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Echoes of Constantinople: Rewriting the Byzantine Soundscape in Travel Accounts

Marie-Emmanuelle Torres¹

I. Introduction

Travel stories are quite divided about Byzantium: it is a brilliant empire, an oversized capital overwhelmed by luxury and splendour, but it is also populated by treacherous Greeks. All these texts draw a popular image of Byzantine life, splendour, and excessiveness. These literary testimonies are, however, quite difficult to approach, for several reasons. First of all, context obviously modulates travel experience. Merchants are just passing through to go much further. Ambassadors are expected to report back on what they have seen, heard, and discovered. Pilgrims evoke their religious experience while guiding future travellers. All of them report the novelties and wonders they have seen. For some of them, it is just curiosity notes; for others, it is a way to measure the value of the Empire, whether it is a friend or rival. The traveller's cultural background is also important. All witnesses report the great impression the Byzantine power left on them, except for the Crusaders, who were obsessed with the triple fault of the Byzantines (perfidy, treachery, and effeminacy). At last, there are also the writer's literary choices, since these texts can serve multiple purposes and multiple audiences.

Faced with such a difficulty of analysis, we may try to go back to the basics. First and foremost, otherness is discovered through senses. All these texts are in fact built on a sensory experience, which is, for the most part, both visual and aural. Writers tell what they have seen, heard, and even felt. Some of them speak about sound like any other attraction. Others talk about it to create a specific literary (re)creation of Byzantine culture. In fact, the sound experience and its literary transcription might create a “pop” knowledge of Constantinople.

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The recent boom of sound studies proves that an auroral approach is legitimate.² The aural dimension has been evoked in Byzantine otherness studies, but in a quick way.³ The Empire might provide a suitable field of research. Social, religious, and imperial rituals are all strongly sonorous, making a solid impression on foreigners. There, strangers discover odd new music. Consequently, travel accounts can be valuable sources to complement Byzantine sources and to shed light on the effect this official music produces. Therefore, in this paper, we will research the Constantinopolitan sounds travellers heard and choose to recall. Then, we will try to understand how these echoes can enlighten real and literary experiences of Byzantine otherness.

II. A religious capital city

The striking aural impression seems to be more generally related to the church. The Capital is like a “reliquary-city” one visits as a curious visitor or as a devoted pilgrim: everywhere religious chants resound.

1. Some pilgrimage experiences

Pilgrims make a liturgical tour to visit each church and to test each office. Usually, pilgrims to the Holy Land spend only a short time in Constantinople, devoting most of their descriptions to the Holy Places. Only Russian pilgrims describe extensively Constantinople, which they believed to be the New Jerusalem. As in the Holy Land, there are guided tours and report-writing templates. Anthony of Novgorod, Stephen of Novgorod, Ignatius of Smolensk, Alexander the clerk... all of them evoke the same sanctuaries, the same relics, the same songs. They are religious tourists, prepared for what they are going to see.

However, the stories of Anthony, Stephen, and Ignatius are enriched by personal accounts of their emotions and remarks. These three texts

² R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World: Toward a Theory of Soundscape Design* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1977); *Le paysage sonore de l'Antiquité*, ed. S. Émerit et al. (Le Caire: Publication de l'IFAO, 2015); *Les paysages sonores*, ed. L. Hablot et al. (Rennes: PUR, 2015); J.P. Gutton, *Bruits et sons dans notre histoire* (Paris: PUF, 2000); B. Pentcheva, *Aural Architecture in Byzantium: Music, Acoustics, and Ritual* (Aldershot: Routledge, 2017); *Knowing Bodies, Passionate Souls. Senses Perceptions in Byzantium*, ed. S. Ashbrook Harvey and M. Mullet (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2017).

³ K.N. Ciggaar, *Western Travelers to Constantinople* (Leiden-New York-Cologne: Brill, 1996); M. Carrier, *L'autre chrétien pendant les croisades* (Saarbrücken: EUE, 2012).

are particularly rich in sound evocations. They are built on the more or less detailed evocation of places, relics, liturgical objects, practices, and emotions. Sound is everywhere, so much so that it seems to sound in their ears. These Russian pilgrims attended various services, followed numerous processions, and prayed in front of many relics. Devotion and excitement are apparent; accounts are full of lyricism, emotion, and sensorial impressions. These texts evoke the same echoes of hymns, cries, and vibrant prayers one can hear in Jerusalem. These pilgrims expect to find the same atmosphere, the same fervour, the same liturgical practices. They fully feel all liturgies.

Let us follow Anthony of Novgorod. This layman, the future Bishop of Novgorod, came to visit the Capital in May 1200. His account is a typical pilgrimage report: he lists the places he saw, the offices he attended, the relics he kissed. He is interested only in the liturgical circuit and he does not talk about other aspects of the city life. His conclusion sheds light on his writing motivations: he has to write for pilgrims since, without a guide, Constantinople is a vast forest where the stranger can lose himself. Therefore, his aim is above all practical, but his style goes beyond this rather dry framework. His account is exhaustive and is clearly the liveliest of all: it is full of the sounds, sensations, and emotions that emerge during this liturgical journey. It may be due to his personal writing style, but in doing so, he creates a specific literary experience of Byzantium liturgy.

In *Hagia Sophia*, he attends the procession of what looks like the Tablets of Law, which is performed by the clergy.⁴ He describes the scene, the gestures and then he depicts the atmosphere. Everybody is weeping, moved, and greatly humbled, the priests are filled with fear and respect. Anthony is fully moved by the Patriarch humility and compunction: this state of mind seems to be best way to perfection. Indeed, all the monastic *typika* constantly repeat the importance of compunction: one must pray with fear, both like a trembling servant and a mourning widow. This mourning spirit explains the emotionally charged atmosphere: people groan and weep over their sins, repeating the *Kyrie eleison* hundreds of times, in all voices, often with tears in the eyes. Cries, begging, compunction are clearly expected during Byzantine liturgies, especially in front of the most sacred relics. The *Kyrie* resounds

⁴ Anthony of Novgorod, *Pilgrim book*, ed. Loparev and trans. M. Ehrhard, "Le livre du pèlerin Antoine de Novgorod," *Romania* 58-229 (1932): 44-65, here 54.

almost like a mantra. In this feverish atmosphere, one sings hymns and psalms.

2. *Feeling the divine*

One of the liturgical tour usual stops is the *Theotokos Hodegetria* church, to see the image St Luke is said to have painted. This icon is famous for its history and for the miracle it performs every Tuesday. In 1348-49, Stephane of Novgorod also came to this church with some friends. He is even more explicit than Anthony.⁵ The office seems quite simple: several men must carry the heavy and very large icon. It is so heavy that it has to be a miraculous action. In fact, the miracle is created by the celebration itself. The monks sing “a very beautiful chant in front of it, while all the people cry out with tears, ‘*Kyrie eleison*!’” They sing, implore, weep, beg, cry... all at the same time. *Kyrie*, hymns, and cries call for divine action and help the icon bearers. It is both a collective and liturgical moment, and, more importantly, it is a great sound experience. In this moment, all senses are needed, but the hearing is highly stimulated. All these pilgrims transcribe it and, doing so, spread an emotionally and acoustic rich experience of Constantinople.

They feel the Divine collectively visiting the most important sanctuaries and relics. Everything here seems to be extraordinary, even the offices. The pilgrim’s tour follows a dozen of stages, the offices last all night, the choirs sing all day long, the crowd is very numerous... and everyone is suffering together as one heart. The literary translation of these sound liturgical experiences is made very lively and vibrant by using many details and a very touching and sensory style. Here, the pilgrim’s story clearly serves as much to inform as to continue the pilgrim’s lived experience even after going back home. This is clearly stated by Anthony of Novgorod when he exhorts his readers to remember and to imitate this peculiar way of attending liturgy.⁶ By this writing, these texts prepare the future pilgrim for all the multi-sensory experiences that await him and guide those who will only go on a mental/interior journey.

Other witnesses remain more descriptive. Ruy Gonzáles de Clavijo, sent to Tamerlane’s court for Henry III of Castile, writes about his visit

⁵ Stephen of Novgorod, *Wanderer*, trans. G.P. Majeska, *Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2007), 30-36.

⁶ Anthony of Novgorod, *Pilgrim book*, 64.

to Constantinople during the fall of 1403. He follows a guided tour and describes these same two important stops.⁷ In the *Hodegetria* church, he also notices the “prayers and devotions with sobbing and wailing.” He is genuinely convinced of the miraculous action, but never uses an exalted tone. It is not his style, neither the aim of his story. He is a Latin, but this description proves that he has been marked by the sound liturgy.

3. *The voice of angels*

In this atmosphere, one hears constant singing. Obviously, as the pilgrim goes from one site to another, he is offered a continuous liturgical experience. But generally speaking, in Byzantium, the Sacred Chanting is intended to be uninterrupted. Monastic life seeks to imitate the angelic practices.⁸ Monks must therefore spend their time singing like angels in order for their singing be effective. This music’s almost-angelic dimension is well-known among the Byzantines, but the same idea can be found in foreign accounts.

This seems quite normal among Russian pilgrims: the compunction Anthony and Stephen noticed is matched by Man’s unspeakable joy praising his God. This so-called “rejoice with trembling” state of mind seems to be provided by the singers’ voices.⁹ In the *Theotokos Bebaia Elpis* monastery, the founder Theodora Synadenos clearly demands that the chanting nuns “stand consumed with fear and much trembling, with contrition weeping for the sins.”¹⁰ She is not the only one to say so: since hymns are above all musical prayers, nuns and monks have to adopt one and only attitude: that of the angels. Thus, Anthony of Novgorod hears the *Orthros* at *Hagia Sophia* and says the choir sings as harmoniously and softly as the angels.¹¹ When the emperor is attending the office, the ritual changes and Anthony has the impression of leaving the Earth, carried by the scent of the incense and by the voices: the singing is as marvellous as that of the angels; it is like being in heaven or in paradise, the Holy Spirit

⁷ Ruy Gonzáles de Clavijo, *Embassy to Tamerlane. 1403-1406*, trans. G. le Strange, (London: Routledge, 1928), 83-84.

⁸ R. Dubowchik, “Singing with the Angels: Foundation Documents as Evidence for Musical Life in Monasteries of the Byzantine Empire,” *DOP* 56 (2002): 277-296.

⁹ Echoes of Ps. 2:11 can be seen in the *typika* of Theotokos Bebaia Elpis (*BMFD*, 116), Theotokos Kosmosoteira (*BMFD*, 834), Theotokos Petritzonitissa (*BMFD*, 58).

¹⁰ Theodora Synadenos, “Theotokos Bebaia Elpis typikon,” in *BMFD*, 1541.

¹¹ Anthony of Novgorod, *Pilgrim book*, 56-57.

fills the soul with joy and gladness. Once again, sound is a part of a Holy experience. Voices, sighs, lights, fragrances, warmth: everything contributes to building an exalted atmosphere anticipating celestial realities.

Under the Palaiologans, Ignatius of Smolensk had the same liturgical experiences and even tasted the greatest of Byzantine imperial ceremonies. He goes to Constantinople with his Bishop for ecclesiastical affairs. He stays there for three years (1389-1392) and describes the churches, services, and relics he sees, as other pilgrims do. On February 11, 1392, he also attends the coronation of Manuel II Palaiologos and evokes this great moment in detail, focusing on the gestures performed at *Hagia Sophia*.¹² He admires the demonstration of the God-given power. He is impressed by the choir and the music. He describes a choir of about twenty singers, all sumptuously dressed and wearing pointed hats. They are led by an old one, with an immaculate beard, and they sing “indecipherable, unusual music.” Ignatius has no words to define this music and this extraordinary experience, exclaiming: “who can express the beauty of this moment?” He might be familiar with Byzantine sounds, since Russian hymnology is built on a common heritage. However, here he discovers very specific songs and a very specific office. This virtuosic music is only performed by the choir’s elite and is excessively adorned with melismas. One again, just like the other Russian pilgrims, Ignatius had an almost mystical experience, moved by the angelic music.

III. Echoes of Byzantine musical practices

We find an almost equally strong observation among Latins, even among the most critical ones. Not only do pilgrims note but even appreciate the vocal prowess of Byzantine choirs. This music intrigues, fascinates, and even inspires a certain emulation.

1. *Pleasant voices*

Since the Carolingian period, Byzantine chant has sparked great interest. But times changed during the Crusades. The Western musical tradition is built around the *organum*. At the end of the twelfth century, the Notre-

¹² Ignatius of Smolensk, *Journey to Constantinople*, trans. Majeska, *Russian*, 106 and 110.

Dame school style and other more complex polyphonies began to flourish. Byzantine music remains resolutely monodic. The melodic intervals are moreover specific. In fact, hearing it, Crusaders discover new and strange musical practices. They are also reluctant to remain objective or moderate in their descriptions. Against this backdrop, one might expect some very sharp criticism about Byzantine chant. On the contrary, they are thrilled. On October 9, 1147, Emperor Manuel I Komnenos sent his cantors to the Crusader camp, in front of the Capital, to perform the liturgy of St. Denis. Louis VII's chaplain, Odo of Deuil, describes the imperial choir vocal performance: "these clerics differed from ours in the words they spoke and in the quality of their voices, but their gentle modulations were very pleasant. The mixture of voices, a stronger voice joining with a clearer voice, a eunuch's voice with a man's voice (for there were many eunuchs among them), was apt to charm the French."¹³ He notes three aspects of Byzantine sacred music: eunuch's voice, Greek musical system, and specific ritual performance. The extraordinary voice of eunuchs obviously fascinates Westerners since it is not common for them and since it is used for a virtuoso repertoire, with movements of the fingers.

Aural chock would have been clearly understandable. Because the ear is accustomed to quite precise intervals and timbres, any novelty may shock or repel. But Odo is not put off: he even finds this new music attractive, maybe because he is a Clunisian? He keeps on denouncing the Byzantine's flaws without any moderation, but he mentions the only thing he appreciates. He even takes the time to describe, explain, and render the musical performance correctly. He does so only twice in his chronicle. He is not indifferent to sounds as he is constantly evoking trumpets and war drums. His description is quite long: it surely reveals his interest, but one can see how he uses it to expose Manuel I's treachery: one more proof that all Byzantine gifts are poisoned, to lose the Crusaders better. Nevertheless, the aural effect must have been significant. Louis VII himself mentions this performance in a letter he sends to Suger. The interest it aroused might explain the creation of a Greek mass which was sung in St Denis Abbey. So, the religious Byzantine soundscape may attract very diverse interests because of its style, its voices, and its high sophistication.

¹³ Odo of Deuil, *De projectione Ludovici VII in Orientem*, trans. J. Brundage, *The Crusades: A Documentary Survey* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1962), 111.

2. *Singing practice in Byzantium*

An indication of its popularity can be found in its frequent literary mention. Travelers should have considered it was something new, interesting, and exotic enough to be recorded. However, these literary echoes remain short. We therefore need to look into Byzantine sources to get details about whatever sounds they remember having heard. The first discovery might have been the singers. Until 1204, the eunuch's voice is specifically used in church and aulic rituals.¹⁴ Singers, who can be identified by their extra-human voice, their rich white robe, and their beardless face, make a huge impression. These eunuchs are professional musicians who have been trained in technical virtuosity and brilliant melodies. After 1204, no trace of singing eunuchs can be found: liturgical and aulic chants are still performed but by bearded singers. Nevertheless, this vocal transformation in no way lessened the vocal skills of cantors and the accounts are equally enthusiastic, as Ignatius of Smolensk describing the remarkable voices he heard at the crowning. For the Byzantines, the choir of eunuchs is defined by white clothes, beardless faces (in a world where the beard is an aesthetic norm), and crystalline voices. Singing endlessly under *Hagia Sophia's* dome, they are an earthly version of the angelic choir.

Travelers do not linger too long on the melodies, yet the style might be quite specific and the harmonies quite strange to foreign ears. Neither do they distinguish between the musical repertoires, which are in fact strictly defined. In monasteries, one hears an ascetic song that must remain simple and severe. The founders are very clear: no eunuchs in the congregation,¹⁵ nor virtuosic, beautiful and sparkling singing. Only in secular church (especially in *Hagia Sophia*) music can be virtuosic, since the melodic beauties can lead the laity to God.¹⁶ The musical difficulty reaches its peak in imperial churches. This rite, which is only performed by the singers' elite, is brilliant. In Palaiologan time, the virtuosity rises even more in the so-called kalophonic style, so full of melismas.

¹⁴ E. Wellesz, *A history of Byzantine music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), 147; N. Moran, "Byzantine castrati," *Plainsong and medieval music* 11:2 (2002): 99-112.

¹⁵ Gregory Pakourianos, "Theotokos Petritzonitissa typikon," in *BMFD*, 541.

¹⁶ Nicephoros Blemmydes, "Ematha typikon," *Idem*, 1204; Nilos Damilas, "Theotokos Pantanassa typikon," *Idem*, 1474; Luke of Messina, "San Salvator typikon," *Idem*, 644.

3. Musical performance

The sacred Byzantine chant thus offers a powerful experience that might have been difficult to put into words. By including it in his story, traveller evokes this Byzantine elsewhere and makes the reader imagine sounds he has never heard before, and even he cannot imagine. No need to go into too much detail describing them: these *are* angelic sounds. All the testimonies agree on this music's sweetness because of the eunuchs' crystalline voice and the melodic style. Byzantine church singing is monodic, unaccompanied and turned towards the angelic pattern. Canon 75 of the Council *In Trullo* had clearly forbidden to shout, to sing loudly and without moderation in the church. Everything has to be structured, guided, and controlled by the choir's voice, which imposes a pure aesthetics and harmony. In this case, the angelic inspiration is the one of the Psalmist, with its softness, delicacy, moderation, simplicity and not the more thunderous one of the Archangels and Seraphims. This delicate atmosphere supports all religious worship and thus colours the singing.

The musical performance is also visual: attitudes, costumes, and gestures complete the powerful impression voices can produce. In 1147 Odo seems as much marked by the voices as by the show given by the choir. He thus evokes some movements of hands that John Brundage translates as a "clapping." But this is more like chironomy: while singing, the singers use their fingers to follow the melody and the vocal movements and to keep the tune. Musical practice is indeed performed from memory, the singing books being rather used by the choirmaster to tell the mode and the beginning of melody. In 1432, Bertrandon de la Broquière is sent by duke Philip of Burgundy as an ambassador in Serbia and in Byzantium. In 1433, he visits the Capital, observes the empress, the polo game, and is intrigued by the singer's clothes and chironomy.¹⁷ His account of Constantinople lingers only for a short time. He is rather enchanted by the Capital's wealth and beauty but takes the time to evoke shortly the clergy, about music. Thus, the performance of this religious chant might have seemed odd and new to him. In fact, generally speaking, travellers seem to remember the Byzantine sung liturgies.

¹⁷ Bertrandon de la Broquière, *The Voyage d'outremer*, trans. Galen R. Kline, (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 105.

IV. The sounds of the Empire

One visits Constantinople and discovers its streets, palaces, buildings, and curiosities. But it is above all the place where the imperial authority is staged. The sound practices of power provoke very different reactions among travellers.

1. Cheers and songs of praise

One of the earliest accounts is that of Liutprand of Cremona. This Lombard diplomat, Bishop of Cremona, was sent twice on a diplomatic mission to Constantinople. On September 17, 949, he comes to conclude a matrimonial alliance for the Marquis of Ivrea Beranger II: it is a great success and quite an experience. He fully enjoys the honour the most powerful Christian prince offers him. He is thrilled, and after his departure on March 31, 960 he writes down in his *Retribution*, using a dithyrambic tone, all that he could have seen and heard. Doing so, he confirms contemporary Byzantine sources, as the *Book of Ceremonies* compiled by Constantine VII Porphyrogenetus around 944-959. When he comes back in 968, from June 4 to October 9, the context is different: so does the account. This mission is a disaster and his second text (*Embassy*) is clearly written with resentment and outrageous criticism. Indeed, he then acted on behalf of Otto I and suffered Byzantine disdain towards his brand-new imperial ambitions. He has been sent to the imperial rival, whom he has to discredit and to mock. All his account is built to prove Ottonian legitimacy by denouncing Byzantine excesses. The aulic pomp is an excellent point of argument. In 968, therefore, after a catastrophic meeting with Nicephoros II Phocas, he is invited to a *proélensis*, the imperial procession. Very frequently, for religious, aulic, or popular celebrations, the emperor walks in a procession through a certain part of the palace and the city, followed by the choir, to be greeted by the crowd. At each stop, he must hear an endless series of songs and cheers. And that is exactly what Liutprand describes.

He takes this unique opportunity to criticize the crowd, the clothes of the inhabitants, then he focuses his mockery on the ritual songs. Sitting with a front row next to the choir, he mocked the rite:

the adulating *psaltas* called out: ‘Here comes the morning star, there arises *Eous*, he reflects the sun’s rays with his glare, the pallid death of the Saracens, Nicephoros the *μῆδων*’ (the

prince). And they sang on, *Μέδοντι* (the prince) ‘Nicephoros, may there be *πολλὰ ἔτη* (many_years)’ [...] How much more accurately they might have sung: “Come, burnt cinder, *μέλας*, old hag in your walk, elfin in your expression, boor, jungle-wanderer, goat-footed, horned.”¹⁸

Observing this ritual with resentment and frustration, he only concentrates on the symbolic discourse to denigrate Nicephoros II. His dark skin contrasts indeed quite radically with the bright metaphor here developed, and lyrics clearly sing of imperial glory. Yet he must have heard these same ritual chants during his first embassy, as he was admitted to Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos official audience. He did not mention nor criticized them before; in the new context of 968, this liturgy appears to be a solid argument for his indictment. According to him, this musical practice proves “how ignorant the Greeks are, how enamoured of their glory, what adulators, how greedy.”¹⁹ His testimony is precious as he saw, heard, and understood everything, even if he uses it to vilify Byzantines.

In 1147, Odo of Deuil also dislikes these ritual acclamations, called *polychronia*. He understands that this is a stereotypical language, typical of Byzantine courtly life, but he is almost disgusted in so many aulic manners. Westerners are very wary of the aulic atmosphere as they prefer a more direct (and rough) expression of authority. This voice control, ultra-complex etiquette, and aulic language give them the impression that they are being deceived by a fake friendliness. But this musical pomp does not seem to bother the other writers. In his large chronicle, William of Tyre confirms the Byzantines perfidious “nature” but fully recognizes John II and Manuel I Komnenos’ valour. The Archbishop of Tyre, who was Baldwin IV’s preceptor and sent as ambassador to two different Byzantine emperors, was born in the Latin East. When he writes and even uses other sources to evoke the First Crusade, he knows how to put gestures into context. He evokes the pomp, splendour and liberality that characterize the imperial authority. Thus, he evokes John II Komnenos’ entrance in Antioch in 1137: “songs of praise and the sound of musical instruments accompanied his progress as well as frequent bursts of

¹⁸ Liutprand of Cremona, *Embassy*, trans. P. Squatriti, *The Complete works of Liutprand of Cremona* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 244.

¹⁹ Liutprand of Cremona, *Embassy*, 255.

joyous applause from the populace.”²⁰ He fully understands that music and cheers simply build the imperial demonstration of power.²¹ Because it is impressive and specific to the Byzantine authority style, it is a good reason to talk about it.

2. *Voices in imperial ritual*

The emperor appears in a variety of feasts, audiences, and ceremonies, but few foreigners experience them. In most cases, they attend the *proëleusis* and/or the imperial entrance (*adventus*). Both are real stagings of authority: gestures, attitudes, and sounds take place in a grandiose theatrical experience. Sound is a major element in these authority performances. Indeed, the emperor gets his legitimacy from God and the unanimous acclaim of the army, the Senate, and the Church. During his reign, almost every week, he must constantly repeat this social approval to keep his own popularity intact. The books of ceremonies thus detail the very long series of verses chanting imperial authority, interspersed with hundreds of preventative *polychronia* such as “many years for many years.” In order to preserve, or impose, a ritual order (*taxis*) and a musical harmony, this vocalization is divided into two parts. The imperial choir sings at length the Emperor’s praises and orthodoxy, in a rather brilliant way, then begins the stereotyped cheers. These *polychronia*, which Liutprand and Odon denounced, are then taken up by the entire audience hundreds of times. These experiences of authority are carried out according to ritual rules, under the control of the master of ceremonies and guided by the singers’ voices. It goes on during hours, and it adds a lot of drama and majesty. This is what Ignatius of Smolensk felt at Manuel II Palaiologos coronation, in 1392: according to him, this was “wondrous to see.”²²

All this sung dialogue must be heard at every imperial theophany. Cheering confirms legitimacy but it can also initiate power. The

²⁰ William of Tyre, *History of deeds done beyond the sea*, ed. and trans. E. Atwater Babcock and A.C Krey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), t. II, 97.

²¹ On cheering in imperial rite, see: M.E. Torres, “Πολλά ἔτη εἰς πολλά: Some Litanic Practices in Byzantine Imperial Ceremonies?” in *The Litany in Arts and Cultures*, ed. W. Sadowski and F. Marschiani (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), 101-124; A. Berger, “Imperial and Ecclesiastical Processions in Constantinople,” in *Byzantine Constantinople*, ed. N. Necipoğlu (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 73-87.

²² Ignatius of Smolensk, *Journey*, 104.

acclamation reveals the political pretension of any candidate to the throne. This one must obtain supports and create, stimulate, and frame the cheers that would make him emperor. In April 1390, Ignatius of Smolensk witnesses a very significant episode of the civil war. Feeling deeply aggrieved by his grandfather John V Palaiologos, John VII Palaiologos besieges the Capital, with the help of the Turks. As the inhabitants finally opened the doors to his grandson, John V locked himself in the palace. To seize power, John VII must both dislodge the old emperor and be cheered by the people. All night long, Ignatius hears cheers resounding in the midst of the urban revolt.²³ Soldiers are running in the streets, waking up the inhabitants while singing the ritual acclamation: “many years to you Andronikos.” As John VII Palaiologos has two first names (John Andronikos),²⁴ his followers carefully acclaim him only as Andronikos, to avoid confusion. The popular voice must be clear: the rebels want these *polychronia* to be sung everywhere and by everyone. Only unanimous cheering should legitimize John VII-Andronikos. Singing cheers might not be enough to win the throne, but it is a mandatory gesture.

3. *The soundscape of the Capital*

Singing and cheering take place in a broader soundscape that enhances the show of power. Other ritual instructions²⁵ are confirmed by William of Tyre and even by Ibn Battuta in 1332. During his third journey, Ibn Battuta went to the Capital, accompanying a Byzantine princess, who was married to some Mongol prince. He thus attends and describes imperial *adventus*. Its account was written in 1335 by the court secretary Ibn Juzayy, who often complements the testimonies he writes down with books excerpts. But the description of this imperial entrance seems to come directly from Ibn Battuta own experience. This one recalls the striking noise of this collective celebration, saying that the people “beat their church gongs until the very skies shook the mingling of their sound” and

²³ *Idem*, 102.

²⁴ This is quite exceptional in the Byzantine context, but this double first name is very useful for John VII's claims. He thus appears quite different from his grandfather and belatedly rehabilitates his father Andronic IV, who was ousted by John V.

²⁵ Such as Philotheos' *Kletorologion* (ninth c.), Constantine VII's *Book of Ceremonies* (tenth c.), and pseudo-Kodinos' *Book of Offices* (fourteenth c.).

that “drums, trumpets and fifes were sounded.”²⁶ His testimony is important because it describes the deafening effect of these sumptuous rituals, where excessiveness is also sonorous. This sound power can either impress, frighten or even repel.

His testimony also sheds light on a brand-new Byzantine sound: bells. In fact, the ringing of bells does not appear in the Byzantine soundscape before the thirteenth century. Even after that, it would not fully replace the *semantra*.²⁷ In 1200 Antony of Novgorod notices that there is no bell in *Hagia Sophia*.²⁸ A few years earlier, Isaac Komnenos *sebastocrator* (son of Alexios I Komnenos) offered two bells to the monks of the *Kosmosoteira*,²⁹ but to be used only for Saturday-Sunday worship. Until Palaiologian times, the *semantra* still remained the main and distinctive Byzantine sound signal. At the very beginning of the 15th century, Ruy Gonzáles de Clavijo still reports that Greeks do not use bells in *Hagia Sophia* but “strike a wooden board to mark the more important moments of the ritual.”³⁰ He clearly saw and heard the *semantra* in a religious context. Surprisingly, there are few mentions of this Byzantine sound device in travel accounts, but it is true that travellers should have been able to hear it and to understand its use as a signal — whether liturgical or urban, before reporting it.

However, these two sounds have provoked quite strong reactions from some people. Thus, Bishop Eustathios describes the Normans capture of Thessaloniki in 1185. He deplores their ransacking and brutality and he is astonished at their behaviour. They are startled when the *semantra* rings.³¹ The Normans do not know this sound and see it as a tool to incite to revolt. Considering the City situation, the atmosphere might be tense, of course, but one can see here how an unfamiliar sound can easily provoke a powerful reaction. That is what happens to Ibn

²⁶ Ibn Battuta, *The Travels*, ed. C. Defrémery and B.R. Sanguinetti and trans. H.A.R. Gibb, (Farnham: Ashgate, 1959), 502, 504, 505.

²⁷ See B. Miljković, “*Semantra* and Bells in Byzantium,” *Zbornik radova Vizantoloskog instituta* 55 (2018): 271-303; A. Rodríguez Suarez, “The fate of bells under ottoman rule,” in *Cross-Cultural interaction between Byzantium and the West*, ed. A. Lymberopoulou (London: Routledge, 2018), 303-317.

²⁸ Anthony of Novgorod, *Pilgrim book*, 56.

²⁹ Isaac Komnenos, “Theotokos Kosmosoteira typikon,” in *BMFD*, 802.

³⁰ Ruy Gonzáles de Clavijo, *Embassy to Tamerlane*, 113.

³¹ Eustathios of Thessaloniki, *The Capture of Thessaloniki*, ed. S. Kyriakidis and trans. J.R. Melville Jones (Canberra: Australian Association of Byzantine Studies, 1988), 135-137.

Battuta too. Unlike Westerners, he is used to hearing the *semantra*,³² but when he first hears the bells ringing, in Caffa, he is startled. He begins to pray and to chant the Qur'an.³³

4. *For the lucky ones: the imperial audience*

The aulic rite leaves a great impression because it is designed that way. In 944, Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos compiled all imperial rituals, even the oldest ones. In his text, he clearly explains the meaning of such complex ritualization:

... through praiseworthy ceremonial the imperial rule appears more beautiful and acquires more nobility and so is a cause of wonder to both foreigners and our own people ... Through the rite, the imperial power will have measure and order, reflecting the harmony and movement of the creator in relation to the whole, and it will appear to those subject to it to be more dignified and for this reason both sweeter and more wonderful.³⁴

Travelers clearly experience this search for harmony and admit to being dazzled by the reception, the majesty of the entertainment and the prevailing order. The ceremonial ordering manifests the *taxis* favoured in Byzantium.³⁵ Moreover, it is the perfect demonstration of the emperor's authority. Music helps to unify the whole and to orchestrate everyone's contribution.³⁶ Indeed, the entire soundscape constructs and modulates the expression of Byzantine power. One sees, hears, and feels an overwhelming authority.

The core of the imperial theophany is, of course, the audience: after waiting for days or even weeks, some foreigners are admitted into the *Chrysotriclinos*. The rare testimonies confirm the Byzantine ritual

³² The ringing of bell is forbidden in Islamic territories and is replaced by *semantra*.

³³ Ibn Battuta, *Idem*, 470.

³⁴ Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos, *The Book of Ceremonies*, ed. A. Riecke and trans. A. Moffat and M. Tall (Canberra: Australian Association of Byzantine Studies, 2012), 3-5.

³⁵ G. Dagron, *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³⁶ About imperial music see: A. Carile, "Le cerimonie musicali alla corte bizantina," in *Da Bisanzio a San Marco. Musica e liturgia*, ed. G. Cattin, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997), 43-60; M.E. Torres, "Du sonore dans les sources non musicales," in *Paysages sensoriels : quelle place dans les sciences humaines et sociales?*, ed. V. Mehl and L. Péaud, (Rennes: PUR, 2019), 119-134.

regulations. The audience provides the experience of the Byzantine supremacy, of God-given authority, and cosmic harmony. This is expressed through the abundance of precious materials and the strict orchestration of bodies, voices, and spaces. Each voice must be heard at the right time. The master of ceremonies is a sort of conductor because he alone allows each voice to be heard in an orderly fashion. Authority is both sound and sound harmony. In front of the emperor, silence prevails, each sound being made only with special authorization.

Obviously, it might be difficult to isolate one of the elements of this highly sophisticated staging, but we could focus on the sound dimension, particularly using Liutprand's *Retribution*. In his first account, he indicates having been brought in front of the emperor during a highly sonorous stage. He describes the room, the dignitaries standing, motionless and completely silent, the golden throne of the emperor adorned with roaring automatons and the bronze tree decorated with machine birds.³⁷ He is told what to say, what to do. He is a spectator of an authority designed to be inaccessible and universal. When he enters the hall, "the lions emitted their roar and the birds called out, each according to its species." When the emperor stands up, the organ plays. After these automatons, he hears the singers' voices, the organ, the master of ceremonies, but never the emperor's voice. The latter "speaks" only by nodding his head a little.

Liutprand is experiencing the complete dramatization of the Byzantine authority. The emperor participates in a true staging, where movements, voices, and sounds are entirely controlled. The distance between the emperor and the rest of the world must be genuinely felt and his divine authority must be made tangible. The most important thing is to amaze.³⁸ The full sound orchestration strengthens the distance that has to be experienced. The means used will vary on who is received by the emperor. Ritual order, voice control, and silence build an impression of a powerful massive and well-ordered Empire. The

³⁷ Liutprand of Cremona, *Retribution*, 197.

³⁸ N. Drocourt, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* (Louvain: Peeters, 2015), 505. See also: G. Dagron, "Trônes pour un empereur," in *Βυζάντιο. Κράτος και Κοινωνία* [Byzantium. Power and Society], ed. A. Avraméa (Athens: Institute for Byzantine Research, 2003), 179-203; M. Featherstone, "The Great Palace as Reflected in the *De Cerimoniis*," in *Visualisierungen von Herrschaft*, ed. F.A. Bauer (Istanbul: Ege Yayınları, 2006), 47-61; G. Brett, "The Automata in the Byzantine 'Throne of Solomon,'" *Speculum* 29 (1954): 477-87.

obsessive focus on harmony is evident in most of the testimonies: sound practices largely contributes to it and even magnifies it.

Nevertheless, Crusaders are conquerors and reluctant to this pompous expression of authority. Byzantine emperors therefore would have to make significant ritual compromises to impress them without repelling them too much. Imperative silence has to be broken.

5. *Some extraordinary entertainments*

Even among the Crusaders who were wary of this ritualized power, the palace usually offered outstanding experiences. Westerners discover excessive pomp, aulic pleasures, and grandiose entertainments. All the senses are stimulated, and the descriptions hardly give a complete account of these unique moments. However, they are evoked, quite exhaustively, in some texts that endlessly denounce the Greeks' weakness, perfidy, and vanity. This shows that the impression was very strong, so strong as to overcome prejudices and resentments. Liutprand himself tells that "it is a very long thing to write about" all the novel and marvellous things he saw, and does not seem to have recovered from the wonders performed by the acrobats.³⁹ Later, Odo of Deuil says that banquet satisfies "eyes, tongue and ears alike."⁴⁰ William of Tyre adds that "various kinds of musical instruments were brought in, from which strains of marvellous sweetness in harmonious measure were evoked for their delight. Again, choruses of maidens [eunuchs] sang, and pantomimes of great merit were presented."⁴¹ The banquets offer a profusion of fine foods, artistic performances, brilliant music, and ritual cheers. In 899, the banquet attendant Philotheos recalled that the choir's elite of *Hagia Sophia* must come and sing during Christmas and Epiphany banquets. People at the table must sing and accompany together the said sacred song.⁴² Feast is also a part of the imperial rite, giving another glimpse of Byzantine superiority.

At the beginning of the tenth century, Ahmad ibn Rustah included Harun ibn Yahya's testimony in his *Book of precious things*. The latter, held prisoner in Constantinople near 881, is invited to a banquet in the palace:

³⁹ Liutprand of Cremona, *Retribution*, 200.

⁴⁰ Odo of Deuil, *De projectione Ludovici VII in Orientem*, 109.

⁴¹ William of Tyre, *History of deeds*, 381-382.

⁴² Philotheos, *Kletorologion*, ed. John B. Bury, *The Imperial Administrative System in the Ninth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1911).

among other things, he is amazed by the golden organ.⁴³ This musical instrument is played during the entire imperial ritual and it fully demonstrates the Byzantines' technical superiority. Harun recalls it as an astonishing device: a sort of wooden box, covered with strong leather, into which sixty pipes of copper are put. Two men have to blow it so as the organist can play. This musical instrument is a Byzantine specificity, used only when the emperor is there. It is played even during banquet but never in a religious context. It is fascinating because it generates a rare sound and it is a jealously guarded technical marvel. Constantine V offered two organs to Pepin the Short in 757,⁴⁴ a gift the first Carolingians greatly appreciated. In 826, Louis the Pious hastened to pay a Venetian priest offering to "compose an organ in the manner of the Greeks."⁴⁵ Thus, for several centuries, this musical instrument remained a specifically Byzantine sound element. From the tenth and the eleventh centuries, a new Latin variant of the organ is created and enters the sacred Western soundscape.⁴⁶ The Crusaders should therefore not have been surprised to see and hear organs in Byzantium, although its use for imperial authority might have seemed odd, even confusing. Generally speaking, aulic banquets always provide rich and brilliant multi-sensorial experiences that leave a deep impression. Arab travelers would expect such splendor, but not Westerners. The impact of this opulent courtly life can be guessed from the many references to the Byzantine Court in the chivalric literature.

V. Conclusions

So, despite of the precise writing contexts, the sound echoes of Constantinople are easy to thing. No matter why they visit Constantinople, they behave, at one time or another, like ordinary tourists. Their experience, and the account they tell of it, is therefore

⁴³ Ahmad ibn Rustah, *The Book of precious things*, ed. A. A. Vasiliev and trans. H. Grégoire and M. Canard, *Byzantium and Arabs*, t.II-2 (Bruxelles: CBHB, 1935), 388.

⁴⁴ *Carolingian chronicles: Royal Frankish annals and Nithard's Histories*, ed. and trans. B.W. Scholz and B. Rogers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 42.

⁴⁵ *Idem*, 120.

⁴⁶ J. Herrin, "Constantinople, Rome and the Franks," in *Byzantine Diplomacy*, ed. J. Shepard and S. Franklin (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1992) 91-107; P. Williams, *The Organ in Western Culture, 750-1250* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 137-42; P. Hardouin and J. Perrot, "De l'orgue de Pépin à l'orgue médiéval," *Revue de Musicologie* 52 (1966), 21-55.

necessarily fragmentary. These various echoes of the Byzantine city reveal what astonishes foreigners but also how Constantinople wants to show itself. The semantema does not seem to be of any interest, nor does the noise of the city or the people. But the religious chants, the Aulic rite, and the imperial festivities attract a lot. No matter what the traveller thinks about Byzantine culture, these sounds appeal, impress, and amaze. The discovery is worthy of the city's splendors: manifold, brilliant, sensorial, quasi-divine. A completely different world appears before the traveler's eyes and ears, or rather two worlds. On one side, the paradise antechamber, enchanted by celestial songs, angelic voices, and soul crying. On the other, the arena of an overwhelming sensuality, filled with perfumes, gold, dances, vocal and instrumental music. In the middle is the Byzantine power, which plays on both sides, using sensorial stimuli, especially sound, to build and demonstrate its power, superiority, and pretensions.

This sonic vision is certainly fragmentary, distorted, oriented, and incomplete, but it is nonetheless very much alive and striking. These texts are built on preformatted expectations, focused descriptions, more or less impartial explanations, but they are very precious testimonies. They confirm Byzantine texts and give glimpses on the performativity of these sonorous demonstrations of authority. All these sound echoes are useful arguments for the traveler to recreate his experience of the Empire, and thus to stage what he thinks about it. These extraordinary sounds fill these extraordinary places. The echo of Constantinople is thus richer, longer, and more vibrant.

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