papacy. Even Justinian's (or perhaps Theodora's) hand-picked Pope Vigilius refused to conform to imperial expectations. After initially following Justinian's lead and condemning the writings of these three men (but not the men themselves), Vigilius's repudiated that position in the *Constitutum* of 551. Sixteen western bishops including 2 from Illyricum endorsed this document and rejected Justinian's condemnation of the Three Chapters while the Fifth Ecumenical Council was busy proclaiming its anathema on those very texts.

While the repercussions of these disputes in Illyricum and Achaia specifically remain shadowy at best, it is clear that the close tie between imperial authority and ecclesiastical unity in 5th and 6th century imperial policy would need to be handled with particular refinement to play well in the conflicted provinces between the East and West.

It is clear from elsewhere in the empire that liturgy played an increasingly prominent role in the promotion of particular theological and political perspectives over

¹⁰ W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement* (Cambridge 1972) 184-295. P. Charanis, *Church and State in the Late Roman Period*. (Thessaloniki 1974) for a short summary of this conflict that pays particular attention to the role of Greece.

¹¹ A. Fortescue, *The Reunion Formula of Hormisdas*.

the course of the 6th century. For example, the exclusion of the imperial, patriarchal, or papal name from the diptychs of the living was a most visible way of communicating anathema. The language of certain liturgical prayers – the trisagion, for example – had become a battle ground for conflicting theological perspectives. The inclusion of the Nicene Creed in the liturgy of the Capital during the reign of the monophysite emperor Anastasius by Patriarch Timothy “The Cat” (511-519) would certainly appear to fit this mold.¹² Timothy had come to power in the immediate aftermath of the Anastasius’s deposition of his predecessor Macedonius II. Taft and Dix have suggested that the Timothy may have modeled his inclusion of the creed in the service on monophysite practices around Antioch initiated, perhaps, by Peter the Fuller.

Despite the Creed’s early associations with monophysitism under Anastasius, by the beginning of Justin I reign the crowd of Constantinople refused to allow his Patriarch John to leave the Great Church until he had proclaimed his faith in Chalcedon and performed the liturgy, including the Creed.¹³ There is no reason to think that the creed dropped out of the liturgy during the reign of Justinian and it is clear that by the time of his successor, Justin II, the creed had become a watchword for Orthodoxy. Justin II had the Creed sung throughout the empire on the occasion of his accession to the throne, and it features prominently in Corripus’ panegyric commemorating Justin’s coronation.

The creed, then, as it appeared in the liturgy had been absorbed by Orthodox emperors and transformed from a subversive, monophysite text to a symbol of Orthodoxy. Its association with the emperor would have confirmed his place among the Orthodox, but perhaps to an Isthmian reader with a particular slant toward the interpretation of Orthodoxy espoused in the capital. The use of this phrase, with its slight taint of ambiguity would not, of course, be inappropriate for Justinian whose position on Christological matters became more ambiguous at the end of his life as he continued to seek compromise between the theological divergent Christian groups in the Late Empire.

¹² R. F. Taft, *The Great Entrance*. OCA 200 (Rome 1975) 398-402: There has been some ambiguity regarding the exact text of the creed read in the church by the Patriarch Timothy, but Taft has argued persuasively that the creed was, in fact, the so-called Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed which was formalized as the Creed of the Council of Nicaea only at Chalcedon in 451. Its use by a monophysite Patriarch appears as a strikingly bold political and doctrinal statement and perhaps explains how the creed was retained in the liturgy after the accession of Orthodox Justin I (519) amidst protests by the Constantinopolitan crowd.

¹³ Taft, *The Great Entrance*, 401.

The Politics of the Creed

The willingness of the emperor to employ an overtly theological text rooted in liturgical practice outside any reference to the ecclesiastical hierarchy is representative of the Justinianic synthesis of theological and political affairs. This interpretation of the text depends on our growing awareness of the link between epigraphy and oral genres – ranging from urban rituals like acclamations to Christian ritual of the liturgy. This link takes the initial statement of this text and transforms it into a *pars pro toto* reference to the Christian ritual which over the course of the late 5th and early 6th century had become more and more architecturally prominent on the Isthmus.

Recognizing the ambivalent nature of the Isthmus, Justinian employed a text that likewise crossed boundaries – on the one hand, the Creed straddled the well-trod border between the rather overt monophysitism of his predecessor Anastasius and the Orthodoxy of the strongly Chalcedonian Western church, and on the other hand, between the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Papacy and the imperial liturgy of Constantinople. The tensions present in the history of the text that Justinian used, the relations between the Eastern Emperor and the Western church, and the liminal economic and cultural space of the Isthmus brings to the fore the contested landscape of Achaia.

The text discussed here today, while long known, has only begun to come into focus as the preceding half century of research on the Late Roman Isthmus has provided a suitable context for understanding the place of the Achaia in the Late Roman world and in the imperial policies of Justinian. As for the Isthmian voice, there hardly seems a better audience for Justinian's subtle rhetoric than the inhabitants and visitors to the Isthmian crossroad.