Some Remarks on the Significance of Gold Based on Byzantine Ekphraseis of Works of Art

Gold is considered one of the most characteristic elements of Byzantine culture. This view applies especially to art. Undoubtedly, this statement is quite right: it is best confirmed by the preserved works of painting and artistic craftsmanship, especially those of jewellery. In sum, Byzantine artists used to use gold on a large scale, showing great technical skill. It is therefore surprising that this issue has not received a separate and comprehensive study yet. Although researchers recognise the presence of gold, unfortunately, they rarely go beyond the general observations. Despite this, in the literature devoted to Byzantine art, researchers are paying more and more attention to Byzantine goldsmiths, i.a. New Research on Late Byzantine Goldsmiths’ Works (13th–15th Centuries). Neue Forschungen zur spätbyzantinischen Goldschmiedekunst (13.–15. Jahrhundert), ed. A. Bosselman-Ruickbie, Mainz 2019 [= BOO, 13]; eadem, Byzantinischer Schmuck des 9. bis frühen 13. Untersuchungen zum metallen den dekorativen Körperschmuck der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit anhand datierter Funde, Wiesbaden 2011 [= SFChB, 28]; Intelligible Beauty. Recent Research on Byzantine Jewellery, ed. C. Entwistle, N. Adams, London 2010. Works related to gold in the context of Late Antique and Byzantine culture are noteworthy as well, e.g. M. Grünbart, Zur Kulturgeschichte des Goldes, [in:] Gold und Blei. Byzantinische Kostbarkeiten aus dem Münsterland, ed. idem, Wien 2012, p. 53–66; D. Janes, God and Gold in Late Antiquity, Cambridge 2010 (1st ed. Cambridge 1998); S. Awierincew, Złoto w systemie symboli kultury wczesnobizantyjskiej, [in:] idem, Na skrzyżowaniu tradycji. Szkice o literaturze i kulturze wczesnobizantyjskiej, trans. et ed. D. Ulicka, Warszawa 1988, p. 175–201 (oryg. ed. С.С. Аверинцев, Золото в системе символов ранневизантийской культуры, [in:] Византия, южные славяне и Древняя Русь. Западная Европа. Искусство и культура. Сборник статей в честь В.Н. Лазарева, ed. В.Н. Граценков, Москва 1973, p. 43–52).


2 The striking lack of more accurate references to gold is particularly evident in studies on Byzantine aesthetics, in which the focus of their authors is mainly the role of the Neoplatonic thought, e.g. В.Н. Лазарев, История византийской живописи, vol. I, Москва 1947, p. 23–33, 104; П.А. Михеев, Агиография, Фредрика эстетика цыганской течений, Атхана 2006, p. 106–111, 131, 156–157 (1st ed. Атхана 1946); R.A. Michail, Neo-Platonic Philosophy and Byzantine Art, JAAC 11, 1952, p. 21–45; idem, L’esthétique d’Hagia-Sophia, Faenza 1963, p. 44–60 (1st ed. Атхана 1946); G. Mathew, Byzantine Aesthetics, London 1963, p. 13–22, 144; В.В. Бычков, Византийская эстетика. Теоретические проблемы, Москва 1977, passim; idem, Малая история византийской эстетики, Киев 1991, passim.
it is assumed that gold was used primarily because of its symbolic meanings\(^3\). As a result, the issues pertaining to aesthetics and aesthetic experiences are ignored\(^4\), although they are the main subject in Byzantine texts. In fact, reading these modern studies, we learn more about contemporary beliefs about Byzantine art than about it itself. The issue of the significance of gold in Byzantine art is unquestionably complex, and for this reason, this article may be only a preliminary outline of the most important questions related to the subject. Selected examples of Byzantine source texts in which their authors referred to gold in a strictly artistic context are the backbone for all considerations. The main thesis statement, which will be proved here, is as follows: gold, as a substantial medium of artistic expression, was used on a large scale primarily for aesthetic reasons. At the outset, it should also be highlighted that the primary sources testify that for over a thousand years of the existence of the Byzantine Empire views on gold did not undergo major shifts, hence these texts do not reflect the changes of Byzantine art. Therefore, it was decided to discuss the topic using the content criterion referring to the aesthetic values that were associated with gold in Byzantium. These values are above all: glow, colour, and splendour.

In the context of the issue of the significance of gold in Byzantine art, ekphrases (ἐκφράσεις) are the most useful type of texts\(^5\). They are usually part of larger texts, both poetic and prose ones. Ekphrases, present in Greek literature from its

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\(^3\) It seems that Julius Lange was the first who directly indicated that gold backgrounds in medieval paintings can also be understood in symbolic categories. The research direction he outlined was developed and eventually became dominant – also in relation to Byzantine painting; J. Lange, *Et blad af koloritens historie* (1893), [in:] *Udvalgte Skrifter af Julius Lange*, ed. G. Brandes, P. Købke, København 1901, p. 136–156.

\(^4\) This is a general problem related to the study of mediaeval art, because – as Mary Carruthers points out – researchers are used to the question “what does it mean?”, and that is why they so easily overlook the problem of aesthetic pleasure of mediaeval people. Her observation can be equally well applied to the study of Byzantine art. However, as Carruthers reasonably indicates, to tackle this kind of topic, our understanding must be changed, because we should move away from nineteenth-century Romantic and twentieth-century Modern categories relevant to art and its perception; M. Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages*, Oxford 2013, passim.

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very beginnings, became extremely popular in late antiquity because they allowed both the use of a variety of stylistic devices and the choice of attractive subjects⁶. Byzantine authors carried on taste for them. Nicholas of Myra (also known as Nicholas Rhetor, ca. 410 – ca. 490) defined the ekphrasis in his *Progymnasmata* (Προγυμνάσματα) as follows:

> ἔκφρασις ἐστὶ λόγος ἀφηγηματικός, ὑπ’ ὄψιν ἄγων ἐναργῶς τὸ δηλούμενον. πρόσκειται δὲ ἐναργῶς, ὅτι κατὰ τόσο μάλιστα τῆς διηγήσεως διαφέρει· ἢ μὲν γὰρ ψιλὴν ἔχει ἔκθεσιν πραγμάτων, ἢ δὲ πειράται θεατάς τοὺς ἀκούόντας ἐργάζεσθαι. ἐκφράζομεν δὲ τόπους, χρόνους, πρόσωπα, πανηγύρεις, πράγματα. […] Δεῖ δὲ, ἣνικα ἂν ἐκφράζαμεν καὶ μάλιστα ἀγάλματα τυχόν ἢ εἰκόνας ἢ εἰ τὸ ἄλλο τοιοῦτον, πειράσθαι λογισμοὺς προστιθέντες τοῦ τοιοῦτοῦ ἢ τοιοῦτοῦ παρὰ τοῦ γραφέως ἢ πλάστου σχήματος, οἷον τυχόν ἢ ὅτι ὁργιζόμενον ἔγραψε διὰ τῆς αἰτίας ἢ ἠδόμενον, ἢ ἄλλο τι πάθος ἐροῦμεν συμβαῖνον τῇ περὶ τοῦ ἐκφραζομένου ἱστορίᾳ· καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἢ ἀγάλματα ἤ ἔκθεσιν πραγμάτων ἢ συμβαίνει μὲν ἀκούοντας μᾶλιστα ἐργάζεσθαι. ἐκφράζωμεν δὲ τόπους, χρόνους, πρόσωπα, πανηγύρεις, πράγματα. […] Δεῖ δὲ, ἡνίκα ἂν ἐκφράζωμεν καὶ μάλιστα ἀγάλματα τυχόν ἢ εἰκόνας ἢ εἰ τὸ ἄλλο τοιοῦτον, πειράσθαι λογισμοὺς προστιθέντες τοῦ τοιοῦτοῦ ἢ τοιοῦτοῦ παρὰ τοῦ γραφέως ἢ πλάστου σχήματος, οἷον τυχόν ἢ ὅτι ὁργιζόμενον ἔγραψε διὰ τῆς αἰτίας ἢ ἠδόμενον, ἢ ἄλλο τι πάθος ἐροῦμεν συμβαῖνον τῇ περὶ τοῦ ἐκφραζομένου ἱστορίᾳ· καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἢ ἀγάλματα ἤ ἔκθεσιν πραγμάτων ἢ συμβαίνει μὲν ἀκούοντας μᾶλιστα ἐργάζεσθαι. ἐκφράζωμεν δὲ τόπους, χρόνους, πρόσωπα, πανηγύρεις, πράγματα. […]

Therefore, the key to a brilliant ekphrasis is to bring the described things – including works of art – or events clearly (ἐναργῶς; so also φανερῶς, i.e.: plainly, openly, manifestly, evidently⁹) before the eyes of an audience (ὅτι δὲ πειράται θεατάς τοὺς ἀκούόντας ἐργάζεσθαι), since this is the only way that listeners can become spectators (ἢ δὲ πειράται θεατάς τοὺς ἀκούόντας ἐργάζεσθαι). The way to achieve this desirable feature was, in particular, a thoroughgoing description which was supposed to evoke images (φαντασίαι) in minds of listeners. In Byzantium, the creation of ekphraseis – as in antiquity – was a part of the elementary stage of...

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⁷ Nicolai *progymnasmata*, 68–69, ed. J. Felten, Leipzig 1913 [= RG, 11; BSGR].
the rhetorical education during which the late antique textbooks with the preliminary exercises (i.e. προγυμνάσματα, praeexercitamina) were employed. These works, as well as other texts on the theory of rhetoric, were commented and summarized by Byzantine authors. Some of them, e.g. John Geometres (ca. 935 – ca. 1000)\textsuperscript{10}, Nikephoros Basilakes (ca. 1115 – after 1182)\textsuperscript{11}, and George Pachymeres (1242 – ca. 1310)\textsuperscript{12}, prepared their own ones as well\textsuperscript{13}.

Ekphraseis are often very significant sources for Byzantine art studies. Byzantine authors of such descriptions used to write not so much about the details of the appearance of a given image or building, but mainly about the reactions of the audience. In fact, the most crucial task was not to refer to a real, specific work of art, but to evoke in a listener – by referring to the collective cultural memory – the sense that such piece of art might exist. Thus, ekphraseis were, above all, a kind of intellectual play of a given author with his listeners. Hence, they may say a lot about the culture in which they were created. These texts may be helpful in comprehending Byzantine notions on art as well, because they indicate to us what Byzantines found significant. On their basis, therefore, it is possible to draw conclusions regarding the perception of works of art, as well as prized aesthetic values. Although in ekphraseis there are many well-known topoi (τόποι), it should be emphasized that they were not only ornaments indicating the author’s erudition, but also elements carrying specific and legible content. The use of topoi that would no longer be understandable would interfere with communication, and as a result, an ekphrasis would not bring the subject described before the eyes with visual vividness\textsuperscript{14}. The authors, however, had a wide range of rhetorical devices to

\textsuperscript{10} The Progymnasmata of Ioannes Geometres, ed. A.R. Littlewood, Amsterdam 1972.
\textsuperscript{12} Rhetores Graeci, 551–596, vol. I, ed. C. Walz, Stuttgart 1832.
achieve this required effect in their texts. In the Description of the all-praiseworth
y St. Euphemia (Ἔκφρασις εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν Εὐφημίαν τὴν πανεύφημον), Asterius the
bishop of Amasea (ca. 350 – ca. 410) wrote about these media of expression, using
a vivid metaphor: οὐδὲ γὰρ φαυλότερα πάντως τῶν ζωγράφων οἱ μουσῶν παίδες
ἔχομεν φάρμακα\(^{15}\) (For we, men of letters, can use colors no worse than painters
do)\(^{16}\). Thus, Henry Maguire pertinently points out that:

A closer reading of the Byzantine rhetorical writers reveals that they were extremely sensi-
tive to artistic styles and to their meanings, whether those styles were, in present-day terms,
classicizing and naturalistic on the one hand, or unclassical and schematic on the other. The
difference between Byzantine and modern art criticism lies not in perception but in lan-
guage. The Byzantines were not blind, but they were using a language completely different
from those of twentieth-century critics, and for this reason their statements have been mis-
understood\(^{17}\).

Hence, despite some conventionality and a specific language, ekphraseis may
be substantial primary sources, also when it comes to the issue of the significance
of gold in Byzantine art.

According to Byzantine texts, beauty was the main idea with which gold was
associated. Plotinus (ca. 204 – ca. 270) was the first who constituted the theoreti-
cal fundament for thinking about beauty (τὸ καλὸν) as the idea (τὸ έἰδος). This
philosopher pointed out that beauty is the idea manifested in different ways. Then, the
presence of the idea is vital\(^{18}\). In this way, therefore, widespread observations

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\(^{15}\) Euphémie de Chalcédoine. Légendes byzantines, 1.14–15, ed. F. Halkin, Bruxelles 1965 [= SHa, 41].
\(^{17}\) H. Maguire, Originality…, p. 102.
\(^{18}\) Plotini opera, vol. I, Porphyrii vita Plotini et enneades I–III, e.g. 1.6.1.1–3; 1.6.1.17–36; 1.6.2.1–6;
1.6.2.11–28, ed. P. Henry, H.–R. Schwzyzer, Leiden 1951 [= ML.SPh, 33]. In this context, it is also
worth pointing to Michael Psellos’ short commentary:

Περὶ τοῦ καλοῦ δὲ ’ι εἰ μὴ ἐκείνο’ φησίν ἤν τὸ ύπερκαλὸν κάλλει ἀμηχάνῳ, τί ἂν τοῦτο τοῦ ὁρωμέ-
νου ἦν κάλλιον; οἱ δὲ μεμφόμενοι τοῦτο σύκ εἶ ὅλων ὀρῶς μερῶν, ἂλ’ οἰόν μέρος ἐζόων ἄπολαμβά-
nοντες, τρίχα ὢν οὐνα ἡ χολὴ καὶ φλέγμα, καὶ οὐδὲ τοῦτο πρός ὁ παρήκτη σκοπήσαντες, ὅπερ τοῦ
μέρους δυσχεραίνουσιν ἀπόπτυουσι κατὰ τοῦ παντός, εἰ δὲ τις ὁμοῦ "πάντα" λάβῃ τε καὶ συλλάβη
καὶ γνοὶ τᾶς τις σύσσια αὐτῶν καὶ δυνάμεις καὶ τᾶς ἐνεργείας καὶ τᾶς πρῶς ἄλλο κράσεις καὶ μίξεις
καὶ σχέσεις καὶ ἐτὶ τὸ πᾶν ἐννοήσει, ἀπατηθείη ἄν ἰος ἐντεῦθεν, ὅτι αὐτὸ τοῦτο τὸ πρῶς κα-
lόν, δι’ ὁ καὶ τὸ εἶναι ποθείνου ἕστιν αὐτὸ, ὅτι ὁμοιωμα τοῦ καλοῦ. καὶ τὸ μέν πρῶς καλὸν, ἵνα
dη πάλιν εἴπωμεν ἀναλύσαντες, ὁ πρῶτος νοῦς καὶ τὰ ἐκείνου πρῶτα νοῆμα, ἀπερ αὐτὸς ἐκείνος
ἕστιν, ἀπερ ἔχει μὲν παρὰ τάγαθου, ὡσπερ καὶ αὐτὸς ἐκείθεν ὑφόστηκεν, ἐκφαινεί δὲ πρῶτος. τὸ δὲ

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– Plotinus, after all, did not have to order people to recognize light, gold, or stars as beautiful – gained a weighty philosophical foundation. As for the late antique and Byzantine plastic arts themselves, it is difficult to talk about the direct impact of the Plotinus’ thoughts on their shape 19. His aesthetic considerations, however, played an important role in Byzantine culture, because they were accepted by the Church Fathers thanks to whom the Plotinus’ understanding of the perceptible beauty was consolidated 20.

For Byzantine authors, the beauty of gold essentially meant its glow – so it was directly related to light – as well its colour. Both attributes were positively perceived in antiquity, but it seems that they were particularly appreciated in late antiquity, and on this account, it can be said that at that time there was formed an aesthetic thought in which variegation (ποικιλία) was the most important value.

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It was related to colours and visual effects on shimmering surfaces of various materials, such as gold, precious stones, marbles, and fabrics. This kind of aesthetic inclinations was then adopted in Byzantium where they did not lose its relevance until the end of the empire's existence, as evidenced by numerous texts and works of art.

In the context of the late antique aesthetics, Michael Roberts coined the evocative term “jeweled style” to illustrate concisely a change in taste in the contemporary poetry, whereby he refers chiefly to the Latin literature. According to Roberts, the classical poetics was then rejected in favour of a new one, in which instead of the simplicity and unity of composition, the variety (varietas, variatio) was particularly delighted and due to it even a simple topic could become interesting and decorative (ornatus). Therefore, repetition was avoided, and authors used to use synonyms and circumlocutions to prevent monotony. The literature created in this way was supposed to be like a shimmering gem (gemma) that attracts attention with its glitter (lumen) and colour (color)\(^{21}\). Although it is difficult to agree with all the detailed considerations of the researcher, who sometimes compares literature with painting too easily, his term “jeweled style”, in the context of art understood simply as a predilection for sophisticated, multi-coloured and shiny materials, quite aptly describes the late-antique and Byzantine aesthetics\(^{22}\).

Referring directly to Byzantine primary sources, it should be stressed that gold in ekphraseis, full of admiration for visible beauty, appears as one of the quintessential precious materials, and this is the most characteristic feature: gold does not have a unique, special position among them, since marbles, precious stones, and expensive fabrics are not perceived as less valued. Let’s study some specific examples. Describing the church of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople, Paulus Silentiarius (died ca. 575–580) wrote:


The roof is compacted of gilded tesserae from which a glittering stream of golden rays pours abundantly and strikes men’s eyes with irresistible force. It is as if one were gazing at the midday sun in spring, when he gilds each mountain top.

Here, the poet drew attention not only to the golden mosaic cubes covering the vaulted parts but also emphasized that the rays of light reflecting from their surface are so intense that it is even difficult to look at them (the brilliance of the tesserae hurts eyes like the spring sun illuminating the mountain peaks at noon). It should be noted that the colour of the sun’s rays, both in the church and outside, is described as golden.

It is worth adding that Silentarius in some very poetic lines contained quite specific content because authors frequently used to stop on more general statements. For example, Procopius of Caesarea (ca. 500 – ca. 565) wrote on the same church: “The whole ceiling is overlaid with pure gold, which adds glory to the beauty, yet the light reflected from the stones prevails, shining out in rivalry with the gold.”

Thus he did not specify that the vaults were decorated with gold tesserae but he admitted that this part of the building is beautiful and resplendent. Notwithstanding this opinion, Procopius found that the glow of marbles is stronger than that of gold. His view may seem somewhat surprising, but a little further we read as well: “This brass, in its colour, is softer than pure gold, and its value is not much less than that of an equal weight of silver.”

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24 C. Mango, The Art of the Byzantine…., p. 86.
27 Procopius, I, 2, 4.
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interesting that both Procopius and Silentarius noticed some weaknesses of gold, especially since their feelings are opposite – although they both described the same dome – because for the first author gold glitters less than marbles, and its colour is less delicate than that of copper, and for the second one, the glow of golden mosaic cubes is too dazzling.

Other writers also used to point to the special visual effects associated with golden surfaces, both earlier such as Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260 – ca. 339) and later ones. Of the latter, it is especially worth paying attention to the text from around the mid-twelfth century whose author is Michael *protecdicus* of the church of Thessalonica and later deacon of the church of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople. His composition is on folios 123r–124v of the Escorial codex Y–II–10 (Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial) and it is the ekphrasis of the Holy Wisdom church written for the annual celebration of the inauguration of the church. This text consists of 232 lines – unfortunately, it is incomplete now – and refers to the architectural form of the church and its symbolic interpretation as well. What is more, the author remarked on the building’s decoration, and, at the very beginning, he emphasized that the beauty of the church is related to gold (ὃς καὶ πυρράζει τὴν ὄψιν ὡς ὑγρότης πάντη χρυσόν). Regarding the narthex, we read:

καὶ ἡ τοῦ χρυσοῦ στιλπνότης ἐγγὺς εἶναι τοῦ καταστάζειν ποεῖ νομίζεσθαι τὸν χρυσόν. τούς γὰρ όργοις ὀφθαλμοὺς τῇ ἀνταυγείᾳ ὡσπερ κυμαίνουσα, τὰς ἐκείνων νοτίδας εἰς τὸν χρυσὸν ἐφάντασε τὸν ὁρώμενον, καὶ δοκεῖ ῥευσεῖσθαι τηκόμενος. λίθος δὲ ἀλλὰ ποδαπὴ περιελαμμένῃ ἐπόεις ὑπὲρ τὸν χρυσόν, ἐκ μὲν λειμβανείης στεγῆς ἐποίησε τὸ ἐργόν ἀσφάλειαν· καὶ τοῦτον δὲ πολὺς περιέλαμπε χρυσός, ὡς μαρμαρυγὰς τοῖς πορρωθεὶς ταῖς ἡλίου αὐγαῖς ἀντανακλωμέναις ἐκπέμπειν. δικτυωτὰ δὲ περίξ ἐκύκλου τὸ δωμάτιον ἀνάγλυφα χαλκῷ καὶ χρυσῷ κατειργασμένα.

[...] and the brightness of the gold almost makes the gold appear to drip down; for by its refulgence making waves to arise, as it were, in eyes that are moist, it causes their moisture to appear in the gold which is seen, and it seems to be flowing in a molten stream. But what

29 E.g. his description of the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople:

30 *Glossarium ad scriptores mediae et infimae latinitatis*, vol. VI, ed. C. du Fresne du Cange, Niort 1883–1887, 541a (s.v. *Protecdicus*).


32 This text was edited and translated by Cyril Mango and John Parker. They also provided it with an introduction and commentary; C. Mango, J. Parker, *A Twelfth-Century…*, 1.12–13, p. 235.
manner of stonework is this that fastened around the building, striving with its variegated coloring and smoothness against gold, shining because of its smoothness and, because of its diversified bloom having something that surpasses even the gold, which is of one color?\textsuperscript{33}.

To Michael, gold – because of its intense gloss – seems to be flowing down the walls (καὶ ἡ τοῦ χρυσοῦ στιλπνότης ἐγγὺς εἶναι τοῦ καταστάζειν ποεῖ νομίζεσθαι τὸν χρυσὸν). The shimmer of gold is glaring and it results in watery eyes (τοὺς γὰρ ὑγροὺς ὀφθαλμούς τῇ ἀνταυγείᾳ ὥσπερ κυμαίνουσα, τὰς ἐκείνων νοτίδας εἰς τὸν χρυσὸν ἔφτασε τὸν ὁρώμενον, καὶ δοκεῖ ἑβεβέβησθαι τηκόμενος), and the stones, due to their variegation of colours, resemble flowers in bloom (ἐκ δὲ τοῦ ἄνθους ὄντος ποικίλου)\textsuperscript{34}. Interestingly, the author is inclined to consider the multi-coloured revetments as more beautiful than gold which is, after all, of one colour (μονόχροος)\textsuperscript{35}. A monochromaticity seems to be less valued than colourfulness (πολύχροος), although there were exceptions to this rule, as evidenced by the description of the floor in one of the homilies of Leo VI the Wise (886–912)\textsuperscript{36}. 

\textsuperscript{33} C. Mango, J. Parker, A Twelfth-Century…, 3.67–79, p. 237 (There are the Greek text and the English translation).

\textsuperscript{34} This kind of comparison of multi-coloured stones to blooming flowers is quite common in Byzantine literature, and its general prototype can be found in The Hall (Περὶ τοῦ οἴκου) of Lucian of Samosata. However, he compared frescoes, not marbles, to a flourishing meadow; Lucian, The Hall, 9, [in:] Lucian, Phalaris. Hippias or The Bath. Dionysus. Heracles. Amber or The Swans. The Fly. Nigrinus. Demonax. The Hall. My Native Land. Octogenarians. A True Story. Slander. The Consonants at Law. The Carousel (Symposium) or The Laphis, vol. I, ed. A.M. Harmon, Cambridge Mass. 1913 [= LCL, 14]. This motif, as it seems, has been referred to marble revetments and floors since the 6th century; H. Maguire, Nectar & Illusion. Nature in Byzantine Art and Literature, Oxford 2016 [= OSHC], p. 121–122 (1st ed. Oxford 2012). In this early period, we find it, among others, in Procopius (Procopius, 1.1.59–60), as well as in the carved inscription of the church of St. Polyeuctus in Constantinople (Anthologia Graeca, 1.10.60–69, vol. I, ed. H. Beckby, München 1965). This comparison turned out to be extremely enduring, because it was often used for the next centuries, until the end of Byzantium, since the beauty of various stones decorating interiors was constantly emphasized and glorified. See as well: Gregorius Nyssenus, De sancto Theodoro, [in:] PG, vol. XLVI, col. 737.48–740.6; Choricii Gazaei opera, 2.2.40, ed. R. Foerster, E. Richtsteig, Leipzig 1929 [= BSGR] (cetera: Choricius).

\textsuperscript{35} Reading Byzantine primary sources, one could often find that the most wonderful visual effects are associated not with gold but with multi-coloured stones, both marbles, and gems, to which the former ones are regularly compared. In the context of stone revetments, the example of the poetic ekphrasis of the Constantinopolitan church of the Holy Wisdom of Silentiarius is significant. His description of the church’s marbles is extensive and very detailed, because it does not boil down to the general highlighting of their diverse colours and extraordinary gloss. Therefore, almost all the stones mentioned in the poem can be accurately recognized and assigned to individual places of the church; N. Schibille, Hagia Sophia…, p. 97–109, 241–243. It should be clearly emphasized that the Silentiarius’ ekphrasis is a unique combination of elaborate poetry with a large dose of specific information, which was quoted in a very erudite form; Paulus Silentiarius, 617–646, 664–667.

\textsuperscript{36} Μαρμάρου γὰρ λευκῆς ἐκ πλακῶν ὑπέστρωται, τὸ συνεχὲς τῆς διαφανείας μηδενὸς διατείχιστος χρώματος, προτετιμηκότος τοῦ τεχνίτου τὸ ἀμιγὲς τῆς ἀγλαΐας τοῦ ἐκ τῆς ποικίλης κατασκευῆς ἄνθους, οἷα πολλὰ ἐν ταῖς τῶν ἐδαφῶν κατασκευαῖς ὀρᾶται. Πλὴν ὅσπερ τινα δρια

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The author underlined there that the pavement made of white slabs is beautiful because of its one colour, and it is a pure splendour for him. In general, the combination of materials of different colours providing stunning visual effects was valued more than simplicity praised by Leo.

In the context of extraordinary impressions, the X Homily of Photius I of Constantinople (858–867, 877–886) immediately comes to mind. The patriarch prepared it on the occasion of the inauguration of the church of the Virgin of the Pharos at the Great Palace of Constantinople. This event took place in 864 during the reign of Michael III (842–867):

It is as if one had entered heaven itself with no one barring the way from any side, and was illuminated by the beauty in all forms shining all around like so many stars, so is one utterly amazed. Thenceforth it seems that everything is in ecstatic motion, and the church itself is circling around. For the spectator, through his whirling about in all directions and being constantly astir, which he is forced to experience by the variegated spectacle on all sides, imagines that his personal own is transferred to the object. Gold and silver cover the greater part of the church, the one smeared on tesserae, the other cut out and fashioned into plaques, or otherwise applied to other parts. Over here are capitals adorned with gold, over there are golden cornices. Elsewhere gold is twined into chains, but more wonderful than gold is the composition of the holy table. The little doors and columns of the sanctuary together with the peristyle are covered with silver; so also is the conical roof set over the holy table. The little doors and columns of the sanctuary together with the peristyle are covered with silver; so also is the conical roof set over the holy table.

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little pillars and canopy that support it. The rest of the church, as much of it as gold has not overspread or silver covered, is adorned with many-hued marble, a surpassingly fair work.

In his solemn speech, Photius used well-known and much earlier developed schemes for describing the church’s interior, and his ekphrasis is, in fact, rather general, thus it could be applied easily as a description of another church. As for gold, he mentioned that it is in the mosaic cubes (ὁ μὲν ψηφῖσιν ἐπαλειφόμενος) and that capitals, cornices, and chains are gilded (ἐνταῦθα δὲ διὰ χρυσοῦ περιῤῥόματα· ἀλλαχόθι δὲ ταῖς ἀλύσεσιν ἐπιπλεκόμενος χρυσός). The author, however, emphasized that the altar with the silver ciborium is more beautiful than gold (ἡ θεία τράπεζα, σύνθημα). It seems that in this way Photius rather indicates that the sanctuary is the most important part of the church than comments on aesthetics. The patriarch certainly succeeded in creating the vision of the splendour of the new foundation: completely covered with gold and silver (Ἀλλὰ γὰρ χρυσὸς τε καὶ ἄργυρος τὰ πλείστα τοῦ ναοῦ διειλήφασιν) and also with multi-coloured marbles (μαρμάρων δὲ πολυχρώμων). It is worth adding that the homily was given in situ, which also allowed for less scrupulous explanations. Anyway, the Photius himself justified his approach with rhetorical emphasis:

Yet, even if my speech has fallen below the mark, I am not any the less content than if it had risen to the level of an adequate description. For my purpose was not to make an exhibition of eloquence but to show that the church is most excellent and beautiful and that it defeats the canons of an ekphrasis.

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40 Photius, 10, p. 103.23–27. In Homily XVII, Photius also emphasized the power of sight – a sense that surpasses hearing (Photius, 17, p. 170.28–33):

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The X Homily of Photius, which passages were cited above, was formerly considered a speech for the inauguration of the so-called New Church (Νέα Ἐκκλησία) funded by Basil I the Macedonian (867–886). Cyril Mango proves, however, that the text refers to the church of the Virgin of the Pharos. The description of the New Church is found in the panegyrical Vita Basilii (Ἱστορικὴ διήγησις τοῦ βίου καὶ τῶν πράξεων Βασιλείου τοῦ ἀοιδίμου βασιλέως), which is the only extant secular biography in Byzantine literature. The emperor was presented there not only as a brave warrior, but also as a generous founder, who raised many churches from ruin and also built numerous new ones.

The emperor offered this church to Christ, the immortal Bridegroom, as a bride decked out and adorned with pearls and gold and gleaming silver and, moreover, with a variety of many-colored marbles, mosaic compositions and silken robes. The ceilings of that five-domed church glitter with gold and flash forth (their) beautiful representations like (as many) stars; on the outside, the roof is embellished with brass work resembling gold; the shrine’s interior walls on either side are varied with costly and many-colored marbles and its sanctuary is variously decked out with a wealth of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls. The chancel barrier that separates the outside area from the altar space; the colonnade set into this barrier and the (parts) above, functioning as lintels, as it were; the seats within (the sanctuary); the steps leading to them; and the altars themselves are all given massivity and substance by

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silver that is gilded all over and (adorned) with precious stones in settings made [?] from costly pearls. As for the pavement, it first will appear to be spread with (rugs) woven of silk or with Sidonian fabrics, so beautifully has all of it been inlaid and varied by marble panels of many hues set into the ground; by the variegated mosaic bands that enclose these panels; by the precision with which everything has been joined together; and by the superabundant elegance spreading throughout.

The quoted ekphrasis although quite extensive, does not contain many details – like that of Photius. This is another evocation of a dazzling imperial foundation which is composed primarily by the discussing of wonderful and expensive materials exploited in the church embellishment, namely: gold, silver, tesserae, fabrics, and various many-hued stones. In this instance, like in previous ones, the beauty is grounded on variegation (οὕτω ποικῖλαι ταύτας τοῦ τεχνίτου θελήσαντος, ώς ἐκ τοῦ πολυμόρφου θηρῶντος τὸ εὐπρεπὲς καὶ έράσμιον)\textsuperscript{45}. Besides, the lavish decoration of the shrine is compared to the fine attire of a bride (ὅν ὡς νύμφην ὡραισμένην καὶ περικεκοσμημένην). This comparison also indicates that the Church is married to Christ, the immortal Bridegroom (τῷ ἀθανάτῳ προσήγαγεν νυμφίῳ Χριστῷ). Thereupon each church building also in terms of external appearance must be appropriate for such a great Groom. On this account, the adorned “garment” of the New Church consists of marble cladding, mosaics, silk fabrics, pearls, gold, and silver. All these elements are costly and shiny, and they differ in colours as well.

Gold, probably in the form of tesserae, also covered the interiors of the five domes (πέντε συμπληρούμενοι ἡμισφαιρίων στίλβει χρυσῷ καὶ εἰκόνων ώς ἀστέρων ἐξαστράπτει κάλλειον), shimmering like stars. Moreover, all parts of the templon and the altars were made of silver and thereafter gilded (ἐξ ἀργυροῦ πάντα οθεν χρυσοῦ). Very similar elements of a description are also found in the somewhat earlier poetic ekphrasis of the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. It was written by Constantine of Rhodes (ca. 870 – after 931) who dedicated his work to Constantine VII

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44} \textit{Vita Basilii}, 83.15–19, 84.1–18 (There are the Greek text and the English translation). Liutprand of Cremona (ca. 920 – ca. 972) mentioned this church in the \textit{Retributio (Ἀνταπόδοσις)}, where he described his first diplomatic mission at the court of Constantinople, during the reign of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (913–959):
\item \textit{Fabricavit autem precioso et mirabili opere iuxta palatium orientem versus ecclesiam in honorem summī et caelestis militiae principis, archangeli Michahelis, qui Grece archistratigōs, hoc est miliciae princeps, appellatur. Ecclesiam autem ipsam Nean, hoc est novam, alii vocant, alii vero Ennean, quod nostra lingua novennalem sonat, appellant, eo quod ibidem ecclesiasticarum horarum machina novem pulsata icibus sonet,}
\item \textsuperscript{45} \textit{Vita Basilii}, 89.15–17.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Porphyrogenitus (913–959). The poet mentioned there the names of the architects Anthemius of Tralles and Isidore of Miletus, known most of all from the design of the church of the Holy Wisdom, and stressed that due to their theoretical knowledge it was possible to erect such a magnificent building. The church of the Holy Apostles, however, was ravishing not only because of the engineering concepts but also because of the stunning decoration. The latter is compared to a bride with golden ornaments (ὅποια νύμφην κροσσωτοῖσι χρυσέοις) – this motive was used, as we have seen, also in reference to the New Church – and to a wedding chamber glistening with gold (παστάδα χρύσαυγον ὁρασιμένην). The extraordinary glow of the church interior is associated with gold, as well as with multi-coloured marbles (μαρμάρων πολυχρόων), precious stones, and pearls giving fiery reflections (ταῖς ἐκ λίθων τε μαργάρων φρυκτωρίαις) and coming from different parts of the whole world (τῶν ἐξ ὅλης σχεδόν γε τῆς οἰκουμένης / καὶ μέχρις Ἰνδῶν Λιβύης τε κ’ Εὐρώπης / τῆς Ἀσίας τε πανταχοῦ θρυλλουμένων). A little further, Constantine of Rhodes also pointed to golden tesserae, against which – as can be

 Constantine of Rhodes, On Constantinople and the Church of the Holy Apostles, 636–649, ed. L. James, I. Vassis, trans. V. Dimitropoulou, L. James, R. Jordan, Farnham 2012 (cetera: Constantine of Rhodes). Then follows the description of the used marbles. They, as we read, cover the building like a chiton (ἃς ὡς χιτῶνας ἐνδύσας τοὺς ὀρθίους τοίχους) and create in the interior the impression of a meadow full of blooming flowers with colours reminiscent of precious stones (Constantine of Rhodes, 650–674; 686–695). It is worth comparing this part of the ekphrasis to the some passages from the Silentiary’s poem on the church of the Holy Wisdom, vide Paulus Silentiarius, 617–646.

46 Τοίας μὲν ὤντος καὶ τάσαις τεχνουργίαις καὶ σχηματισμοῖς γραμμικῆς θεωρίας ὁλον διαμπὰξ συγκατήρτισεν ὠν τὸν ἀστρολαμπῆ τῶν σοφῶν Ἀποστόλων, εἰτ’ Ἀνθέμιος, εἰτ’ Ἰσιδώρος νέος, ὁλαις ἀπέροις μαρμάρων πολυχρόων καὶ λαμπρότητι τῶν μετάλλων τῶν ἐξ ἐνων ἐπενδύσας τα καὶ καλὸς συναρμόσας, ὁποία νύμφην κροσσωτοῖσι χρυσέοις ἢ παστάδα χρύσαυγον ὁρασιμένην ταῖς ἐκ λίθων τε μαργάρων φρυκτωρίαις τῶν ἐξ ὅλης σχεδόν γε τῆς οἰκουμένης καὶ μέχρις Ἰνδῶν Λιβύης τε κ’ Εὐρώπης τῆς Ασίας τε πανταχοῦ θρυλλουμένων.

47 Χρυσῷ δὲ μίγδην ύέλῳ πεφυκότι ἅπαν κατεχρύσωσε τούνδοθεν μέρος, ὅσον τ’ ἐν ύει σφαιροσυνθέτου στέγης χ’ ὅσον λαγόσιν ἁψίδων ὑπερφέρει, καὶ μέχρις αὐτῶν μαρμάρων πολυχρόων καὶ μέχρις αὐτῶν κοσμητῶν τῶν δευτέρων

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concluded from the description – scenes from the life of Christ were depicted\(^{48}\). It is noteworthy that the author had regard to technical detail, namely, that the golden mosaic cubes were made of glass and gold (Χρυσῷ δὲ μίγδην ύέλῳ πεφυκότι).

The golden glow was also associated with shiny fabrics, as evidenced, for example, by Silentiarius’s ekphrasis of one of the silk purple fabrics\(^{49}\) prepared for the church of the Holy Wisdom:

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\text{τοῦτο δὲ καλλιπόνοιο φυτεύσατο χείρεσι τέχνης οὐ γλυφίς, οὐ ραφίδων εἴπερ χάλκῳ, ἀλλὰ μεταλλάσσουσα πολύχροα νήματα πηνῆ, νήματα ποικιλόμορφα, τά βάρβαρος ἀστικάταραθεὶς ημὺς ἀπλοὶς ἀντήστραψε ἄρα γάρ ἀμπεχόντος μὲν ἀπωλίσθησε καλύπτρη, καλὰ δὲ ἀνερπύζουσα διὰ πλευρῆς ὑπὲρ ὄμοιν ἄγκεχυται λαιοῖο· ἔοικε δὲ δάκτυλα τείνειν δεξιτερῆς, ἅτε μῦθον ἀειζώοντα πιφαύσκων, γράψας ἀέθλους καὶ σεβασμίους τύπους τοὺς τὴν κένωσιν ἐκδιδάσκοντας Λόγου καὶ τὴν πρὸς ἡμᾶς τοὺς βροτοὺς παρουσίαν, Constantine of Rhodes, 742–750.}
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\(^{48}\) This is a quite long description, Constantine of Rhodes, 751–980. The church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople was demolished in 1453, therefore a form of this church is reconstructed primarily on the basis of written sources, which include, first of all, the ekphraseis created by Procopius of Caesarea, Constantine of Rhodes, and Nicholas Mesarites. The earliest of them discussed only the architectural form, and the other two also depicted scenes. Perhaps these mosaic pictures were made during the reign of Basil I; L. James, \textit{Constantine of Rhodes’s Poem and Art History}, [in:] \textit{Constantine of Rhodes, On Constantinople…}, p. 181–217. On the place where the church was built: \textit{Constantinople. Archaeology of a Byzantine Megapolis. Final Report on the Istanbul Rescue Archaeology Project 1998–2004}, ed. K. Dark, F. Özgümüş, Oxford–Oakville 2013, p. 83–96. It is worth noting that there was a “Dumbarton Oaks Symposium” dedicated to this church (24–26 April 2015); M. Mullett, R. Ousterhout, \textit{The Holy Apostles. Dumbarton Oaks Symposium, 24–26 April 2015}, DOP 70, 2016, p. 325–326; a collection of essays related to this conference has been recently published: \textit{The Holy Apostles – A Lost Monument, a Forgotten Project, and the Presentness of the Past}, ed. M. Mullett, R.G. Ousterhout, Washington D.C. 2020 (= DOBSC).

Some Remarks on the Significance of Gold

λαίῃ βίβλον ἔχων ζαθέων ἐπίστορα μόνων, 
βίβλον ἀπαγγέλλουσαν, ὅσα χραισμήτορι βουλή 
αὐτὸς ἀναξ ἐτέλεσσεν ἐπὶ χθονὶ ταρσὸν εἰρείδων. 

This has been fashioned not by artists’ skilful hands plying the knife, nor by the needle 
driven through cloth, but by the web, the produce of the foreign worm, changing its colored 
threads of many shades. Upon the divine legs is a garment reflecting a golden glow under 
the rays of rosy-fingered Dawn, and a chiton, dyed purple by the Tyrian seashell, covers the 
right shoulder beneath its well-woven fabric; for at that point the upper garment has slipped 
down while, pulled up across the side, it envelops the left shoulder. The forearm and hand 
are thus laid bare. He seems to be stretching out the fingers of the right hand, as if preaching 
His immortal words, while in His left He holds the book of divine message – the book that 
tells what He, the Lord, accomplished with provident mind when His foot trod the earth. 
The whole robe shines with gold: for on it gold leaf has been wrapped round thread after 
the manner of a pipe or a reed, and so it projects above the lovely cloth, firmly bound with 
silk thread by sharp needles.

The poet described the liturgical fabric that was laid on the altar. It was made 
of silk dyed with the Tyrian purple, and the figure of Christ Pantocrator was 
embroidered with gold thread. According to Silentiarius, this cloth glistened won- 
derfully in the morning sun, spreading the golden glare all-round. In the following 
lines, the author also referred to other scenes and persons, including Peter and Paul 
who are next to Christ. They are standing under golden arcades (νηὸς ἐκολπώθη 
χρύσεος; τέτρασι χρυσείοις ἐπὶ κίοσι). The both saints, having a rank lower than 
Christ, were embroidered with silver threads (ἀμφώ δὲ στολίδεσσιν ὑπ’ ἀργυφέῃσι 

50 Paulus Silentiarius, 765–785.
51 C. Mango, The Art of the Byzantine…., p. 88–89.
52 ἄμφω δὲ στολίδεσσιν ὑπ’ ἀργυφέῃσι πυκάζε 
pήνη ποικιλόεργος· ἐπ’ ἀμβροσίων δὲ καρῆνων 
νηὸς ἐκολπώθη χρύσεος, τριέλικτον ἐγείρων 
ἀγλαίνην ἀψίδος· ἐφεδρήσει δὲ βεβηκ 
tέτρασι χρυσείοις ἐπὶ κίοσι. ἑλιχθείς ἰο 
χείλεσι δὲ ἀκροι χρυσειδότων 
ἐπεμένει πάλαμαι Μαρίης θεοκύμονος 
ἔργα πολισσούχων ὑπ’ ἀργυφέῃσι
This kind of composition and its major colours can bring to mind the fantastic architecture, which is depicted in the mosaics in the dome of the Rotunda in Thessalonica. This architecture was depicted primarily of gold mosaic cubes, and it also frames the figures of standing saints or courtiers. In the case of the described fabric, buildings funded by emperors as well as the scenes of Christ’s miracles were embroidered with gold thread. As a result, the cloth is beautiful because of the content shown and the craftsmanship, and it is lighted by the golden glow of the threads.

It should be noted that examples of this kind of fabric’s ekphraseis are quite numerous, especially in the late antique Latin literature. At that time, imperial and consular robes were widely described. This theme was popular because it gave the opportunity – as in the case of architecture – to present splendid objects made of expensive, multi-coloured, and shiny materials. In the context of this so-called “jeweled aesthetics”, it is worth citing some passages from the semi-legendary *Narration on the Hagia Sophia* (Διήγησις περὶ τῆς Ἁγίας Σοφίας). Its chapters...

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15–19, 21–24, and 26 relate mainly to costly materials used in the church. In most cases, there are not many detailed descriptive parts among them: only two of them are quite extensive ekphraseis. The first one refers to the altar commissioned by Justinian I (527–565):

He also make the following contrivance. Wishing to make the holy altar table better and more precious than gold, he consulted many wise men and told them so. They said to him. “Let us throw gold, silver, various precious stones, pearls and mother of pearl, bronze, electrum, lead, iron, tin, glass and every other metallic material into melting furnace.” Having crushed and bound all of these in mortars, they poured them into the melting furnace. And when the fire had kneaded these together, the craftsman took them out of the fire and poured them into a casting mold. And so the altar table was cast, made up of all materials and priceless. And then he set it up in this manner, and placed columns of pure gold under it with precious stones and enamels; and he made the surrounding stairs, on which the priests stand when they kiss the holy altar table, also of pure silver. He made the liturgical basin (thalassa) of the altar table of priceless stones and gilded it. So who can behold the beauty of the holy altar table and not be amazed? Or who can comprehend it as its many colors and brilliances change, so that it appears sometimes as gold, in other places as silver, elsewhere gleaming with sapphire – radiating and, in a word, sending out seventy-two colors according to the nature of the stones, pearls and all the metals?58.

In this description, where gold is a synonym of the most valuable substance, Justinian, however, managed to find a way to obtain a material even more wonderful and expensive (κρείττονα τὴν ἁγίαν τράπεζαν καὶ πολυτελεστέραν ποιῆσαι υπὲρ χρυσίου), since he ordered to melt all possible precious materials – apart

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from gold also silver, electrum, bronze, pearls, and precious stones – along with more common metals – i.e. lead, iron, tin, and with glass – in one crucible. Consequently, a priceless mixture (πάμμιγος ἀτίμητος) was created. As we read, it was characterized by a multitude of colours and it shimmered in different ways, like the materials of which it was made. It can be assumed that the author, explaining how the altar was built, above all tried to emphasize the emperor’s involvement and generosity, as he cumulated the most expensive materials for the most vital part of the church’s furnishings. Therefore, this description should not be taken literally. In turn, the seventy-two colours probably allude to the number of disciples sent by Christ to preach the Gospel. Importantly, an anonymous author of the Narration clearly stressed a brilliance and colourfulness of the costly materials. In the second ekphrasis – regarding the floor and symbolic interpretation of the four stripes on it – he directly stated that: “Θαῦμα δὲ ἦν ἰδέσθαι ἐν τῷ κάλλει καὶ τῇ ποικιλίᾳ τοῦ ναοῦ· ὅτι πάντοθεν ἐκ τε χρυσοῦ καὶ ἀργύρου ἐξήστραπτεν” (It was wonderful to see the beauty and variety of the church, for it shone all around with gold and silver). Thus, the most prized aesthetic value is still the variegation (ποικιλία, πολυποικιλία). Evidences of this preference can be found throughout the text, since it glitters with precious and shiny materials such as, among others: golden mosaic cubes (ὑέλινος χρυσός), niello (ἀργυροέγκαυστος), sardonyx (σαρδόνυξ), crystal (κρύος), jasper (ἰάσπιον), sapphire (σάπφειρος), ruby (λυχνιτάριον) and emerald (σμάραγδος). They are all so wonderful and dazzling that the author rhetorically asks: “Τὴν δὲ ὡραιότητα καὶ τὴν ὑπερβολὴν τοῦ κάλλους τοῦ κεχρυσωμένου καὶ διηργυρωμένου ναοῦ ἀπὸ ὀρόφους ἕως ἐδάφους τίς διηγήσεται;” (Who can relate the loveliness and the excessive beauty of this church, gilded and sheathed with silver from ceiling to floor?). From the texts discussed so far, it follows that gold was valued primarily for its extraordinary glow – sometimes even too blinding – with which light was

60 Cf. Lc 10, 1.
61 The author interpreted these stripes as the Paradise rivers. At the end of chapter 28, where he discussed the reconstruction of the church after the collapse of the dome on the 7th of May 558, the author pointed out that the pavement was almost entirely made of the Proconesian marble, only the strips were of a green stone. He did not provide information about the place of its origin, but it is known to be the Thessalian marble (verde antico). “Εἰς δὲ τὸν πάτον οὐκ ἴδοιναι εὐφρέν τοιαύτα πολυποίκιλα καὶ μέγιστα ἀβάκια, καὶ ἀποστείλας Μανασσῆ πατρίκιον καὶ πραιπόσιτον ἐν Προκοννήσῳ ἔπρισεν ἐκεῖ τὰ μάρμαρα εἰς ὁμοιότητα τῆς γῆς, τα δὲ πράσινα εἰς ὁμοιότητα τῶν ποταμῶν τῶν ἐμβαινόντων ἐν τῇ θαλάσσῃ”, Narration, 28.37–42.
63 Patria, 26, p. 265.
64 Narration, 26.3–5.
65 Patria, 26, p. 267.
inevitably related. The authors, as could be seen, regularly point out that rays falling on golden surfaces are reflected from them, scattering golden reflections all-round. Thus, the aforementioned “jeweled aesthetics” do not exist without light, because it “triggers” these, described with pleasure and highly praised, characteristic visual effects. Hence, gold needs a light source to fully show its beauty. In turn, the light can take dazzling colour of gold. It is not surprising, then, that Sergey Averintsev termed gold the “absolute metaphor of light”\textsuperscript{66}.

In the accounts of Byzantine writers, gold is also a colour, although this issue was considered less often because in terms of colours marbles and precious stones were much more praised. They were, as already mentioned, compared to meadows in full bloom. All the more, it is worth quoting a passage from the already cited homily of Leo VI, where he explains the reason for using golden mosaic cubes in the church:

\begin{quote}
Ἐφεξῆς δὲ τοῦ ὅλου τοῦ ναοῦ κύτους καὶ τῶν ἀλλῶν ὀικείων ἁψίδων τῶν ὕψων, τῶν ἀλλῶν ὀικείων ἁψίδων τῶν ἀνεστήλων θεραπόντων εἰκόνες, τάσαι ψηφίδος χρυσῷ ἀλειφομένης πεποιημέναι, ἐνταῦθα τὸ χρήσιμον τοῦ χρυσοῦ καταδίδοντος τοῦ καθοίκου καὶ ἀρκόνος χρησαμένου. ἐξουσία ἡ γὰρ ταῖς εἰκόσι τῆς τοῦ χρυσοῦ μίξει τιοιτῶν ἡμῖν ἄλλως τοῦ ὀλίγου τούτου παραδείγματος κάλλος, οἰον εἰκὸς ἀμφιέννυσθαι τοῖς βασιλείως πλησίον, ἀλλωστε ἡ Ἡμῶν ἁπλοῦτος ἀνθρώπου, τὴν ἐκ τοῦ χρυσοῦ κατενόησεν χρησιμεύουσαν ὠχρότητα\textsuperscript{67}.
\end{quote}

The rest of the church’s hollow and the arches on which the roof is supported have images of [God’s] own servants, all of them made of mosaic smeared with gold. The craftsman has made abundant use of gold whose utility he perceived: for, by its admixture, he intended to endow the pictures with such beauty as appears in the apparel of the emperor’s entourage. Furthermore, he realized that the pallor of gold was an appropriate color to express the virtue of [Christ’s] member\textsuperscript{68}.

The emperor points out there that the pale hue of gold (ὠχρότητα) reminds the costumes of the imperial court (εἰκὸς ἀμφιέννυσθαι τοὺς βασιλείως πλησίον), and that it is suitable for the images of saints because it emphasises their sainthood (πρὸς τὸ γράψαι τοῖς μέλεσιν ἀρετῆς χρῶμα τὴν ἐκ τοῦ χρυσοῦ κατενόησεν χρησιμεύουσαν ωχρότητα). In this context, it is also worth paying attention to the short poem of Eugenius of Palermo (ca. 1130–1202) dedicated to the image of Saint John Chrysostom:

\begin{quote}
Καὶ χρῶμα χρυσοῦν, πάμμακαρ, σοὶ καὶ στόμα·
τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἡμῖν ἐκχέον χρυσοὺς λόγους
τὴν κλῆσιν ἀπήνεγκεν ἐκ τῶν πραγμάτων,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{66} S. Awierincew, Złoto…, p. 184.
\textsuperscript{67} Leo VI, 31.70–78.
\textsuperscript{68} C. Mango, The Art of the Byzantine…, p. 203.
All blessed one, both your color and your voice are golden.
For the one [your voice], pouring out to us golden words,
took its name from your deeds,
while pallor delineates the holiness of your color.
For consuming your flesh by the fire of fasting,
you have tinged it with the pallor of gold\textsuperscript{70}.

In this case, the poet specified that the golden colour – due to its pallor (ὀχρότης, χλωρότης) – was very suitable for the representation of the ascetic saint whose body, experienced by fasting, lost its more vivid colours.

The beauty of gold was also associated with splendour. This question was also raised, e.g., by Choricius of Gaza (491–518) in the ekphrasis of the church of St. Stephen at Gaza:

\begin{quote}
&e; \textit{eι δε} \textit{περίεργος ϑεατής πάντα διερευνήσεται μαρμάρων ἢ χρυσοῦ γυμνόν τι ζητῶν, οὐδὲν ἐνταῦθα τοιούτον εὑρήσει. Εἰ τινες οὖν ἀπορίᾳ χρυσοῦ καὶ πλακῶν ἐπὶ λίθους καὶ λίθων συνθήκην καταφεύγουσι, τούτοις ἐστὶν ἀπό τῆς ἐξωθεὶς όψεως ταῦτα περιεργάζεσθαι}\textsuperscript{71}
\end{quote}

The curious observer may look high and low in search of a spot bare of either marble or gold: he will not find one here. Those who are embarrassed by [so much] gold and marble, and seek relief in stones and masonry, will be able to study the latter on the outside\textsuperscript{72}.

The effulgent embellishment of the church consists of gold and marble revetment. They contrast with the outside stone walls which can provide a respite from the richness of the interior. Recognizing that this type of decoration could be too overwhelming to spectators, the author also hurried to explain that the building has a very good style that would only be appreciated by true art experts. Of course, there is a trap here: those who perceive a building negatively have no knowledge of art\textsuperscript{73}. Choricius, though sure of the incomparable beauty of the church, made

\textsuperscript{69} Eugenius Panormitanus, In imaginem Chrysostomi, 11, [in:] Versus Iambici, ed. M. Gigante, Palermo 1964 [= TMon, 10].
\textsuperscript{70} H. Maguire, Nectar..., p. 130.
\textsuperscript{71} Choricius, 2.2.49.
\textsuperscript{72} C. Mango, The Art of the Byzantine..., p. 71–72.
\textsuperscript{73} [...] συνελέγετον ἄνδρες πολλῶν ἱστορήσαντες πόλεων ἱερά, ἄλλος ἄλλο τι δοκιμάζειν ἔργον εἰδὼς, καὶ πρὸς τοὺς πανταχοῦ βεβοηθόμενους νέως κρινέσθων καθάπερ ἐν δικαστηρίῳ τὸ τέμενος ἐκ τοιούτων συνεστηκότι κριτῶν. οἷον ὁ μὲν γραφῆς ἔστω φιλοθεάμων, οὐ τῆς ἐν χρώμασι μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῆς ἐν ψηφίδι μιμουμένης ἐκείνης· ὁ δὲ μαρμάρων δοκιμαστὴς, ἀν τὰ μὲν ἔξω ὄν μεταλλεύεται προσαγορεύουσι τόπων, τοῖς δὲ τὰ χρώματα δίδωσιν ὀνόματα. ἄλλω κιόνων μελέτω τὰς κεφαλίδας.
it clear that the right proportions must be respected in the use of gold, because both an excess and a shortness is wrong. Just from this one example, it can be seen that the attitude to gold was to some extent marked by suspiciousness. The authors often felt obliged to clarify that the decorations of gold did not exceed the appropriate measure (ἀμετρία): gold is beautiful, but it is necessary to use it purposefully and decorously.

Against a backdrop of the moderation in a use of gold, the description of the church of Saint George in the Mangana quarter written by Michael Psellos (ca. 1017–1078?) is an interesting example. He characterised the church rebuilt by Constantine IX Monomachos (1042–1055) as a combination of beauty and luxury:

καὶ τεχνικότερα πάντα· καὶ χρυσός ὑπαλείφων τὸν ὄροφον. τῶν δὲ λίθων ὃπόσαι χλοαξούσιν, αἱ μὲν καταστροφόνυντο· αἱ δὲ τοίχοις ἡμιόζοντο· καὶ ἄλλη τὶς ἐφ’, ἐτέρα ἐπήγει, ἢ εφ’ ὅμοιος τῷ χρώματι· ἐναλλάξασιν. ὁ δὲ χρυσός, ἀπὸ τῶν δημοσίων ταμιεύσων ὡσπερ εξ ἀφθόνων πηγῶν καχλάζοντι ἑπέρρει τῷ ρεύματι. […] Ο μὲν γὰρ ναὸς, ὡσπέρ τις οὐρανὸς χρυσῶν ἅστρων πάντεσθεν ἐπεποίκιστο, μᾶλλον δὲ τὸ μὲν αἰθέριον σῶμα ἐκ διαστημάτων κατακεχρύσωσα· ἐκείνῳ δὲ ὁ χρυσός, ὡσπερ ἐκ κέντρου ρυεῖς, ἀφθόνῳ τῷ ρεύματι πᾶσαν ἀδιαστάτως ἐπέδραμεν ἐπιφάνειαν

Everything was made more artful, the ceiling was covered with gold, slabs of a verdant color were laid in the pavement and affixed to the walls, and each kind of marble bloomed next to another which was either of the same or of contrasting hue. And gold flowed in a torrential stream from the public treasury as from an inexhaustible source. […] Indeed, the church was

<σκοπεῖν>. χρυσῶν ἐτερος μέτρα πολυπραγμονείτω σαφῶς, εἰ ποῦ τι γέγονεν ἐνδεῖς ἢ περιττὸν· ἀκάτερον γὰρ ἀμετρία· ἄλλος κατανοείτω τὸν ὄροφον ἀκριβῶς, ἂν ἄρα μὴ πρὸς τὸ ὕψος ἀπείπῃ· ξύλα γὰρ εὐαρκεῖς πολυτελῆ καλαθίσκοις κεκαλυμμένα τοῦ πρὸς ὶσχυν ἅμα καὶ πρὸς κάλλος εὖ ἐστιγμένα χρωμάτων καὶ ψηφίδων τυπώματα, ὅποσα ἡ πόλις ἔστεγεν ἢ κώμαις καὶ χώραις ἀνέκειτο φυλακτήρια, χειρὸς ἀρχαιόν ἔργα καὶ θαυμασίας, κατὰ τὸ αὐτὸ συνήθροισε τέμενος,

Choricius, 2.252–54.

74 In the History of Niketas Choniates, we read that Isaac II Angelos (1185–1195) destroyed this church with the adjacent palace, and the building materials obtained during this demolition were then used for other edifices:


like the sky adorned on all sides with golden stars; to be more exact, the heavens are gilded only at intervals, while here the gold, flowing as it were, from the center in a copious stream, has covered the entire surface without interruption.²⁶

Although Psellos admired this church, he also recognized it as a crowning example of the exaggeration of the emperor who wanted to surpass all other churches:

ὁ δὲ γε λόγος τὰς ύπερβολὰς ἐκείνου καταιτιώμενος, ἐπ’ αὐτὸ δὴ χωρεῖ τὸ κεφάλαιον, φημὶ δὴ ὁν ἐκείνος ναὸν τῷ μάρτυρι Γεωργίῳ καθιδρυσεν. οὐ δὴ πάντα συνετριϕε καὶ ἡφαίνικαι τέλος, καὶ αὐτὸν ἐκείνον τοῖς συντριβεῖσι προσέζετο. [...] εἶτα δὴ χρόνου διελθόντος τινὸς, ἐρωτεῖς τινες αὐτὸν ὑπεξεκαθίσαι, ἀστε πρὸς πάσας τὰς πώποτε γεγονόις ἁμιλληθῆναι οἰκοδομὰς καὶ ταύτας υπερβαλέσθαι μακρῷ.²⁷

My indictment of his [Constantine IX’s] excesses now comes to its principal point, namely the church he founded in honor of the martyr George, which he then entirely destroyed and wiped out, and [after rebuilding it] reduced it once again to ruin. [...] Later on, however, he became consumed by the passion of rivalling all the buildings of the past and even surpassing them by far.²⁸

Therefore, Psellos heavily criticised exaggerated aspirations of the emperor, and the ruler’s intention was decisive for considering the church too luxurious. However the funding of various edifices was a quite significant task of emperors, sometimes they were reprehended for the activity of this sort. It could also be a way of showing general disapproval of the policy pursued by a given emperor, just to mention the particularly symptomatic case of Procopius of Caesarea.²⁹

In the case of art, splendour of gold could be very desirable, as evidenced by epigrams devoted to icons made of precious materials or, at least, clad with them.³⁰ And to give an example, Nicholas Kallikles (ca. 1080 – ca. 1150) prepared a poem for an icon of Christ, which John II Komnenos (1118–1143) commissioned for the Pantokrator Monastery in Constantinople:

²⁷ Psellos, 6.185.1–5; 6.185.8–11.
When I beautify your icon with gold,
I, the king, pay tribute to the king of all.
When I [make it] glitter with precious stones,
I do not want you [to be] an “obstructing stone”;
for I honour you as [the] cornerstone that unites all extremities.
And thus, like a merchant I attain you and adorn you with pearls,
you, the worthy and beautiful pearl,
from whom I have won all my good fortune:
an anointed throne, and sceptre, and glorious crown.
Should some Persian dog,
Scythian leopard, or Hungarian wolf howl,
should Panonians clamour and Dacians mount [their chargers],
strike them, O powerful one, smash their jaws.
Protect my offspring, the vine’s fruit,
the flowers of the meadow, the white “lilies of the valley” –
give [them] long life. And in that future judgement
let me be united with my consort in a single soul
that death divided in twain,
leaving me half and already dead.
Unite that man immediately, as you know how,

81 Cf. Rom 9, 33.
82 Cf. Ct 2, 1.
83 Nicola Callicle, Carmi, 2.12–34, ed. R. Romano, Napoli 1980 [= BNN, 8].
bestowing the garden of Eden as [his] lot.
So these things I, John Komnenos, [address] to you, O Word,
I, the king of the Ausonites, sprung from the purple.

This emperor also funded another icon of Christ, which is associated with an epigram (Εἰς εἰκόνα τοῦ ὑπεραγάθου σωτήρος Χριστοῦ, ὡς ἀπὸ βασιλέως κυροῦ Ἰωάννου) written by Theodore Prodromos (ca. 1100 – ca. 1165):

Σὺ μὲν καθιστάς γῆς με πάσης δεσπότην,
ὁ παμβασιλεὺς ὑπεράγαθος Λόγος,
καὶ μοι πρὸς ταρσών πᾶν τὸ βάρβαρον κλίνεις,
ὡς καὶ φόρους μοι δουλικῶς συνεισφέρειν·
καὶ προσκύνησιν οὐκ ἔμοι μόνον νέμει,
ἀλλ’ εἰ τις ἡμῶν εἰκονισθῇ καὶ τύπος·
ἔγω δὲ τῷ πλάσαντι καὶ στέψαντί με
καὶ ταύτα πάντα δόντι ἃ καὶ στέψαντι με τήν δουλικὴν εὔνοιαν εἰσφέρω πάλιν
καὶ ζωγράφων σε προσκυνήσω σοῦ τόπυν
καὶ τήν ἅπτ’ ἀργύρου ἐχαρίν
καθὼς καὶ στέψαντί με καὶ τοῖς προλοίποις δάμασόν μοι βαρβάρους
καὶ τῷ βασιλεῖ μου καὶ θεῷ καὶ δεσπότῃ

You who made me lord of all the world,
You the King of All and abundantly good Logos
who makes all barbarians bow at my feet,
and pay servile tribute to me.
It is not to my person alone that they bow down
but wherever else the image of our features is depicted.
I, to Him that made and crowned me,
once again pay the homage of a slave,
and painting you I venerate your form;
adorning you with gold and silver
is my way of paying you tribute.
To you I owe both life’s existence

and my royal sceptre,
and the throne inherited from my father,
and a sea of myriad trophies
of which above the sun is unimpeachable witness
and below, the breadth of sea and earth.
But, O sovereign and all-powerful Pantokrator,
rein in for me the remaining barbarians,
and preserve my city through my own pains,
and at the end give my soul salvation.
The emperor Komnenos sprung from the purple,
to my king and God and Lord⁸⁶.

In the both poems, the emperor decided to commission an icon decorated with expensive materials – in the first case they are gold, pearls, and precious stones, in the second one – silver and gold. The descriptions are quite general, but it can be assumed that these materials formed revetments: it is especially likely in the last epigram, where both the painting layer and adornment are distinguished (καὶ ζωγραφῶν σε προσκυνῶ σου τὸν τύπον / καὶ τὴν ἀργύρου τε καὶ χρυσοῦ χάριν / καθώσπερ ἄλλους εἰσκομίζω σοι φόρους). John II Komnenos chooses these gifts to thank for all the favours he has received so far and to ask God for further support in both state and personal matters. The emperor presents himself as the greatest earthly ruler who addresses the supreme king, therefore the gift must be worthy of both of them. In the context of material goods, precious metals and stones are the most valuable. Hence, Komnenos intended them to deck the images of Christ. There are more Byzantine poems composed around the problem of icons with precious-metal revetments, which proves the popularity of the motif and this type of votive gifts as well⁸⁷.

Costly and shiny materials creating a dazzling decoration were suitable not only for churches but also for the imperial court. In ekphraseis of imperial residences, the richness of the materials used – as well as the way they are characterised – virtually does not differ from that employed for descriptions of religious architecture. In this context, it is worth quoting the ekphrasis of the palace of Digenis Akritis. His residence is an example of unreal architecture, created for the purpose of the poem, therefore it is more magnificent than any real palace:

Μέσον αὐτοῦ τοῦ θαυμαστοῦ καὶ τερπνοῦ παραδείσου
οἶκου τερπνόν ἀνήγειρεν ὁ γενναῖος Ἀκρίτης
εὐμεγέθη, τετράγωνον ἐκ λίθων πεπρισμένων,
ἄνωθεν δὲ μετὰ σεμνῶν κιόνων καὶ θυρίδων.
Τοὺς ὀρόφους ἐκόσμησε πάντα μετὰ μουσείου
ἐκ μαρμάρων πολυτελῶν τῇ αἴγλῃ ἄστραπτόντων.
τὸ ἔδαφος ἐφαίδρυνε, ἐψήφωσεν ἐν λίθοις,

⁸⁶ T. Papamastorakis, The Display…, p. 38.
⁸⁷ Ibidem, p. 39–47.
In the midst of this wonderfully pleasant garden the noble Akrites erected a big square house of cut stone having stately columns and windows up above. He adorned all the ceilings with mosaic, he decorated the pavement with precious gleaming marbles and tesserae of stone. Inside he made upper chambers on three floors having sufficient height and decorated ceilings; [he also made] cruciform halls, strange pentacubicula, containing shining marbles reflecting shafts of light. So beautiful was the artist's work that the gay, many-figured aspect of the stones made one think of woven tapestry. He paved the floor with onyx so smoothly polished that those who saw it mistook it for water congealed to ice. On either side he set up long, wondrous reclining-rooms having golden ceilings upon which he represented in mosaic the victories of all those men of yore who shone in valor.

In the description of the residence of Akritis, sparkling marbles (ἐκ μαρμάρων τῇ αἴγλῃ ἀστρατιτόντων; μετὰ μαρμάρων φαεινῶν λίαν ἀστραπηβόλων), mosaics (ἐφαίδρυνε, ἐψήφωσεν ἐν λίθοις, χρυσόμουσα), and gilded ceilings (χρυσορόφος) are specified: their glow is clearly emphasized. As for colours, they are actually not particularised. This imagined palace is described in accordance with the established convention, and – due to the epic character of the poem – all the features are exaggerated and idealised. As the Akritis’ residence is an example of fantastic architecture, so its opposite is the palace Muchrutas, which brief ekphrasis was composed by Nicholas Mesarites (ca. 1163 – after 1216). It is a very interesting text because in this case, the author had to face the necessity of crossing the formulaic patterns since the building was erected in a style referring to Muslim architecture:

The Mouchroutas is an enormous building adjacent to the Chrysotriklinos, lying as it does on the west side of the latter. [...] This building is the work not of a Roman, nor a Sicilian, nor a Celt-Iberian, nor a Sybaritic, nor a Cypriot, nor a Cilician hand, but of a Persian hand, by virtue of which it contains images of Persians in their different costumes. The canopy of the roof, consisting of hemispheres joined to the heaven-like ceiling, offers a variegated spectacle; closely packed angles project inward and outward; the beauty of the carving is extraordinary, and wonderful is the appearance of the cavities which, overlaid with gold, produce the effect of rainbow more colourful than the one in the clouds. There is insatiable enjoyment here – not hidden, but on the surface. Not only those who direct their gaze to these things for the first time, but those who have often done so are struck with wonder and astonishment. Indeed, this Persian building is more delightful than the Laconian ones of Menelaus.

It is assumed that this palace was built around the mid-twelfth century. Its most characteristic element was – as can be deduced from the text – a muqarnas vault. The author, using a heavily rhetorical style, describes its complex form. He employs the common comparison of the vault with the heaven (τῷ οὐρανοειδεῖ ὀρόφῳ) and highlights the delightful – surpassing the rainbow – glow of gold reflections (τῶν κοιλωμάτων θέαμα πάντερπνον, ἶριν φαντάζον πολυχρωμότεραν τῆς ἐν τοῖς νέφεσι, χρυσοῦ τούτῳ ὑπεστρωμένου). He concludes the whole with a statement of the extraordinary beauty of the building, even more magnificent than the Menelaus' palace. In this way, Mesarites pointed to the Poet and his scheme of ekphrasis of dazzling residence of the mighty ruler.

93 […] οἱ δὲ ἰδόντες θαύμαζον κατὰ δῶμα διοτρεφέος βασιλῆος· ὡς τε γὰρ ἥλιον αἴγλη πέλεν ἡ σελήνης δῶμα καθ’ ψυφεφες Μενελάου κυδαλίμοιο. […] δὴ τότε Τηλέμαχος προσεφώνεε Νέστορος υἱόν, ἅγγι σχὼν κεφαλῆς ἵνα μὴ πευθοίαθ’ οἱ ἄλλοι· “φράζεο, Νεστορίδη, τῷ ἐμῷ κεχαρισμένε θυμῷ, χαλκὸν τε στεροπῆν κατὰ δῶματα ἤχηντα
To summarize the remarks on the significance of gold in Byzantine ekphraseis, and at the same time indicate how long-lasting - reaching even beyond the fall of Constantinople - the inclination for gleaming and costly materials, including gold, was, it is proper to cite the passage on the Pammakaristos Church from the History of the Patriarchate of Constantinople from 1454 to 1578 (Πατριαρχικὴ Κωνσταντινουπόλεως ἱστορία ἀπὸ τοῦ αὐνδ’ ἕως τοῦ ἁφού’ ἔτους Χριστοῦ) which was written by Manuel Malaxos (died ca. 1580):

ἔχει γὰρ ὁ οὐρανὸς, καθὼς τὸν ἐβλέπομεν, ἥλιον φεγγάρη ἀστρῆ καὶ τὰ ἄλλα. ἔχει δὲ αὐτὸς ὁ ναὸς τῆς παμμακαρίστου ἀντὶ τοῦ φωτὸς τοῦ ἠλίου τὸ ὡραιότατον καὶ λαμπρότατον χρυσὸν τέμπλον, ἀπάνω μετὰ τοῦ ζωοποιοῦ χρυσοῦ σταυροῦ, ὡς οὔτε ἐν αὐτῷ ἐσταυρωμένος ὁ κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς καὶ σωτὴρ παντὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ἀνθίζεται καὶ λαμπρή, ἔχοντες πολλὰς τιμίας ποδαῖς χρυσαῖς. καὶ βημαθήκους μέγα ἐκλεκτῶς, πολλῆς τιμῆς· καὶ αἱ πόρται τοῦ ἁγίου βήματος πάνχρυσαις, μὲ τὸν θεῖον εὐαγγελικὸν ἀσπασμὸν τῆς πανυπεράγνου θεοτόκου. καὶ αἱ εἰκόναι τῶν δώδεκα διακοσίων ἔτη, καὶ κάτωθεν τοῦ τέμπλου ἡ εἰκόνα αὐτοῦ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, μεγάλη καὶ λαμπρότατη, καὶ ἐν τῷ δεξιῶτερῳ μέρει ἡ εἰκόνα τῆς ὑπεραγίας θεοτόκου, ἐξ ἀκαθαρσίας παράθεται, καὶ τῶν ἄστέρων ἔχει τὰς ἀργυρὰς κανδήλας καὶ τὴν λαμπρότητα τῶν θείων εἰκόνων πολλὰ ἐκλεκτῶς, ἔχοντες πολλαῖς τιμίας ποδαῖς χρυσαῖς.

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Some Remarks on the Significance of Gold

καὶ ὅλην τὴν εὐπρέπειαν τοῦ ναοῦ [...] ἔναι δὲ καὶ λέγεται αὐτὸς ὁ ναὸς τῆς μεγάλης ἐκκλησίας τῆς παμμακαριστοῦ ἐπίγειος οὐρανός, νέα Σιών

The sky – when we look at it – has the sun, moon, stars and other [celestial bodies]. In turn, this church of the All-Blessed instead of the light of the sun has the most beautiful and brightest golden templon with a life-giving and golden cross on the top, where the crucified Jesus Christ, Lord and Saviour of all mankind, is set, as well as the representation of the Twelve Great Feasts, and below the image of Our Lord Jesus Christ, great and brightest, and on the right, the image of the All-Blessed Virgin Mary, the most beautiful and bright: both have extremely valuable golden podeai. [There are] also gates to the sanctuary, really excellent and of great value; the door wings of the holy sanctuary [are] all gold and with the evangelical salutation of the Holy Mother of God. Instead of moonlight and stars, it has silver candlesticks and the splendour of sacred images, and all the glory of the shrine. [...] And this church is called the great church of the All-Blessed and is the heaven on earth, the new Zion.

Gold in Byzantine texts appears primarily as one of the most beautiful materials available to artists. Its beauty lies in its glow and colour, although despite the dazzling appearance, some authors stated that multi-coloured marbles are more wonderful. Above all, the variegation (ποικιλία, πολυποικιλία) was valued the most. It was the main feature of the “jeweled aesthetics” developed in late antiquity and carried on by Byzantines. Byzantine writers relatively rarely referred to symbolic issues. For instance, in an ekphrasis of an icon of Virgin and Christ written by John Eugenikos (ca. 1400 – ca. 1453), we read that a gold colour of Christ’s cloak indicates his divine nature⁹⁵. A similar interpretation of the significance of gold we find in an epigram associated with Manuel Philes (ca. 1275–1345). He explains there that a silver gilded revetment of an icon designates spiritual features of the depicted Virgin⁹⁶. The same motive is in an epigram on a bronze gilded statue of the charioteer Porphyrios: gold is referred to the merits of the famous athlete⁹⁷. What is more important, for Byzantine authors, wonderful aesthetic properties of gold could also have a symbolic meaning. Nonetheless, they more frequently used to discuss aesthetic questions. Then, it seems that these matters need more attention of researchers because now they are rather neglected. In closing, it should also be added that highly appreciated visual effects created

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²⁴ Manuel Malaxus, Historia politica Constantinopolos (a 1454 usque ad 1578 annum Christi), 7–22, 7–9, [in:] Historia Politica et Patriarchica Constantinopolos, ed. I. Bekker, Bonn 1849 [= CSHB, 32], p. 203–204.
²⁶ See Manuelis Philae carmina inedita, 35, ed. A. Martini, Napoli 1900. See as well H. Maguire, Originality. . ., p. 110.
on gold surfaces are not only associated with diverse conceptual meanings but also with technical aspects which pertain to, among others, various methods of gilding and polishing. It is very important problem due to its direct impact on a final shape of works of art. This issue, however, is the subject for a different paper.

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Abstract. The abundance of gilding is considered to be a particularly characteristic feature of Byzantine art. This attribute can be confirmed by even a cursory analysis of works of art. In short, Byzantine artists used gold on a large scale, showing great technical skill. It is therefore quite surprising that this issue has not yet received a separate, comprehensive study. Admittedly, researchers recognize the presence of gold but unfortunately, they almost do not go beyond general observations. On the one hand, they emphasize the primary role of the symbolic meanings of gold, and, on the other, they indicate the high material value of this precious metal. These comments are usually very general and their authors rarely refer to specific primary sources. Their observations, however, speak more about present-day ideas about Byzantine culture than about it itself. The indicated problem is an important and extensive task to be done, hence this paper is only an outline of the most important questions, each of which requires a separate and in-depth study. Therefore, this synthetic article introduces the most basic points associated with the understanding of gold in Byzantium. For this purpose, selected examples of Byzantine texts in which their authors referred to gold in a strictly artistic context are analysed. Thus, the main thesis is as follows: in Byzantine painting, gold, one of the most important devices of artistic expression, was used on a large scale primarily for aesthetic reasons.

Keywords: Byzantine aesthetics, ekphrasis, gilding, mosaic, marble