The Vatican Epithalamion

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The illustrations in the Vatican Epithalamion (marriage poem), *Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 1851, are vivid and evocative.1 The seven illuminations show a walled city, its surrounding waters and bridges, its buildings and ceremonial tents, and an array of courtiers and members of the imperial family all participating in a complex narrative. The protagonist is a small female figure who arrives by boat. The accompanying poem, only surviving in part, reveals that this book, not much larger than an A5 sized piece of paper, belonged to this girl, a foreign princess.2 It was originally perhaps 32 pages long (eight bifolia) and is now just 16 (four bifolia).3 From the text and the images, the story emerges of the girl’s betrothal to the son of the emperor, her arrival, her reception by the women of the Byzantine court, her visual transformation into a Byzantine augusta, an impending meeting with the emperor and a first encounter with her future sister-in-law in the splendour of an imperial tent.

Not surprisingly, since none of the protagonists are named and there is no specific reference to the culture from which the princess came, much that has been written on the manuscript has explored its date and the identity of the characters. Regardless of the specific context, the text is rich in detailing court custom in the reception of foreign brides, and the illustrations show vibrant and uncommon examples of imperial dress and regalia. These images give women and girls a prominent role, in contrast to formal imperial portraits which tend to be dominated by sons and dynastic hopes.

The miniatures depict the bride and groom as children (probably pre-pubescent if our identification is correct), who are placed in official and responsible positions in a diplomatic setting. The sister of the groom, who may have been

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1 The manuscript is usually now referred to as the “Vatican Epithalamion” and the name is retained here, although the use of the term epithalamion has been questioned by Michael Jeffreys, who uses eisiterioi. See Jeffreys, “The Vernacular εἰσιτήριοι for Agnes of France”, p. 104.
2 Belting observed that she was the recipient, Belting, Das illuminierte Buch, p. 27; the Greek text is published in Spatharakis, Portrait, pp. 220–7; an English translation in Hilsdale, “Constructing a Byzantine ‘Augusta’”, pp. 461, 465, 467, 468, 470, 474; a German translation in Strzygowski, “Das Epithalamion”, pp. 547–5; the manuscript measures 227 by 170 mm; Canart, Codices Vaticani Graeci, vol. 1, p. 324.
3 Canart, Codices Vaticani Graeci, vol. 1, p. 324.
of a similar age, was also given familial and ambassadorial duties. The manuscript gives a pictorial glimpse of the duties held by children at court, particularly girls. It shows a rite of passage, the bride’s liminal experience and her transformation from a girl to a woman and from an outsider to an insider. The manuscript appears to be a memento of these significant changes in her life and provides a rare example of a book made for a young recipient.  

Let us look at the text and images in their probable original order. Paul Canart suggested that two folios at the beginning are lost. The extant text, on fol. 8r, opens with a partial letter from the father of the bride written to the Byzantine emperor. He wrestles with the idea of giving up his daughter, the light of his life, but resigns himself to it in recognition of the emperor’s greatness. On fol. 2r, the narrator tells how the father of the bride sent a messenger by sea to the porphyrogenetos, the groom. Below the text is a representation of a walled city, which is commonly held to be Constantinople. It is by the sea with a large domed church, presumably Hagia Sophia, and a smaller one to the left, maybe Hagia Eirene. The arrival of the messenger is shown on fol. 2v in a full-page illumination, read from bottom to top: in the lower register, the messenger steps out of a boat and, above, kneels before one of three officials and hands him a scroll. In the upper register, this official presents the scroll to the emperor, who is enthroned with his son to the left and surrounded by the court entourage. On the adjacent folio, 7r, in a further full-page illumination read from bottom to top, the emperor followed by his son ascend stairs and, in the upper register, stand on a dais with a tall imperial female figure, presumably the empress, as a herald proclaims the agreement of the marriage. On the verso, the text records the joy of the emperor and his people and, on fol. 1r, tells of the arrival of a further message from the ambassadors. In a miniature, the messenger gives the scroll to the emperor, who sits enthroned with his attendants. On the verso, the text proclaims the arrival of the bride.

Three folios are then missing, and the text resumes, on fol. 3r, with “after these things” and tells how the emperor sends at least 70 female members of the imperial family to receive the princess, and one in particular is to help her

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4 First proposed in Hennessy, “A Child Bride”; see also, ead., “Vatican Epitaphalium”, pp. 149-50; ead., Images of Children in Byzantium, pp. 174-6; the rite of passage theme was also applied in Hilsdale, “Constructing a Byzantine ‘Augusta’”.

5 Canart, Codices Vaticani Graeci, vol. I, p. 324; the order given here seems now generally accepted: Spatharakis seconded Canart, see Spatharakis, Portrait, pp. 218-9; alternate numbers of folios and their arrangement have been put forward in Strzygowski, “Das Epitaphalium”, pp. 555-6; Papademetriou, “Ὁ ἐπιθαλάμιος”, pp. 452-60; Belting, Das illuminierte Buch, pp. 28-9.

6 First noted in Strzygowski, “Das Epitaphalium”, p. 548.