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14 Metrical variation in Byzantine colophons (XI–XV CE): The example of ἡ μὲν χεὶρ ἡ γράψασα

Abstract: In this chapter, several metrical varieties in a corpus of Byzantine book epigrams are explored. More specifically, we look into a number of varieties in metrical colophons of the type ἡ μὲν χεὶρ ἡ γράψασα ‘the hand that wrote [this]’, which was a very popular colophon throughout the entire Byzantine period. In its canonical form, these epigrams follow a dodecasyllabic metrical pattern, but many scribes freely experimented with the wording and the metrical structure of these colophons, which gives us a unique insight into the mechanics behind the colometrics of these texts and, by expansion, of Byzantine texts in general. The modern cognitive-linguistic theory of Information Units provides a fitting framework to interpret these varieties and to see them in a way that is different from the traditional reading of written texts. Indeed, the specific characteristics of these texts allow us to attribute certain oral characteristics to them, while still maintaining their written status. From this point of view, multiple reoccurring “mistakes” in the metre turn out to be varieties in disguise, originating from a wrongful pairing of correct metrical units (cola).

1 Introduction: Metrical colophons

In this paper, I will investigate the varieties to be found in Byzantine colophons, and more specifically the metrical varieties therein. Even though these texts display a number of interesting linguistic features – most notably orthographical and morphological varieties – this chapter will focus solely on the metre. Indeed, the metre of Byzantine colophons and/or epigrams has not been studied before, even though this may provide new insight into the use and perception of metre in Byzantine texts in general, because of the *ad hoc* character of many of these texts. I will investigate this by means of a closer inspection of the varieties in one specific case study, the ἡ μὲν χεὶρ-colophons, within the framework of the linguistic theory of Information Units and the concept of metrical pairing (or ταίρισμα).

A modern definition of a colophon is “an inscription at the end of a book or manuscript usually with facts about its production” (Kleinedler *et al.* 2005: 227). In a more Byzantine context, it can be defined as a brief statement, usually at the beginning or end of the main text, containing information about the production of the manuscript, such as the scriptorium where it was copied, the patron who ordered the manuscript, the date of the production, the scribe who copied the manuscript etc. Colophons can sometimes also be book epigrams, but this is not necessarily so. Book epigrams are inscriptions “in and on books” (Kominis 1966: 38), with a clear connection to manuscript production¹ and with the main characteristic of being written in verse, i.e. in metre. The case study of this paper stands at the crossroad between a colophon and a book epigram, since it is both at once. It contains information about the scribe and the production of the manuscript, but it is also a poem and is therefore written in verse. A more correct way of referring to it may therefore be “metrical colophon”.

Byzantine colophons are very often metrical – much more often than they are in western, Latin manuscripts.² This tendency for metrical texts is not only noticeable in manuscripts, but also in other inscriptions that are scattered throughout the Byzantine world, since Byzantines had the custom to inscribe everything that had some importance to them with a text in verses.³ Paul Magdalino touches upon this when he speaks of the “Byzantine epigrammatic habit” (Magdalino 2012:32). But why did the Byzantines bother with this metricality so much that even hardly literate scribes produced (or attempted to produce) verses?

Through the investigation of the metre in our case study, I hope to provide an answer to this question – or at the least to give a clearer and deeper insight into the production of Greek metrical texts in the Middle Ages.

2 The case study

Many Byzantine colophons circulated in the form of pre-set verses, on which scribes relied to produce their own version of the colophon. These were not set in stone, but could be varied upon elaborately. Two popular examples of such adaptable colophons are the following ones:

- (1a) ὥσπερ ξένοι χαίρουσιν ἰδ(εῖν) πατρίδα,
οὕτω καὶ οἱ γράφοντες βιβλίου τέλος.

¹ Lauxtermann (2003: 197).

² Bernard & Demoen (2019).

³ Bernard & Demoen (2019).

‘Just like strangers rejoice in seeing their fatherland,
so do writers in seeing the end of the book.’⁴

(DBBE 3004 [Firenze - Bibl. Medicea Laurenziana - Plut. 86, Cod. 7, f. 217v]; XII CE)⁵

(1b) Θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον καὶ Ἰωάννου πόνος.

‘The present is God’s and the toil is John’s.’

(DBBE 4165 [Athos - Monê Megistês Lauras

Λ 122 (Eustratiades 1613), f. 16v]; XV CE)

Our case study is another popular and frequently used example of such a colophon. In its most basic form, it looks like this:

(1c) ἡ μὲν χεὶρ ἣ γράψασα σήπεται τάφῳ,
γράφη δε μένει εἰς πληρεστάτους χρόνους.

‘The hand that wrote this rots in a grave,
But the writing remains until the end of time.’

(DBBE 2456 [Athos - Monê Batopediou 1486, f. 299r]; 1291 CE)

In the *Database of Byzantine Book Epigrams*, sixty occurrences⁶ of this type have been collected today, but this number will most likely grow in the future, as the *DBBE* is a work in progress. Of course, not all texts that were produced in medieval times are still available for us today, and this number suggests that the formula was quite widely spread in the Byzantine world. Moreover, the exact same formula occurs in Syriac and Arabic manuscripts (McCollum 2015), indicating its wide popularity even across the boundaries of language and culture. The colophon must therefore have been very well known to anyone who had anything to do with manuscripts. This was presumably enhanced by the fact that these metrical colophons had no or little connection to the main texts of the manuscript and could thus easily migrate from manuscript to manuscript and from scribe to scribe.

⁴ All translations are my own.

⁵ All DBBE-numbers used in this chapter refer to the number of the occurrence in the DBBE. The database distinguishes between “occurrences” and “types”, with the occurrences being the exact reproduction of the text as it is found in the manuscript, with all peculiarities and punctuations kept intact, while the types are a sort of hyper-texts, collecting identical or near-identical occurrences into one, normalised text (Bernard & Demoen 2019). This paper will only deal with the occurrences, that is, with the faithful reproductions of the manuscript texts.

⁶ In this paper, the term “occurrence” is used in the technical meaning, in the way it is employed in the DBBE, contrasted with the term “type” (cf. fn. 2).

A well-known epigram like this typically exhibits a wealth of variation (lexical, orthographical, grammatical and metrical) in its numerous occurrences. This great variety is tightly connected to the wide circulation of the colophon. As was mentioned, our case study must have been quite well known, which means that most scribes must have had some kind of blueprint of what the text looked like in the back of their minds. They knew the standard shape of the epigram and usually produced their own version of it from memory, rather than copying it from parchment. The vast amount of variation in the occurrences can only be explained through this assumption. Christine Thomas has studied something similar in her study on the *Acts of Peter* and she has called these texts “fluid texts” (Thomas 2003). She notes that they behave “similarly to oral tradition, with each manuscript representing a new ‘performance’ of the work in another context. Yet this occurs on the level of written text” (Thomas 2003: 40). Peter Van Nuffelen has also described the excerpts of John of Antioch in these terms. He calls them “living texts” in that “they could often be rewritten and adapted to new needs” (Van Nuffelen 2012: 446). These texts are thus primarily written, but they exhibit certain characteristics of oral texts in the variation that they display. This variation is often dispelled as being mere mistakes made by scribes who were hardly literate or simply ignorant. In this paper, I aim to refute this and prove that we are dealing with variants rather than mistakes.

3 The dodecasyllable

The metre of our case study is the very popular dodecasyllable, which – as its name suggests – consists of twelve-syllable verses. This is a typically medieval, Byzantine metre, since it is isosyllabic⁷ and thus no longer (primarily) focuses on the length of syllables, but rather on the number of syllables.⁸ This is in contrast to the hexameter or elegiac, which are still used in Byzantine times, but

⁷ This refers to metres that are composed of an equal amount of syllables in each verse.

⁸ Some dodecasyllables still maintain the old prosodic rules of the iambic trimeter (with some adaptations), which suggests that the scribe in these cases had enjoyed a thorough education. The difference between long and short syllables had long been lost to the Byzantine ear, which means that the rules for each syllable had to be learned by heart. However, the rules of prosody were not always heeded and are in most cases not the most prominent feature of the dodecasyllable. It is therefore first and foremost an isosyllabic metre.

only in a very artificial way and only by the more educated scribes. A similarly isosyllabic metre of Byzantine times is the political verse (πολιτικός στίχος).

In the isosyllabic metres, a very important, if not fundamental, feature is the caesura or breathing pause.⁹ In the dodecasyllable this occurs after either five or seven syllables, in the political verse after eight syllables. This caesura subdivides the verse into two (or sometimes more) verse-halves or metrical cola. The caesura must be conceived as being a pause in pronunciation, thus giving these metrical cola a distinct intonational character. As such, the cola are circumvented by two pauses and form one intonational whole. They do not only have intonational features, but they have also been shown to function in the same way as so-called “information units” of Cognitive Linguistics.¹⁰

Wallace Chafe is the main investigator of information units (henceforth IUs) in spoken English and the Native American languages.¹¹ He asserts that oral, spontaneous language is not produced in one long sequence or sentence, but is chopped up into smaller “chunks” of information. These chunks have been given all sorts of names in the literature, going from “sentence segment” (Janse 1991), “intonation groups” (Cruttenden 1997: 1) and “intonation(al) phrases” (Selkirk 1984) to “tone units” (Crystal 1975, Brazil 1997) and “tone groups” (Halliday 1985). Chafe often uses “intonation units” (Chafe 1987, 1988, 1993, 1998, 2001) as well, but for so-called dead languages the term “information units” is usually applied (Slings 1999: 2).¹² These units have an intonational unity, which often means that they are bracketed by pauses of different lengths, but they also have syntactic and semantic unity, which means that words that syntactically and/ or semantically belong together will usually be joined in one unit. They moreover function on a cognitive level, since they allow the speaker to cognitively structure what he is about to say, and at the same time enable the listener to process what is being said.

The metrical cola of Byzantine isosyllabic metres function very much in the same way. They allow the scribe to structure his verses and group syntactically/ semantically connected words together within one colon. Moreover, the audience, whether they were reading the text or listening to it being read, must have

⁹ Maas (1903) called this the “Binnenschluß”. The caesura in Byzantine metre must not be conceived of in exactly the same way as the caesura in ancient metre, because of the fundamentally different character of the metres, but we have retained the term “caesura” in this paper for reasons of simplicity and custom. In accordance with Maas’ term “Binnenschluß”, however, the abbreviation “B” is often used to annotate the caesura, followed by the number of syllables preceding the caesura (e.g. “B7” stands for a caesura after the seventh syllable).

¹⁰ Boeten & Janse (2018).

¹¹ Chafe (1976, 1980, 1987, 1993, 1994).

¹² For more about the difference between ‘intonation group’ and ‘information group’, see Halliday & Greaves (2006).

benefitted from this structuring, since it allowed them to easily comprehend the content of these poems. This is presumably also the reason why the commatic style was so popular in Byzantine rhetorical texts.¹³ It made the dodecasyllable and political verse very easy to produce, even for less literate scribes, since it resembled the natural way of speaking so much. This is very different from metres like the hexameter or the elegiac, which could only be produced by scribes who had enjoyed a more thorough education.

However, this is not to say that there do not exist high-brow dodecasyllables. High-brow dodecasyllables take the old prosodic rules of the iambic trimeter (from which the dodecasyllable emerged, Maas 1903, Rhoby 2011) into account and often use archaic wordings, much like hexametrical and elegiac epigrams do.¹⁴ But whereas the Byzantine hexameter is by definition high-brow, the dodecasyllable can vary greatly from author to author and from text to text. Indeed, quite often dodecasyllabic epigrams do not exhibit any consciousness of prosody and display a variety of orthographical mistakes. These are low-brow dodecasyllables (that are however still very different from the vernacular texts in political verses) which were written by scribes who had enjoyed a less thorough education. The epigrams of our case study belong to this latter group, which makes them interesting to study from a linguistic and cognitive point of view.

4 The variation

Let us now take a closer look at the metrical deviations (“mistakes”) in the different occurrences of our case study. At first glance, these texts have very little literary value, since no less than 60% (36 out of 60) of all occurrences of the ῥὸ μὲν χεῖρ-colophon contain metrical irregularities. As mentioned, however, I will show that they must not simply be considered mistakes, but rather be seen as variation in the low-brow dodecasyllable.

We find three large groups of irregularities in our case study that frequently recur, thus suggesting that we are not dealing with random mistakes but rather with some sort of pattern. The irregularities in question are octosyllables

¹³ Valiavitcharska (2013). The commatic style entails a rather abrupt writing style, with small semantic units (κόμματα) being juxtaposed, in order to underline and highlight an antithesis or a parallelism.

¹⁴ A good example of such a high-brow dodecasyllable is DBBE 5719 (ATHOS - Monê Ibêron 159, f. 64r). It contains words like μελωδέει and Δαμασκόθεν, which remind one of Homeric texts.

(eight-syllable verses), decasyllables (ten-syllable verses) and decatetrasyllables (fourteen-syllable verses). These deviating verses always occur on their own in an otherwise dodecasyllabic epigram. Our corpus contains one epigram with an octosyllable, five epigrams with a decasyllable, two more with both an octo- and a decasyllable, and six epigrams with a decatetrasyllable. Together they comprise 23% of all ἡ μὲν χεῖρ-occurrences. One might perhaps assume that these variants were each based on an early testimony where the mistake occurred once, which was then copied several times. However, as we have seen, evidence indicates that so-called fluid texts, such as our case study, were usually cited from memory (based on a rough knowledge of what the epigram should look like) rather than copied from parchment, which makes the automatic copying of an error less likely. Moreover, not one of the deviating lines is the same twice, meaning that each mistake is a new one. This is illustrated by the decasyllabic lines in our case study, which are cited below. As was mentioned, these are each irregular (decasyllabic) lines in an otherwise perfectly dodecasyllabic epigram, which are cited on their own here, but which are each part of a ἡ μὲν χεῖρ-occurrence:¹⁵

(2a) (. . .) γραφεῖ δὲ μένη· προς χρόνους πολλοῦς·

(DBBE 202 [Paris - BnF - gr. 375, f. 193r]; 1021 CE)

(2b) (. . .) θεόδωρου λέγω δι' καὶ αὐτην·

(. . .) τυρεὶ αὐτοῦς· ἐν ταῖλοι αἰώνων· (. . .)

(DBBE 1129 [Vaticano - Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana - Vat. gr. 1853, f. 124r]; 1173 CE)

(2c) (. . .) γραφὴ μόνιμος ἐστὶν ἐνθάδε·

(DBBE 1767 [Athos - Monē Xēropotamou 221, f. 201v]; 1329 CE)

(2d) (. . .) γραφῇ (δὲ) ἕως τέλους διαμένει

(DBBE 5301 [Sankt-Peterburg - Rossijskaja Nacional'naja biblioteka (RNB) - Φ. № 906 (Gr.) Gr. 71 (Granstrom 195), f. 169r]; 1020 CE)

(2e) (. . .) τί συνε περ(ι) σε κύψον βλέψον (. . .)

(DBBE 5305 [Meteora - Monē Metamorphoseos 84, f. 113v]; 1408 CE)

¹⁵ No translation has been provided of these verses, since it would make little sense trying to translate them isolated from their context.

(2f) (. . .) ἡ δὲ γραφή μένει εἰς αἰῶνας:-

(DBBE 5327 [Vaticano - Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana - Vat. gr. 52, f. 212v]; 1415 CE)

(2g) (. . .) ἡ δὲ γραφή μένει εἰς αἰῶνας (. . .)

(DBBE 5362 [Venezia - Bibl. Naz. Marc. - gr. app. X 5, f. 124v]; 1394 CE)

Some verses resemble one another, but it is quite clear that they are in fact different lines and can never have been based on one and the same mistake by an earlier scribe. Did all of these separate scribes then make the same mistakes? Or were they in fact even meant to be metrical? These numbers are not even close to the original twelve syllables anymore, so one may wonder if we are not dealing with some sort of rhythmical prose here instead. But in fact, we can be certain that these are metrical verses, because of the rather consistent paroxytonic verse ending in these lines¹⁶ and because the same numbers of syllables (8, 10, 14) keep on recurring, which would not be the case if we were dealing with rhythmical prose. Moreover, we even find the same colometrical divisions frequently coming back.

Three times, we see the colometry of 5 + 5 recurring in the decasyllable, as it is here in the second line of the epigram:

(3a) ἡ χεὶρ μὲν ἡ γράψασα σῦπετε τάφῳ,
γραφεὶ δὲ μένη· ||¹⁷προς χρόνους πολλοὺς·

‘The hand that wrote this rots in a grave,
 But the writing remains for a long time.’

(DBBE 202 [Paris - BnF - gr. 375, f. 193r]; 1021 CE)¹⁸

Three times, we find a colometry of 6 + 4, as in the following example:

(3b) ἡ μὲν χεὶρ ἡ γράψασα σήπετ(αι) τάφῳ,
ἡ δὲ γραφή μένει || εἰς αἰῶνας:-

‘The hand that wrote this rots in a grave,
 But the writing remains for centuries.’

(DBBE 5327 [Vaticano - Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana - Vat. gr. 52, f. 212v]; 1415 CE)¹⁹

¹⁶ A paroxytonic verse ending entails that the second-last syllable of each verse is accentuated. This is a consistent and typical rule in the dodecasyllable as well as in the political verse, and may therefore be considered a criterium to decide whether something is metrical or not.

¹⁷ The double vertical lines indicate the location of the caesura.

¹⁸ The other ones are: DBBE 1767 (Athos - Monê Xêropotamou 221, f. 201v) and DBBE 5305 (Meteora - Monê Metamorphoseos 84, f. 113v).

¹⁹ The other ones are: DBBE 1129 (Vaticano - Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana - Vat. gr. 1853, f. 124r) and DBBE 5362 (Venezia - Bibl. Naz. Marc. - gr. app. X 5, f. 124v).

And twice, there is a colometry of 7 + 3:

(3c) Ἐγραψε ταυτ(α) χεῖρ μιχαῆλ (μον)αχ(οῦ)·

(καὶ) χεῖρ μὲν σίπετε τάφω·

γραφή (δὲ) ἕως τέλους || διαμένει

‘The hand of the monk Michael wrote these things,

And his hand rots in a grave,

But the writing remains till the end.’

(DBBE 5301 [Sankt-Peterburg - Rossijskaja Nacional'naja biblioteka (RNB) - Φ. №

906 (Gr.) Gr. 71 (Granstrom 195), f. 169r]; 1020 CE)²⁰

The decatetrasyllables, on the other hand, almost always have the caesura at B7, resulting in a colometry of 7 + 7:

(3d) Ἡ μὲν χεῖρ ἢ γράψασα τήνδε τὴν βίβλον

σαπήσεται φεῦ καὶ γενήσεται κόνις·

τάφω προσεγγίσει τέ· σωματοφθόρῳ

ἡμεῖς δὲ ἅπαντες, οἱ τοῦ χ(ριστο)ῦ μερίδος·

εὐχεσθε πρὸς κ(ύριο)ν || εὐρεῖν σφαλμάτ(ων) λύσι(ν)·

(. . .)

‘The hand that wrote this book

Alas! will rot and will be dust

And will bring near the body-damning grave.

All of us who have part in Christ,

Let us pray to the lord in order to find salvation from our sins’

(. . .)

(DBBE 5319 [Paris - BnF - gr. 1553, f. 301r]; XV CE)²¹

There are two exceptions, however, where the colometry is 6 + 8.²² The octosyllables do not have a clear caesura and were probably meant to be pronounced as one unity.

Despite the fact that these verses seem very incorrect, most of them are built up out of correct metrical cola. This has everything to do with what Peter Mackridge and Marc Lauxtermann have called “ταίρισμα” or the “principle of pairing” (Mackridge 1990, Lauxtermann 1999). This is a principle that explains the emergence of the medieval dodecasyllable and political verse as the result of the consistent pairing of shorter verse-types. In this scenario, the dodecasyllable has arisen

²⁰ The other one is: DBBE 1129 (Vaticano - Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana - Vat. gr. 1853, f. 124r).

²¹ The other ones are: DBBE 5321 (Sinai - Monè tēs Hag. Aikaterinēs - gr. 50, f. 163r), DBBE 5396 (PARIS - BnF - gr. 96, f. 264v), DBBE 5605 (Sankt-Peterburg - Rossijskaja Nacional'naja biblioteka (RNB) - Φ. № 906 (Gr.) Gr. 102 (Granstrom 427), f. 345v).

²² DBBE 5338 (Vaticano - Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana - Palat. gr. 159) and DBBE 5339 (Vaticano - Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana - Palat. gr. 256).

from the pairing of a pentasyllable and a heptasyllable, and the political verse through the pairing of an octosyllable and a heptasyllable. Indeed, as we have seen, the caesura in the dodecasyllable is positioned either at B5 or at B7. This means that the metrical cola in the dodecasyllable are always a pentasyllabic colon and a heptasyllabic colon, in either order. The same goes for the political verse, where the caesura is positioned at B8. We must therefore assume that the pentasyllable, heptasyllable and octosyllable are the three correct and accepted cola in Byzantine isosyllabic metres.

If this is true, then there is in fact nothing wrong with the decasyllables that have a colometry of 5 + 5 and the decatetrasyllables with a colometry of 7 + 7. In fact, Lauxtermann (1999: 51) even mentions a ninth-century manuscript with a hymn that consists of paired heptasyllables, which suggests that the idea of pairing whichever metrical cola was indeed present in earlier Byzantine times and may therefore have survived into later centuries as well. Of course, we must not suppose these decasyllables and decatetrasyllables to be perfectly correct metres, since there are no epigrams written entirely in deca- or decatetrasyllables. However, they must not be done away with as simple ignorant mistakes either. Their frequent occurrence, not only in this formula but also in others,²³ suggests a new pattern, that is, simply of a different combination of these three traditional units.

So what about the verses with other colometrical divisions? Most of them can be explained in a very similar way, but through a more thorough analysis of the Byzantine caesura. Indeed, the main caesura in the dodecasyllable is either at B5 or B7, but Lauxtermann has briefly touched upon secondary pauses which he calls “diereses” (Lauxtermann 2018). These diereses²⁴ are not as strong as the main caesura, but must have been audible in pronunciation (at least in some cases) nonetheless. Lauxtermann situates a dieresis at B4 when the main caesura is at B7, and a dieresis at B8 when the main caesura is at B5. This results in a colometry of 4 + 3 + 5 and 5 + 3 + 4, respectively. Or in other words, the heptasyllable can be split up into a trisyllable and a tetrasyllable. So if we add these two new cola to the ones we already had (pentasyllable, heptasyllable and octosyllable), then we see that the other colometries of the decasyllables and decatetrasyllables are in fact to be explained in quite the same way as was already mentioned – this is through a different combination of accepted units (e.g. a decasyllable which consists of a trisyllable and a heptasyllable).²⁵

²³ Cf. Boeten & Janse (2018) about the “Ὠσπερ ξένοι”-colophon.

²⁴ Not to be confused with the dieresis in the hexameter or other classical metres.

²⁵ DBBE 5301 (Sankt-Peterburg - Rossijskaja Nacional'naja biblioteka (RNB) - Φ. № 906 (Gr.) Gr. 71 (Granstrom 195), f. 169r). The other one is: DBBE 1129 (Vaticano - Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana - Vat. gr. 1853, f. 124r).

If we look back at the resemblance between IUs and metrical cola, then this different combination of cola makes even more sense, especially in consideration of the low-brow dodecasyllables that are used in our case study. Metrical cola were used in the same way as IUs and could therefore easily be strung together to make a verse or a sentence. It is this resemblance with spoken language that enabled less educated scribes to produce verses. For them, it was not the exact number of syllables in the verse that was the most prominent feature of their text, but the stringing together of these units and the general rhythm that came about by concatenating them.

The appearance of octosyllables can be explained through the theory of IUs as well. Instead of being paired with a heptasyllable, as it usually is in the political verse, the colon occurs on its own here. It is because it functions as a prosodic, syntactic and semantic unity, just like an IU, that it has some degree of independence. It was therefore not felt to be problematic if the colon appeared on its own. According to the “principle of pairing”, moreover, the political verse first came into being through the pairing of an independent octo- and heptasyllable. The existence of an independent octosyllable in later Byzantine times can therefore not quite be done away with as a mere mistake, simply because it does not fit into the normative pattern of any of the metres of this time. A good corroboration of this are the four book epigrams in the DBBE (that are not of the ἡ μὲν χεῖρ-type, however) that are written entirely in octosyllables,²⁶ as though it were a metre on its own.

5 The six-syllable colon

However, this still leaves us with 37% of the epigrams, which are irregular and do not fall into the categories of octo-, deca- and decatetrasyllables. All of these epigrams are either eleven or thirteen syllables in total and do not seem to lend themselves to a gratifying explanation at first sight. They look as follows:

(4a) ἡ μὲν χεῖρ ἡ γράψασα, σήπετε τάφῳ·
τὸ δὲ γράμμα μένη εἰς χρόνους πληρεστάτους

‘The hand that wrote this rots in a grave,
But the letter remains until the end of time.’
(DBBE 130 [Athena – EBE 180, f. 393r]; 1089 CE)

²⁶ DBBE 938 (Vaticano - Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana - Palat. gr. 367, f. 136r-v), DBBE 4770 (Vaticano - Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana - Palat. gr. 367, f. 68v), DBBE 7269 (Athos - Monê Ibêron 1384, f. 126r), DBBE 7270 (Athos - Monê Ibêron 1384, f. 1r).

- (4b) **χεῖρ μ(έν) ἡ γράψασα, σίπεται τάφω·**
 γραφή δὲ πᾶσα μένει, εἰς τοὺς αἰῶν(ας)

‘The hand that wrote this rots in a grave,
 But the entire writing remains for centuries.’

(DBBE 1110 [Vaticano - Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana - Vat. gr. 920, f. 221v]; 1340 CE)

There is no plausible way in which a synizesis can make the 13-syllable verse into a correct dodecasyllable or that the 11-syllable verse can be magically made into twelve syllables. Surely, these must all be mistakes?

First of all, it is interesting to note that several instances in this category of “unexplainable” epigrams can in fact be explained in the very same way as the octo-, deca- and decatetrasyllables, i.e. through the wrong pairing of correct cola. We are talking about the following epigrams:

- (5a) **ὅτι χεῖρ μὲν ἡ γράψασα || σίπεται τάφω·**
 γραφή δὲ μένοι· εἰς μακροὺς φεῦ μοι χρ(όνους)·

‘Because the hand that wrote this rots in a grave,
 But the writing remains, poor me!, for a long time.’

(DBBE 1877 [Vaticano - Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana - Barb. gr. 455, f. 145r]; 1276 CE)

- (5b) ἡ μὲν χεῖρ ἡ γράφουσα σήπεται τάφω·
γραφή δὲ μένει || εἰς αἰῶ(νας) ἀπεράντους

‘The hand that wrote this rots in a grave,
 But the writing remains for endless centuries.’

(DBBE 958 [Vaticano - Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana - Vat. gr. 67, f. 256r]; XIV–XV CE)

- (5c) Οἱ μὲν χεῖρ ἡ γράψασα σήπεται τάφω·
ἡ δὲ βίβλος παῖφῃκεν || χρό|νους πλήστους·

‘The hand that wrote this rots in a grave,
 But the book produces many years (much time).’

(DBBE 7971 [Athos - Monê Dionusiou 10, f. 518]; X CE)

As you can see, these epigrams display a colometry of respectively 8 + 5; 5 + 8; and 7 + 4 syllables. All of these cola are correct cola, but through a wrong combination, we end up with irregular verses.

Then what about all of the other “inexplainable” epigrams? They are merely “inexplainable” because they all exhibit a colon of six syllables, which is not among the accepted or available cola in Byzantine metre. Let us retake the epigrams in (4) (= (6)):

- (6a) ἡ μὲν χεῖρ ἡ γράψασα, σήπετε τάφω·
τὸ δὲ γράμμα μένη || εἰς χρόνους πληρεστάτους 6 + 7 syllables

- (6b) χεῖρ μ(έν) ἢ γράψασα, || σίπεται τάφω· 6 + 5 syllables
 γραφή δὲ πᾶσα μένει, εἰς τοὺς αἰῶν(ας)

We cannot somehow make these six syllables into five or seven syllables to make it fit, and it is also not possible to split the colon of six syllables into two smaller cola of three syllables, because there are no word(group) boundaries to facilitate this. Yet, no less than 25 verses with a six-syllable colon can be found in the “ἢ μὲν χεῖρ” occurrences.

A possible explanation for the existence of these six-syllable cola is the re-interpretation of smaller cola into larger units. To understand this concept, we must reiterate the “principle of pairing” which was discussed earlier. According to this principle, the pairing of shorter cola has resulted into the emergence of the medieval verse forms as we know them. This means that, at a certain point in time, the two shorter cola were not considered to be two separate units anymore, but became two subparts of a larger whole. This is a re-interpretation of the cola into a larger unit (i.e. the verse). We can also see that, from a certain point in time, for some authors the entirety of the verse prevails over the cola in that verse. This becomes apparent when there is no clear caesura anymore, as is illustrated in the following epigrams:

- (7a) Τὸ παρὸν τετραευάγγελον, ὑπάρχ(ει)
 ἐμοῦ Γρηγορίου ἱερομονάχου·
 ‘These four gospels belong
 To me, the holy monk Gregory.’
 (DBBE 1761 [Athos - Monē Xēropotamou 107, f. 553r]; XIII CE)
- (7b) Ἐλενη ἐκ θεοῦ ἔνρεμα ἐδόθη.
 ‘Helen was given an invention from God.’
 (DBBE 319 [Firenze - Bibl. Medicea Laurenziana - Plut. 11, Cod. 9, f. 282r]; 1020 CE)
- (7c) τὴν χειροχορδοβροντόκρουστον κιννύραν.
 τὴν ᾠματοδοψαλμοσύνθετον βιβλον.
 τὴν θειοκοσμοψυχόσωστον πυξίδα
 προφητοτερπνόφθογον ἔφρασε στόμα
 καὶ κρατοῦσαν καὶ λαλοῦσαν (καὶ) ψάλλουσάν σε
 ‘The kinor, its strings struck by a mortal hand,
 The book, consisting of songs and psalms,
 The tablet, saving the divine cosmos and soul,
 Of these things this delightfully sounding prophet-tongue speaks,
 Both controlling and talking and singing about you’
 (DBBE 8301 [Athos - Monē Dionusiou 60, f. 6r]; XIII CE)

In these cases, the combination of two cola is re-interpreted as one, more or less unbroken verse. We have seen that the trissyllable is an acceptable colon in Byzantine metre and it is not unthinkable that two trissyllables were sometimes combined into a six-syllable colon. Later, in the same way as the entire verse emerged out of two (or more) cola, the six-syllable colon was then re-interpreted as being one colon and the separation into two trissyllables becomes forgotten. This would explain why there are not that many occurrences of six-syllable cola, since the combination of two trissyllables is rather rare and they are generally not considered to be correct, but why there are still enough of them to form a noticeable group. Once again we are dealing with something not entirely “wrong” (yet more wrong than any combination of the acceptable cola) and at the same time not correct at all either.

6 Conclusion

We must look at Byzantine metre in a different way in order to appreciate the many varieties in the corpus of book epigrams. We have to first of all understand that the texts of our case study were most likely cited from memory, rather than being copied from parchment. Indeed, certain colophon types circulated throughout the Byzantine world (and even beyond) and left the scribe with a more or less set notion of what these colophons should look like. As a result, the reproductions of these texts often have a distinct oral characteristic, despite the fact that they are written texts. What is more, the metrical cola in the dodecasyllable function in the same way as IUs do in spoken language. The theory of IUs has originated through the investigation of oral languages and as such this similarity between metrical cola and IUs gives our texts an extra oral dimension. Despite their fundamentally written character, we must therefore study and appreciate the ἡ μὲν χεῖρ-epigrams in a different way than we usually do with written texts.

Therefore, the metrical mistakes in the case study should not be discarded as being simple mistakes. The wrong combination of traditional cola has led to some irregularities, which can however not be considered entirely wrong. Rather, their frequent occurrence indicates that the stringing together of units was often deemed more important than the resulting number of syllables. In other words, the general rhythm of these texts prevailed over the metrical rules.

Because of the oral dimension to these texts and the fact that their units (metrical cola) function in the same way as the units of spoken language (IUs) do, it was perhaps quite easy for Byzantine scribes to produce metrical texts.

Indeed, the only steps in the production process were basically to assemble several syllables to form units (cola), which in turn needed to be strung together in the same way as they were in everyday spoken language. Deviations were most likely not felt to be gross transgressions, as long as the general rhythm of the text was not compromised, which is why they occur so frequently in our corpus of book epigrams and which made the production of metrical texts seem more accessible to those who had less metrical competence. After all, breaking the metrical rules happened all the time! All of this must have been a contributing factor to the abundance of metrical texts throughout the Byzantine world and what Magdalino (2012:32) called the “Byzantine epigrammatic habit”.

In conclusion, this different approach to Byzantine metrical texts has given us a deeper insight into the mechanics behind Byzantine metre in general. Not only were penta-, hepta- and octosyllables considered to be correct cola, but we may assume that the heptasyllable could be split up into a tetra- and a trissyllable. These trissyllables, in turn, could then be reinterpreted as a six-syllable colon. In short, the scope of accepted metrical units seems to have become infinitely wider than it was, which opens the door for future research of this subject.

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