A Double-Headed Eagle Embroidery: From Battlefield to Altar

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In preparation for “Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557),” the comprehensive exhibition of Late Byzantine art held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art from March to July 2004, a fourteenth-century embroidered textile, which was known as the “double-headed eagle banner” (Figure 1), became the object of new research. A study of its inscription and its construction strongly suggested that it had, in fact, served an ecclesiastical function.

The large, double-headed eagle is heavily embroidered in multicolored silk and silver thread. On its breast is an inscribed medallion and a crown sits atop each of its heads; these face outward, in profile, while the outspread wings and talons extend to the left and right, creating a symmetrical, stylized design. The geometric patterning of the feathers takes the form of fixed rows of semicircles that flare out into vertically striped “streamers” at the edge of each wing—a typical Byzantine motif, although it is found earlier in the art of Persia and of the Roman empire. In the nineteenth century, the eagle embroidery was mounted on a cloth backing with a sleeve across the top in which a rod could be inserted, and with tassels at the lower corners, thus misleading viewers as to its original purpose, its form, and even its color.

The history of the banner is an intriguing tale of mistaken identity, from the time that it first came to light in the nineteenth century. It was purchased by the Metropolitan Museum’s Department of Arms and Armor in 1912, along with two military banners, one Italian and one Netherlandish. The textile was thought to be a third such example, not only because of its companion acquisitions but also because of the eagle motif, the gold-colored silk on the reverse—suggesting that the textile was meant to be seen from the front and the back—and the sleeve to accommodate a rod from which it could be suspended. The Romans appropriated the eagle as a subject on military banners, but after the sixth century its popularity declined. Eagles were depicted on imperial hangings used at court, and the double-headed variety was often favored in the Palaiologan era, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, possibly to symbolize an empire that looked both to the East and the West. Theodora, the wife of Alexios III Komnenos, the Trapezuntine emperor, wears an elaborate red and gold robe patterned with large double-headed eagles in the portrait of the couple on a chryseobull, or pendant seal, of 1374.

The textile was part of an extensive collection of medieval and Renaissance art owned by Michel Boy that was dispersed after his death in 1904. Briefly mentioned in an auction catalogue of 1905, it was listed with seventeenth-century Russian textiles. The Russian attribution was quickly abandoned following the research of Bashford Dean, chief curator in the Metropolitan’s Department of Arms and Armor, who recognized that the inscription on the eagle’s breast was not Russian but Greek, and that the textile, indeed, was used for a liturgical rather than a military purpose. In 1994, when curators once again studied the textile, which had been in storage since 1960, they agreed that the object was inappropriate for the Arms and Armor department. The textile, now regarded as Byzantine, was transferred to the Department of Medieval Art in 2001 in anticipation of the upcoming exhibition. Further examination of the inscription linked the textile to a Latin titular Patriarch named Paul.

The most compelling explanation for the presence of the double-headed eagle is provided by the inscription ΠΑΤΡΙΑΡΧΗΣ ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΥ (ΠΩΛΕΩΥ) ΚΑΙ ΝΕΑΣ ΡΩΜΗΣ ("Paul Patriarch of Constantinople and New Rome"), which encircles a blue medallion with a triple monogram in the center, positioned on the bird’s chest (Figure 2). The monograms, from left to right, can be translated as ΑΟΥΚΑΣ (Doukas), ΠΑΤΡΙΑΡΧΟΣ (Patriarch), and ΠΑΛΑΙΟΛΟΓΟΣ.
Figure 1. Double-headed eagle embroidery, Byzantine (possibly Greece or Constantinople), ca. 1366–84. Metallic and silk thread embroidered on a linen and paper support, 175.3 x 139.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1912 (12.104.1). The embroidery formed part of a banner when it was acquired in 1912.

(Palaiologos). The Palaiologos and Doukas were Byzantine imperial families related by marriage; perhaps Paul was a member of one or the other family. Finally, above the monograms is the Greek letter beta, which, here, most likely stands for basileus (emperor).

The title of Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople was only held by various individuals named Paul during the Early Byzantine era, but the textile’s style and structure, along with the Palaiologan reference in the inscription, suggest that the patriarch in question was a later one. No likely patriarch named Paul can be associated with the other important sees in Antioch, Jerusalem, Alexandria, or the post-Byzantine see of Moscow. Three men named Paul figured among the fourteenth-century titular Latin patriarchs: Paul Tagaris (Palaiologos); Paul, Archbishop of Thebes;
and the Paul, whose family name is not known but who was possibly Archbishop of Corinth, and was the Latin patriarch for less than one year about 1379. The brevity of the career of this last Paul, who does not appear to have been affiliated with the Palaiologan or Doukas families named in the inscription, makes him an unlikely candidate.

Paul, Archbishop of Thebes, had an illustrious career as patriarch from 1366 until 1370. As a legate to Pope Urban V, he worked with the former emperor John VI Kantakouzenos (r. 1347–54), who remained active in politics, to unify the Eastern and the Western Church. Although Paul spoke Greek fluently, spending most of his career in the East in posts established during the Crusades, he was of Italian origin. His status certainly would have allowed him to have costly textiles and insignia made bearing his name, although no works of art belonging to him are known to survive. Paul, Archbishop of Thebes, cannot be ruled out as the Paul cited in the inscription, but he was not a member of the Palaiologan or Doukas families, making his connection to this textile more tenuous. While John VI Kantakouzenos was related by marriage to the Palaiologan family, it seems unlikely that Paul, Archbishop of Thebes, would invoke the name Palaiologos in deference to the former emperor rather than Kantakouzenos, which surely represented great power as well.

Paul Tagaris, did, on the other hand, use the name Palaiologos, albeit dubiously; his father’s second wife—his stepmother—was Theodora Asenina Palaiologina, the niece of the emperor Andronikos II. While technically not a relative of Theodora, Paul told the French count of Savoy—himself distantly related to the Palaiologans—that he was, in fact, a relation, and possibly even invented a fictitious family member, Alexios Palaiologos, as a co-signer of a document in Ancona. His rise to the position of Orthodox Patriarch was also gained through a series of outrageous fabrications: an Orthodox priest in Palestine, during his career he laid claim to the titles of Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem and Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople. So skilled was he at deception that he convinced Pope Urban VI to appoint him Latin Patriarch in 1380—a title that he held until 1384, when he was forced to confess his sins before the clergy and the imperial entourage in Constantinople. During his tenure as a bogus patriarch, he spent several years on the island of Negroponte. His presence on Cyprus was recorded in 1385, when he consecrated bishops across the island and possibly even crowned the Cypriot king, James I of Lusignan—or so the impostor claimed. There is evidence of his forging documents and donating spurious relics to churches in his see. Paul played out his role convincingly due both to the lavish gifts he bestowed and received during various
fabricated ceremonies, and to his opulent clothes, noted by the French during his visit to the pope in Avignon who thus believed that Paul was the Orthodox patriarch of Constantinople.\textsuperscript{45} It is not difficult to imagine the Museum’s eagle textile, once brightly colored and extravagantly embroidered with costly materials, owned by such an individual. Moreover, technical analysis of the work revealed that it possibly originated in the Greek Islands or on Cyprus.\textsuperscript{47} Finally, Paul Tagaris’s frequent use of both the title of Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople and the Palaiologan family name suggest that, of the three Pauls, he was the one referred to in the inscription.

Whether the textile was a gift made to Paul, a gift from Paul to a church under his authority, or a patriarchal accoutrement cannot be determined. However, its expensive embroidery, immense size, and inscription point all to its having been manufactured in the late fourteenth century, in the Byzantine Empire, and most likely in Greece, commissioned by or for a patriarch named Paul, probably Paul Tagaris.

The style of the eagle, particularly the wings, further supports a fourteenth-century date, although the motif of the double-headed eagle appeared in the tenth century; an early example is a silk fabric now in the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin.\textsuperscript{50} Its use as a symbol, however, did not become common until the Palaiologan period, as mentioned earlier. The Metropolitan eagle’s wings have small feathers that flare out at the pinions, which is stylistically consistent with other fourteenth-century depictions—notably, the wings of the archangels embroidered on an aër or veil, used to cover a chalice or a paten, made for the grand princess Maria in Moscow in 1389, as well as of those flanking Christ in Majesty on an embroidered silk liturgical cloth now in the State Museum in Novgorod.\textsuperscript{50} The feathers on all three objects curl slightly outward, becoming elongated toward the middle of the wings and shorter again at the outer edge. These eagles differ from Middle Byzantine representations in which the wings are heavily patterned with foliate motifs, and from later fifteenth-century examples where the wings become thinner, projecting out further from the bird’s chest. The silk cover of the writings of Manuel II (Grottaferrata, MS Gr. 161), also of the fourteenth century, has a double-headed eagle with wings of this type and crowns like those on the Metropolitan’s textile; some double-headed eagles have one crown covering both heads or no crowns at all.\textsuperscript{50}

Careful examination of the textile’s structure by conservator Kathrin Colburn further supports the historical and stylistic evidence for a fourteenth-century date.\textsuperscript{31} While the inscription, style, and technique place the object firmly in the fourteenth century, the textile’s function is less clear. A conservator at the Museum of Saint Petersburg who corresponded with Bashford Dean in 1912 was the first to suggest that the textile originally had a liturgical use.\textsuperscript{37} He proposed that it was an orloj (“eagle” in Russian and related to the Greek word aëtos, with the same meaning)—a liturgical rug with an eagle design that was used for the consecration of bishops,\textsuperscript{33} or for other special ceremonies. No such “eagle rug” is known before the fifteenth century, however, and no examples exist for relatively modern ones, making this interpretation unlikely.

Surviving monastic charters, called typika, together with the evidence provided by the majority of extant large embroidered textiles, suggest that they were used either as an altar cloth or a pōdea (a skirt hung beneath an icon). While church inventories typically listed such items, they especially noted embroidered textiles and those made of silk or precious metallic thread, in descriptions that would easily fit the Metropolitan’s example.\textsuperscript{34} For instance, the inventory of the Monastery of the Virgin Eleousa in Stroumitsa, Macedonia, includes most important altar cloths and pōdea: “Another, more elaborately wrought, a silk cloth, which has six lions; and the other, a silk cloth of the highest quality, which is delicately embroidered. These are the altar cloths. Eleven pōdea, namely icon hangings for the feast days: the one that is gold sprinkled, and four [made] of silk cloth of the highest quality, that are white; two other, ordinary ones, that are violet-purple; two others, that are scarlet with gold-sprinkled parrots.”\textsuperscript{55} Altar cloths and pōdea, as opposed to veils and epitaphiai, are the largest in size among ecclesiastical textiles; thus, the Metropolitan’s eagle (533/3 × 531/3 inches) is less exceptional than might be assumed. As most ecclesiastical textiles from this period were embroidered on red silk grounds, red likely was the original color of the silk support of the Metropolitan’s eagle.\textsuperscript{56} It might seem that a secular motif, such as an eagle, would be inappropriate for an altar cloth, or pōdea, on which scenes from the life of Christ were often depicted. Inventories of monastic foundations indicate that animals were typical subjects, however. One thirteenth-century foundation listed “[t]wo silk cloths woven with gold [thread] and showing lions. Another one of gold and scarlet with a griffin in the middle” among their holdings.\textsuperscript{37} Of course, the eagle was a familiar religious symbol—that of the Evangelist John. In patristic writings, eagles were regarded as messengers, similar to angels or even to Christ.\textsuperscript{38} According to Warren Woodfin, in his study of Late Byzantine vestments, accoutrements of imperial ceremonies were adapted to liturgical use in the Late Byzantine
period: eagle-decorated shoes, clothing, banners, and foot pillows were common components of the imperial wardrobe and furnishings, as seen, in the manuscript of the theological works of John VI Kantakouzenos (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, MS Grec 1242). This symbol was readily adopted by the upper echelons of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, including the patriarchate—as, for example, by the thirteenth-century bishop Calvo, whose miter (now in the Abegg-Stiftung, Riggisberg) contained eagle appliqués.

While the Metropolitan’s eagle textile is one of the few Byzantine church embroideries to survive, the majority of them date from the fifteenth century or later. As many of these are the size of veils, they did not suffer the fate of being cut into smaller pieces for other uses. Because Byzantine altar cloths, or podai, typically were exposed to “the sun and . . . to the air . . .,” it is fortuitous that a textile has come down to us in such good condition.

In sum, the inscription on the textile makes Paul Tagaris, who had achieved a certain notoriety for his sinful life, its most likely patron. His activities on the Greek Islands and on Cyprus, where the textile perhaps originated, are additional confirmation of his association with our textile. As Donald Nicol points out, “Saints’ lives are two-a-penny . . . but sinners’ lives are harder to come by.” A textile whose embroidery celebrates the name of a rogue is almost as rare an artifact as the tale of the rogue himself. Yet, the most compelling story is found in the embroidery on the textile in the Metropolitan Museum’s collection, transforming it from a military banner into an ecclesiastical treasure.

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NOTES

2. For a complete analysis of the materials, see Kathrin Colburn, “A Double-Headed Eagle Embroidery: Analysis and Conservation,” in this volume, pp. 65–73. My thanks to Ms. Colburn for sharing her findings with me in the course of preparing this article for publication.
5. Acc. no. 12.104.1. I wish to thank Christine Brennan, Collections Manager, Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters, for making archival material in both the Medieval department and the Department of Arms and Armor available to me.
13. Correspondence among Curator Helen C. Evans and Chairman William D. Wixom of the Medieval department and Stuart W. Pyrr, Curator in Charge of the Arms and Armor department, in 1944 revised interest in the textile, which apparently had not been examined since 1960.
14. These inscriptions were first translated by Michel L. Kambanis in a letter from Athens, dated October 15, 1913, to Bashford Dean, at the Metropolitan Museum. Archives, Department of Medieval Art, Metropolitan Museum.
20. Ibid., p. 152.

22. Ibid., pp. 294–95.

23. For a full account of his career, see ibid., pp. 289–90.

24. Ibid., p. 295.

25. Ibid., p. 296.


28. Other examples include a carved double-headed eagle on an epistle, from a tenth-century temple at the Vatopedi Monastery on Mount Athos, and a silk with lozenges containing medallions surrounding double-headed eagles and other birds, in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.


30. Published in Hans Belting, *Das illuminierte Buch in der spät- byzantinischen Gesellschaft* (Heidelberg, 1970), fig. 36.


32. Letter dated December 19, 1912, from V. Uspensky, Museum of Antiquities, Saint Petersburg, to Bashford Dean, at the Metropolitan Museum, Archives, Department of Medieval Art, Metropolitan Museum.


35. Ibid., p. 1673.


38. Catler, “Eagles.”


