

# A Lord's Prayer inscription from Amorium and the materiality of early Byzantine Christian prayer

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## Abstract

This article presents an analytical study of a rare example of the text of the Lord's Prayer inscribed on an early Byzantine ceramic plate that was found in excavations at Amorium. The graffito inscription is discussed in detail and the text identified securely with the Lord's Prayer as preserved from the Gospels of Mathew and Luke. It is an extremely rare find in Asia Minor. At the same time, the inscribed vessel is examined as an object within its possible context, ecclesiastical, domestic or other, through comparison with other known examples. Finally, the article discusses the possible uses of the Lord's Prayer in day-to-day life and the materiality of prayer for Christians during the early Byzantine period between the fourth and seventh centuries.

## Özet

Bu makale, Amorium kazılarında bulunmuş olan ve erken Bizans dönemine ait seramik bir tabak üzerine yazılmış Rab'bin Duası metninin nadir bir örneğinin analitik çalışmasıdır. Graffiti yazıt ayrıntılı olarak tartışılmış, Matta ve Luka İncil'lerinde korunduğu şekliyle karşılaştırılarak güvenli bir şekilde Rab'bin Duası olarak tanımlanmıştır. Bu, Küçük Asya için son derece nadir bir buluntudur. Aynı zamanda bu yazıtlı kap, bilinen diğer örneklerle karşılaştırılarak, dini, ev içi veya diğer olası bağlamları içinde bir nesne olarak incelenmiştir. Son olarak, makale Rab'bin Duası'nın günlük yaşamdaki olası kullanımlarını ve 4. ve 7. yüzyıllar arasındaki erken Bizans döneminde Hıristiyanlar için duanın önemini tartışmaktadır.

The epigraphical corpus from the Roman and Byzantine city of Amorium and its territory provides an interesting assortment of texts of all aspects of life and forms of written language, official and vernacular. The Byzantine inscriptions from Amorium cover the period from the fourth century up to the 11th, when the city was probably abandoned on the eve of Seljuk expansion into central and western Anatolia. Inscriptions of the early Byzantine (fourth to seventh century), Byzantine early medieval (seventh to ninth century) and middle Byzantine (ninth to 11th century) periods found during the excavations constitute a large part of the epigraphical corpus of the city, and the material recovered from 1987 up to 2013 has been systematically published (Lightfoot et al. 2017). An updated catalogue that will include all the inscriptions of the current phase of the excavation under the direction of Zeliha Demirel Gökalkp will be published when enough new material has been amassed.

As well as inscriptions in stone, a significant part of the Byzantine inscribed texts found at Amorium are of other kinds and in other durable materials: graffiti *ante* or *post cocturam* on pottery, graffiti on stone, dipinti, markings on wet clay, metal items with inscribed, etched or stamped texts and mason marks are the most characteristic ways of expressing in writing names or messages. A total of 32 such inscriptions appear in the 2017 catalogue of Amorium inscriptions, most of them etched with a sharp instrument on complete vessels or ostraca. All but one of these texts are in Greek; the exception is in Arabic (Lightfoot et al. 2017: 123–28).

The systematic excavation of Amorium, which revealed a complex but clear stratigraphical sequence, often offers closely dated archaeological contexts for this epigraphical material comprising graffiti and other informal 'everyday' texts. In this way, the inscriptions can be better ascribed to their temporal and social contexts, as

with the inscribed finds from the destruction layer of the mid-ninth century (Iverson 2012: 115, fig. 1/19). Moreover, the wealth of material culture discovered during the excavations allows us occasionally to match graffito inscriptions with writing implements and set them within the general context of Byzantine literacy (Lightfoot 2014; Demirel Gökalp 2021). In the present study a little-known but very important graffito etched on a small pottery sherd (Tzivikis 2020: 117) from the recent excavations at Amorium will be examined in detail, providing a lead into a much wider discussion of early Byzantine piety and daily prayer across the eastern Mediterranean.

**The object**

The graffito inscription discussed here is preserved on the interior of a small sherd that belonged to a much larger clay vessel. The sherd measures just 8.1 by 5.6 cm and comes from the central part of what must have been a large, deep plate or bowl with a low and wide ring base (figs 1, 2). The vessel has a thick red slip, while the clay is fine and pinkish-yellow (Munsell 2.5YR 7/6 light red). The sherd is too small to reconstruct the exact shape of the plate, but its profile resembles red-slip ware plate bases that are usually dated between the late fourth and the sixth century, and its form could correspond to Late Roman Ware C or Phocaeian Red Slip Ware, especially forms 3 and 8 of John Hayes’ typology (1972: 336–38, 342). Its fabric suggests that it belongs to a local or regional central Anatolian production that imitated the original, a widespread practice in the area (Maranzana 2021).



Fig. 1. Pottery sherd with graffito inscription from Amorium, interior and exterior (© Amorium Project).



Fig. 2. Drawing of the pottery sherd with graffito inscription from Amorium (drawing Y. Nakas; © Amorium Project).

The sherd was found during the 2015 excavation season in a trench on the Upper City of Amorium (Trench Ba1; context: 974.412; date: 03.08.2015; Demirel Gökcalp et al. 2017: 452–54). It came from the ongoing exploration of a large early Byzantine aisled basilica (Church B), perhaps built in the sixth century, that is located on the eastern side of the Upper City (Demirel Gökcalp 2015: 653–54; Demirel Gökcalp et al. 2016: 201–2; 2017: 452–54; 2018: 561–62; 2019: 714–15; 2020: 569). Although the sherd is also early Byzantine, it is difficult to support a connection with the early Byzantine church building in which it was found, as it belongs to fill of a much later archaeological context (Tsivikis 2021: 208–09; Erel forthcoming). During the middle Byzantine period (ninth to 11th century) a complete remodelling and landscaping of the Upper City occurred. The church, which was already ruinous along with many other early Byzantine buildings (Lightfoot 2017: 337–38; Ivison 2000a: 13–18), was further altered into new medieval units (Demirel Gökcalp et al. 2019: 714–15). So, the small red-slip fragment should be understood as a chance find that was probably introduced to the site as part of some manmade fill on the Upper City during the middle Byzantine period.

The graffito inscription was etched with a sharp instrument through the red slip *post cocturam*, thus creating deep cuts that make the clay's buff colour show through in contrast to the red of the surface. The letters of the inscription are small, measuring approximately 6mm, and are consistently written by a steady hand. Only two lines of text are preserved on the sherd. The upper line is very fragmentary and just a few letters are discernible, while the lower line is much better preserved and 17 letters are legible. Underneath, in a third line following the same orientation survives a single symbol, a staurogram.

### The text

#### Transcription

]NϚΕΠΙϚϚ[  
]NKICHMACEICTIPACM[

ϙ

... τὸ]ν cross? ἐπιούσιον ...

... εἰσενέ]νικis ἡμᾶς εἰς πῖρασμ[όν ...

Staurogram

#### Reconstruction

[πάτερ ἡμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, ἀγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομά σου, ἐλθέτω ἡ βασιλεία σου, γενηθήτω τὸ θέλημά σου, ὡς ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς. Τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸ]ν ἐπιούσιον δὸς ἡμῖν σήμερον· καὶ ἄφεσις ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν, ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν· καὶ μὴ εἰσενέ]νικis ἡμᾶς εἰς πῖρασμ[όν, ἀλλὰ ῥῦσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ.]  
Staurogram.

#### Translation

... (our) daily ...

... lead us (not) into temptation ...

Staurogram

#### Translation of reconstructed text

[Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our] daily [bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And] lead us not into temptation, [but deliver us from evil.] Staurogram. (English Standard Version Bible translation)

Line 1: it is not entirely clear if the marking before ε of ἐπιούσιον is a letter, a cross or just damage; we interpret it as a cross. An alternative reading of the same text could be ἡμῶ]ν τ(ὸν) ἐπιούσιον.

Line 2: the surviving ending -νικis should be completed as (εἰσενέ]νικis, a misspelled type for the correct verb in aor. subj. εἰσενέγκης. The verb is commonly misspelled in similar inscriptions, such as in *ICG* 4063, where it is attested as εἰσενέκεις. The simplified orthography of πῖρασμὸν > πειρασμὸν is also common, as in *RIGCE* 357.

Line 3: a *tau-rho* ligature forming a staurogram. This pictogram functioned, probably from the fourth century onward, as a visual reference to the crucified Jesus (Dinkler-von Schubert 1995; Hurtado 2006; Garipzanov 2018: 27–30). The staurogram at the end may not have been the only addition, as can be seen in another example from Megara (*ICG* 4063), where a similar staurogram at the end of the Lord's Prayer text is preceded by the invocation κύριε.

#### The inscription and the text

The text is written in a steady majuscule script. The letters are upright and slightly elongated as part of the etching process. Although it is difficult to ascribe certain script styles to graffito inscriptions, the text appears to follow an uncial type of script, usually dated between the fourth and seventh centuries (Bischoff 2009: 91–107). Of the preserved letters, the most interesting is the form of *eta* resembling a Latin *h* with elongated vertical left arm typical of uncial script.

This type of Greek *eta* resembling the Latin *h* can be traced in connection with official, judicial and administrative documents already from the late third and fourth centuries (Cavallo 2008: 121–22) and further evolved in Greek cursive alphabets in late Roman and early Byzantine papyri (Thompson 2013: 187). It is not uncommon for this *eta* to be used in Greek epigraphy, as in a fifth-century funerary monument from the Via Latina in Rome (Felle 2008: 175–77). Occasionally we see this type of *eta* in a different Byzantine epigraphic context even after the sixth century: in official texts with the practice of rendering Greek texts in Latin lettering for specific passages, such

as the imperial titles (Rhoby 2019: 277–78). Well-known examples are found on coins and seals issued by the imperial administration (Morrisson 1991) or in imperial rescripts like the sixth-century example of Justinian I from Didyma (Feissel 2004). The *h*-like *eta* found on the sherd discussed here is not unique in early Byzantine Greek inscriptions found at Amorium. We can trace it in two stone inscriptions, one certainly a Christian tombstone, that use a mix of Latin and Greek characters for their Greek text dating to the fifth or sixth century (Lightfoot et al. 2017: 59, cat. no. 146, 148).

The surviving text from the inscribed plate or bowl, although short, is easily recognisable as part of the Lord's Prayer in Greek as attested in the Gospels of Luke 11:2–4 and Matthew 6:9–13. The second line reproduces a part existing in both versions of the prayer, Luke 11:4 and Matthew 6:13: μή εισενέλῃς ἡμᾶς εἰς πρᾶσμιόν. This identification further facilitates the reading of the rest of the surviving text in the first line as τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τ(ὸν) ἐπιούσιον, a text found again in both the Lukan (11:3) and the Matthean (6:11) versions of the prayer. Thus, based on the surviving text, it is impossible to establish which of these two versions of the Lord's Prayer was inscribed on the plate from Amorium.

Nonetheless, in most of the known inscribed parallels that will be examined in the following discussion we encounter the text from the Gospel of Matthew. Especially in the early Christian tradition of the use of the Lord's Prayer text as an apotropaic or amuletic device, the typical text chosen is Matthew's version (Calhoun 2020: 419). For this reason, the tentative reconstruction for the graffito text from Amorium follows Matthew's version, since it probably belongs to the same tradition.

### The inscribed object

Open-form pottery vessels of fine ware bearing incised inscriptions were not uncommon in late Roman and early Byzantine times. Red-slip plates in particular, or their larger sherds, offered wide, relatively flat and straight surfaces for incising texts. Sometimes with *post cocturam* etching of the letters, the inscription could become particularly visible because of the contrast between the slipped surface and the deep cut through to the body clay. The case of pottery vessels acting as writing boards is well demonstrated by the famous Roman and late Roman graffito plates of La Graufesenque in southern France (Marichal 1988), where the inscriptions were written in parallel lines on a part of the plate only. Some fine examples of this practice of using ceramic plates as a 'sheet' or writing slab can be seen from sixth-century Sagalassos in Pisidia, such as a large rim fragment of a fine-ware, red-slip serving tray from the upper agora with acclamations for the local guild or faction of the *Michaelitai* (Waelkens, Owens 1994: 179–80;

Talloon 2011: 590; 2019; *CSLA* E00917), or in a more recently excavated set of plates with inscribed lists of goods from the city's *macellum* (Waelkens et al. 2015: 39). For these types of examples, it is difficult to imagine them still being functional tableware items, since the inscriptions usually served purposes other than those intended for the plates (eating, decoration, votive offerings), but also because the plates' etched, and thus damaged, surfaces would no longer be suitable for serving foodstuffs.

Closer to the character of the Amorium sherd might be an early Byzantine ostrakon from Hierapolis in Phrygia containing an invocation or short biblical passage mentioning the Apostles, although this was incised on the exterior of a coarse-ware closed vessel (Arthur 2006: 121; Ritti 2017: 228; *ICG* 934; *CSLA* E01153).

Even from a small piece of inscribed pottery such as that from Amorium, we can deduce useful information about the object carrying the inscription and the inscription's arrangement on it. Of the two surviving lines of text, the second clearly follows a curved axis that largely coincides with the curvature of the ring base of the sherd. This indicates that the original inscription would have probably continued in several lines in a circular or semicircular manner around the plate's inner surface. The existence of the staurogram in the middle of our sherd might be an indicator, acting as a vertical axis, of how the object and its inscription would have been displayed and read. Such an arrangement of the text, running around the plate's centre, recalls another well-known type of late antique inscribed open vessel: the Aramaic or Syriac incantation bowls (Naveh, Shaked 1987: 26–29; Levene 2003: 1–3). These vessels bore painted inscriptions that spiralled in circles around the centre of the bowls from the bottom upwards.

In the case of the Amorium graffito plate the inscription might rather have been written in semicircular lines centred on the existing staurogram. This is further suggested by the segments of the text in the two surviving lines. If the curvature of the second line is considered, together with the size of the letters and the positional relationship between the words ἐπιούσιον and πρᾶσμιόν in the Lord's Prayer text, it can be posited that the text on the plate would have run in three or more semicircular, or circular, lines.

It is not easy to reconstruct the intended use of the Amorium inscribed plate or bowl bearing the Lord's Prayer. As noted above, other cases of late Roman and early Byzantine inscribed plates acquire a different, or at least an extra, function with the incision of the text. What is clear is that the addition of the Christian inscription to the plate's surface transformed the mundane object into something new, something special and sacred, bestowing it with new qualities: apotropaic, amuletic and prayer-focused. This was not a simple writing exercise or note.

### Making inscriptions of the Lord's Prayer

The relatively common and widespread use of the Lord's Prayer (hereafter 'LP') after its first appearance in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke in the wider early Christian and medieval world has been the subject of an immense number of theological, exegetical, church historical and other kinds of studies (Dorneich 1982; Ayo 1992; Clark 2016). The text of the LP appears in many works of the Early Church Fathers and is commented on by authors from Origen to John Chrysostom and beyond (Froehlich 2008; Hammerling 2010). Of particular importance for our analysis is the presence of the LP in the *Didachē*, a late first- or early second-century work focusing on the educative and liturgical process of baptising and incorporating into the Church the newly baptised. In *Didachē* chapter 8 it is noted that Christians are expected to pray three times a day with the words of the LP (Rordorf, Tuilier 1978: 36–38, 172–75; Schöllgen, Geerlings 2000: 48–49, 118–21). The presence of LP in the *Didachē* beyond personal prayer can be related to the early Christian liturgy of the Eucharist and the preparation of the bread and wine (Rordorf 1980). Again, here the personal act of prayer and the liturgical use of prayer seem to be intertwined and difficult to compartmentalise.

This division is reflected also in the possible uses of the Amorium LP plate and the question of whether it could have had a liturgical or a domestic use. However, the precise use probably cannot be clearly defined, as food-related religious practices in Christianity are numerous and take place both in church and home settings, from eucharistic blessings on the altar to simple prayers at the dinner table (McGowan 1999). Unfortunately, the size of the sherd and its state of preservation do not assist us in identifying any use-marks on its surface.

It is indeed possible that the Amorium vessel inscribed with the LP could have had some liturgical use in a modest setting, perhaps for the consecration and distribution of the eucharistic bread (Galavaris 1970). However, one would logically expect much more elaborate vessels to be used, such as the specially commissioned metal patens and *diskoi* that are often inscribed and usually identified as such in early Byzantine contexts (Mundell Mango 1990).

A small fifth- or sixth-century clay bread stamp (diameter 7.2cm) (fig. 3), kept at the Benaki Museum in Athens and originating from Egypt, offers some additional insight (Galavaris 1970: 47–48, fig. 22). The bread stamp carries an inscription with the invocation τὸν ἄρτον εἰμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον κύριε χάρισε εἰμῶν, which echoes the second verse of the LP and so establishes a concrete material connection between the content of the LP and the consecration of bread. But, as George Galavaris notes (1970: 47–48), such a stamp could equally have been used 'on ordinary bread placed on the table of a Christian family



Fig. 3. Clay bread stamp from Egypt (© Benaki Museum, Athens; with permission).

whose daily meals possibly began with a recitation of the Lord's Prayer' or on 'a loaf of bread offered to church in order to be consecrated and used for the Eucharist'. Indeed, it has been long noticed that it is almost impossible to discern between ordinary tableware items and those used in church, unless there is a clear context indicating one use or the other (Taft 1996: 214). And even the best-known terracotta inscribed vessels that apparently are connected with the liturgy are 13th- and 14th-century late Byzantine ceramic chalices usually found inside burials as funerary goods, which probably imitate the actual metal originals used in the liturgy (Iverson 2000b; 2001).

The plate from Amorium with the LP inscription seems more likely to have been used in a non-liturgical environment, as there is no archaeological evidence connecting it closely to an ecclesiastical setting. Within a domestic context such a plate, in addition to a possible particular food-related religious function, could have acquired through the inscription an additional apotropaic or protective function (Foskolou 2014; de Bruyn 2017), like inscriptions that were often included on tableware to protect their users (Łajtar, Pluskota 2001; Felle 2006: 130 cat. no. 218).

Another possibility is to regard the Amorium plate as solely a frame for the inscribed text, either as an apotropaic item for the entire *oikos* or even as a reading aid and focus for the actual performance of reciting the prayer. This might mean that the plate could have been displayed, perhaps upright on a shelf or even hung up with the use of a drilled hole near the now lost rim. In any case, the red-slip tableware, by the careful incision of the graffiti inscription on its surface, certainly lost much of its previous character as an exclusively utilitarian object and became a venerable item of the 'household'.

Another early Christian aspect of the written tradition of the LP has also long been noted, namely the visual use of its written form as an apotropaic or prophylactic element with amuletic qualities (de Bruyn 2017: 157–65). Two recent articles by scholars of early Christianity, Thomas J. Kraus (2006) and Robert Matthew Calhoun (2020), offer detailed catalogues of the surviving early Christian LP manuscripts, mostly on papyri but also inscriptions and textual evidence on other media such as small finds. The scopes of the two studies are different, but, at the same time, they complement and supplement each other. Kraus tries to move away from the older approach that examined these written or inscribed texts as ‘simply witnesses to that text itself’, as the title of his study suggests, and attempts to examine the different functions of these scriptural remains. Calhoun has progressed the field of research by ascribing a true material and ideological role to many of these LP writings by identifying in them a clear amuletic function and thus offering a framework for understanding the creation, circulation and use of the written versions of the LP on papyri and in inscriptions.

Calhoun (2020) provides the most up-to-date catalogue of inscribed artefacts with the LP, having collected 20 objects in various materials dating from the third to the eighth century from various parts of the early Christian world. The catalogue includes 15 entries connected with actual writing (12 papyri, one parchment, two wooden tablets), three entries of inscriptions (an inscribed clay tablet, an inscription in stone and a dipinto inscription on wall plaster) and, finally, two pieces of jewellery (a bronze pendant and an engraved agate gemstone). The great majority of the artefacts discussed so far comprise written documents (papyri and wooden tablets for writing), and their amuletic character has been well documented, including the use of the LP as a protective or therapeutic tool through its combination with other ‘scriptural prayers, doxologies, Gospel-incipits, *voces magicae*, symbols, etc.’ (Calhoun 2020: 424). Kraus (2006: 253) argues that some of the papyri were intentionally made as amulets, others were used as amulets following a change from their original purpose and others were not amulets at all: they were school exercises or loose leaves from liturgical books.

As well as papyri, inscriptions carried the LP, too, in a wide range of materials and scales, from monumental inscriptions in stone to graffiti on various media; this is the sub-category into which the Amorium inscribed sherd falls. As Kraus (2006: 252–53) has already noted, these inscriptions do not easily conform to the mostly amuletic character of the papyri fragments, and so they need to be examined separately. Thus the following discussion aims to comment on and interpret these inscriptions, as a context for the LP inscription from Amorium.

The first inscription is a section, measuring 13.5cm by 12cm, of a clay tablet with the LP text (*ICG* 4063) from Megara near Athens (fig. 4). Only part of the original inscribed surface is preserved on the bottom-right fragment from a larger clay tablet that originally would have measured approximately 23cm by 19cm. The Megara LP text is also based on that of the Gospel of Matthew 6:9–13. It is probably the best-known epigraphic example of the LP and has been discussed extensively in the literature since the beginning of the 20th century (Knopf 1900; 1901; Preisendanz, Henrichs 1973–1974: 2.211; Guarducci 1978: 336–37; Felle 2006: 258, cat. no. 559), initially for its importance in the tradition of the Gospel text (Nestle 1901: 347–49; Gregory 1908: 42–43, cat. no. 0152; *contra* Aland, Aland 1995: 106, 123) but also as an inscribed prophylactic artefact intended to protect its holders through prayer (Wilcken 1901: 430–36; Kern 1913: tab. 50; Jalabert 1914: cols 1745–47; Deissmann 1923: 43; Peterson, Marksches 2012: 53–54; Van Haelst 1976: cat. no. 348; Feissel 1984: 231; Horsley 1987: 191; Kraus 2006: cat. no. 4; Calhoun 2020: 421, cat. no. I.2). It was originally deposited at the National Archaeological Museum of Athens without any indication of its origin, except that it was bought from a young boy in Megara in the last decade of the 19th century, and it is now kept in the Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens (Gkiolos 2002: 96). The writing on the Megara tablet was made in such a way that the letters were incised with a pointed

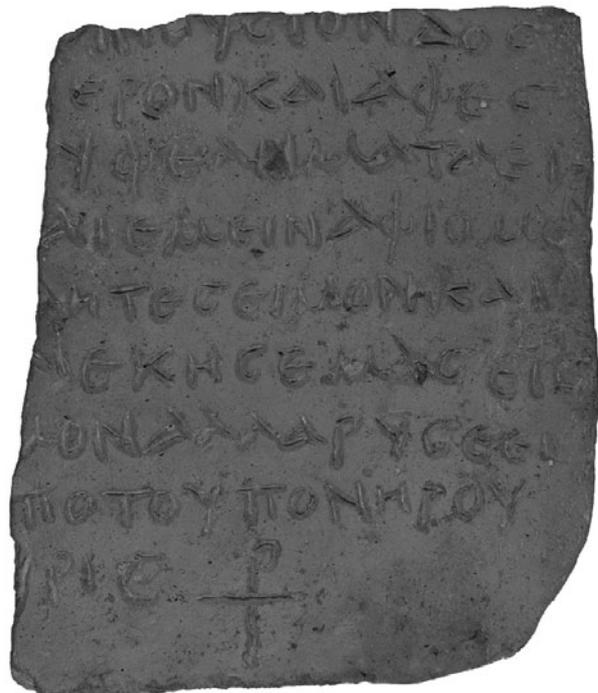


Fig. 4. Inscribed clay tablet from Megara (© Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports, Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens; with permission).

instrument onto the still-wet clay, as into a wax tablet, and then set by firing the clay tablet (Knopf 1900: 313; Deissmann 1923: 29–30 n. 5). Thus, the Megara tablet was apparently made specifically in order to exhibit the text, probably for it to be hung on a wall or propped up vertically on a base, resembling the handling and positioning of an image or an icon (Mathews, Muller 2016). The size and format of the original orthogonal tablet also point to such a use. Interestingly, the text on the tablet closes with an invocation to the Lord (κύριε) followed also by a staurogram at the very end, and it might additionally have contained a request for personal salvation. In the earliest editions of the text, Rudolf Knopf (1901) and Karl Preisendanz (first edition 1931; repeated in Preisendanz, Henrichs 1973–1974) proposed a dating of the inscribed tablet in the fourth century, based on letter forms, the staurogram, the absence of doxology at the end and the orthography; in more recent editions, Margherita Guarducci (1978) and Antonio Felle (2006) point to a later date, probably in the fifth century.

The Megara LP tablet is significant to our discussion for one more reason: historically, it represents an artefact with a graffito that transcends the category of inscriptions on *instrumenta domestica* and crosses into the category of monumental inscriptions. Already in the 1920s Adolf Deissmann (1923: 29–30 n. 5) had pointed out that the clay tablet of Megara is not a ‘tablet’, meaning an ephemeral note or writing exercise, and should be included in the epigraphic corpora, as it was inscribed with care and then fired to make the writing permanent. This makes it ‘not a fragment of a broken vessel, not a true ostrakon’ (Deissmann 1910: 48 n. 2) but more than that: a proper inscribed item, a house benediction. This is largely the view also of Felle (2006: 258), who catalogues it as an inscription of ‘*instrumentum devotionalis*’. It is really not possible to categorise the Megara LP tablet as a writing exercise or a note, as it was purposely inscribed before it was baked, thereby transforming the written passage into a permanent textual icon.

The second epigraphic example of the text of the LP is a dipinto painted in large capital letters on the wall plaster of a funerary chapel southwest of the necropolis of el-Bagawat in the Kharga Oasis, Egypt (*RIGCE* 357; *SEG* 38.1697; Wagner 1987: 62–63, pl. XXIV). The painted text preserves at least two verses of the LP and, judging by its location inside the chapel, it should be regarded as an act of prayer, perhaps supplemented with a personal request for salvation for one of the deceased (Lefebvre 1908: 182–3; Peterson, Marksches 2012: 52–55; Horsley 1983: 103–5; Kraus 2006: 252). No precise date has been proposed so far for the dipinto, but, based on its form and context, it should be attributed to the early Byzantine period.

The only inscription with clear monumental intentions bearing the Greek text of the LP is one in stone from al-Moufaggar near Emesa, Syria (*JGLSyr* 5.2546). This is a large, finely cut, inscribed architrave limestone block originating from an unknown monument that was found reused in a rock-cut mill or tomb (Mouterde 1932: 476, fig. 21; Felle 2006: 147–48, cat. no. 268; Kraus 2006: 252; Calhoun 2020: 424, cat. no. III.1). In the middle of the orthogonal architrave, a large disk was carved containing a Greek cross. Flanking the centrally positioned disk, a long inscription is cut in exergue containing the full text of the Matthew 6:9–13 LP and a request for the salvation of an official, probably a *comes*, by the name of Silvanus. Within the circle of the cross and on the two sides of its lower arm a second individual by the name of Helenis or Helenios is mentioned. The text on the inscribed architrave, where an acclamation is conjoined to the text of the LP, clearly becomes an actual prayer and the block must have originated from a private monument (Felle 2006: 147–48). Judging by the size and style of the architrave and its inscription, the associated monument might have been connected to an ecclesiastic building or a larger complex. It can be dated to the sixth or seventh century.

To the three objects discussed above, we can now add a recently discovered bronze processional cross from the Andritsa Cave near Argos in the Peloponnese (fig. 5). It bears the entire text of Matthew’s version of the LP, inscribed twice, once on each face of the cross and covering the entire surface across its four arms (Chatzilazarou, Metaxas 2016). The archaeological context of the large bronze processional cross (measuring ca 31 cm by 19 cm) is unique. It was found inside the cave among various other objects belonging to a small local rural community of 40 individuals who were trapped and died there (Kormazopoulou, Chatzilazarou 2005; McCormick 2016: 1008–9; Curta 2021: 294). Based on other finds from the cave (coins, pottery, etc.) (Kormazopoulou, Chatzilazarou 2010), the inscribed cross can be securely dated to around AD 600, a date that follows closely the stylistic evolution of metal processional crosses (Chatzilazarou, Metaxas 2016). The inscriptions on the cross have not yet been edited, and a full publication of the artefact along with the other cave finds is in preparation, but the cross is exhibited in the Byzantine Museum of Argos and included in the museum’s catalogue.

The text starts on both sides from the upper arm of the cross, continues to the left arm, then the right arm and concludes on the lower arm. Both sides carry an identical version of Matthew’s LP text. In the centre of the cross, each side is decorated with a bust of a bearded Christ stamped on the metal. Early Byzantine processional crosses bearing inscriptions, usually short invo-



Fig. 5. Bronze processional cross from Andritsa Cave near Argos (© Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports, Ephorate of Antiquities of Argolis, Byzantine Museum of Argolis; with permission).

cations, or donor *ex votos* are quite common (Cotsonis 1994; Nagel 2014). The cross from the Andritsa Cave, however, is exceptional in carrying such a long prayer text and, in particular, the full LP. The LP text is vigorously exhibited as the main element of religious decoration, encompassing the bust of Christ and being framed by the cross shape of the object itself. Additionally, the Andritsa cross does not follow most of the other known examples of early Byzantine processional crosses, as there is no mention of a donor's name, making it one of a kind.

These examples do not cover the Latin inscriptional tradition of the LP, which is unfortunately not as well known. Antonio Felle in his catalogue in *Biblia Epigraphica* (2006: 326, no. 687) includes a single Latin inscription in stone from el-Kef in Tunisia with a verse paraphrase of the Matthean version of the LP (6:13). Being a paraphrase and still in need of documentation, it is not included in the discussion here.

## Discussion

The plate from Amorium stands apart when compared to these other examples, as it is the only known small object with the LP text scratched on its surface. The first step in understanding the artefact and its use has been to identify the text (LP) and the object (an early Byzantine red-slip fineware plate or bowl), but its use and function need further discussion in order to move towards a better understanding of early Christian religious practices through material culture. The Amorium plate must once have been a complete and intact object, which had a secondary life that began when the text was scratched onto its surface.

The possibility that the sherd was part of a writing exercise, during which it was by chance inscribed, does not seem plausible. The LP was indeed used in early Byzantine writing exercises by young students, as is attested on both wooden tablets and papyri from Egypt, such as a seventh-century wooden tablet from Antinoopolis, now in the Louvre (*SEG* 64.1913; Cribiore 1996: 252–53, no. 322; Kraus 2006: 248, cat. no. 15; Calhoun 2020: 422, cat. no. I.8), another example from Qarara, dating to the eighth century and now kept in Heidelberg (Kraus 2006: 248–50, cat. no. 16, fig. 7–8; Calhoun 2020: 422, no. I.9), and a papyrus double leaf in the Ashmolean (Cribiore 1996: 273, cat. no. 387). But, in the case of the Amorium sherd, the steady writing of a learned hand with no real spelling errors aside from itacisms can clearly be observed, precluding the possibility of this having been a student's writing exercise. Additionally, the LP inscription must have covered much of the original plate, and so it must have been intact when it was inscribed.

The Amorium sherd is more akin to the Megara tablet, as it is not an ostrakon that in secondary use simply bore part of an inscription on it (Deissmann 1923: 29–30 n. 5). It is rather an object transformed into a new, completely different entity, a simple, fine plate transformed into a house amulet. It became an object guarding the *oikos* it was in and was used as a literary tool of focus for the recitation of the prayer (Yasin 2015), a material 'icon' of the holy Word itself.

The process of transference of a prayer's text from the documentary universe to the materiality of the household (or any building) can be observed in a spectacular example. In Phrygian Hierapolis, which is not too far from Amorium, in a room of a sixth-century domestic building, the text of the Prayer of Manasseh, an apocryphal penitential text, was painted in large, coloured letters around the inner walls (D'Andria et al. 2005–2006; Cacitti 2007; Mastrocinque 2008; Ritti 2019; Zaccaria Ruggiu 2019). The purpose of this exceeded just penance; it had a clear protective role aimed at warding off the wrath of God

toward sinners. It is a not uncommon practice, as shown by another inscription of the Prayer of Manasseh from Mylasa in Caria (*IK* 35, 956; Felle 2006: 219, cat. no. 467) and, even more so, by various early Christian prayers found inscribed as protective measures on walls of rooms, both of cultic and domestic use (Felle 2006: cat. nos 22, 23, 34, 35, 251).

To return to the LP plate from Amorium, its original setting is uncertain: whether it was that of a household or an ecclesiastical environment. An ecclesiastical setting seems less likely for several reasons. First, even small community churches seem to have been able to afford the creation of holy vessels and assorted tableware usually in gold, silver, bronze or glass, as is attested from descriptions but also by hundreds of surviving objects (Mundell Mango 1986; 1990). Moreover, these holy vessels often carry invocations, parts of prayers or simple donor inscriptions, but none has been identified so far with the LP (apart from the processional cross from the Andritsa Cave discussed earlier). So, it seems reasonable to view the object at the household level when seeking a context for the Amorium LP plate.

The apotropaic and protective character of the LP in the personal amulets made of papyri is well established for early Christian textual amulets, a practice with its roots in Graeco-Roman customary practice (Foskolou 2014; de Bruyn 2017: 2–11). The epigraphical material presented here along with the Amorium LP plate, although not extensive, makes it possible to argue that the protective properties of the LP textual amulets could have transcended the universe of papyri into different types of inscriptions. The written form of a prayer played multiple roles: on one level it was an act of consecration of the item; for the bearer of the item, it was an icon of the prayer, and thus functioned as a visual sign; and, finally, it was a call to read the letters and words and thus recite the prayer.

The examples presented here provide evidence for the complex ways that the LP text could have functioned in a public or semi-public epigraphical context. In the funerary inscriptions of Emesa and el-Bagawat we can observe that the personal protection sought through the LP textual amulets in the earthly life developed into protection in the afterlife, announcing publicly to the guardians of the afterlife and the earthly visitors to the tomb that the deceased is an initiate. The clay tablet from Megara and the inscribed plate from Amorium probably belong to a different context, in which the inscribed objects functioned as house amulets, expanding protection to the whole household. The Andritsa Cave cross seems to have yet another function: here, the LP text has a fully public and ecclesiastical character, and its amuletic properties extend to cover the entire community

of the faithful that gathered under the protection of the cross, literally inscribed on each side. The artefact merged the prayer of the community with the sign of its hope of deliverance, the cross.

These religious practices seem to co-exist or overlap in time and space, showcasing the various ways that personal or communal piety of the early Christian communities was expressed across a wide timeframe, from the fourth to the seventh century, and in a geographic area covering Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor and mainland Greece. These practices are often difficult to follow and understand because of the lack of evidence or because of their localised character. The detailed documentation of the small, inscribed sherd from Amorium and the few syllables that were written on its surface offer an important addition to the unravelling of the materiality of everyday prayer, inside and outside the church, for Christians in the early Byzantine world.

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IGLS 5 = Jalabert, L., Mouterde, R. 1959: *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie 5: Emesène*. Paris, Geuthner

IK 35 = Blümel, W. 1972: *Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien 35: Die Inschriften von Mylasa*. Bonn, Habelt

RIGCE = Lefebvre, G. 1907: *Recueil des inscriptions grecques-chrétiennes d'Égypte*. Cairo, Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale

SEG = Chaniotis, A., Corsten, T., Stavrianopolou, E., Papazarkadas, N. (eds) 2009–: *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum Online*. Leiden, Brill. <https://scholarlyeditions.brill.com/sego>

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