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INSCRIBING WOMEN INTO SACRED SPACE: FEMALE PATRONAGE AND EPIGRAPHIC MEMORY IN THE LATE ANTIQUE BALKANS

Abstract. – This article examines a small group of inscriptions from Stobi and Lychnidos which record women within late antique ecclesiastical space. Rather than treating these texts as neutral notices of donation, it considers them as inscriptions embedded in buildings, where pavements, annexes, and liturgical zones shaped the display and remembrance of names. The argument proceeds in two stages. First, it offers a close reading of the inscriptions from Macedonia, distinguishing what the texts state explicitly from what their architectural contexts permit us to infer. Secondly, it compares this material with evidence from the wider Balkans, in order to define the Macedonian dossier more precisely. The inscriptions from Stobi and Plaošnik do not establish a general rule concerning the status of women in late antique Christianity; they do, however, attest named women, titles borne by women, and acts of memorialisation fixed within ecclesiastical architecture.

Key words. – Late Antiquity, early Christianity, women, patronage, epigraphy, sacred space, Stobi, Lychnidos, deaconesses

Introduction

A small group of ecclesiastical inscriptions from Stobi and Lychnidos raises a narrow but revealing question: how were women made visible within sacred architecture? The question matters because inscriptions preserve a kind of evidence distinct from normative Christian writing. Sermons, canons, and moral treatises tend to instruct and discipline; inscriptions operate differently. They name particular persons, attach them to acts of vow or remembrance, and fix that association in a specific place.[1]

The dossier is small, consisting of the mosaic inscriptions associated with women in the Episcopal Basilica at Stobi and the inscription of the deaconess Sosia Paula from the South Basilica at Plaošnik, Lychni-

[1] Clark 1993; Cloke 1995; Cooper 1996.

dos.[2] Its value lies not simply in wording, but in the relation between text and setting. Rather than treating women's place in Christian life in general terms, these texts place female names and titles within the material fabric of churches.

Ecclesiastical inscriptions did more than record donation or commemoration. Once laid into pavements or installed in annexes, they entered the visual and spatial order of the church, shaping both the encounter with sacred space and the durability of particular names within it.[3] Yet architectural context, though indispensable, must not be made to bear more meaning than the evidence allows: a memorial text in an annex does not function in the same way as a votive inscription set into the pavement of a nave. Text and setting must therefore be read together, while the distinction between attested fact and reconstruction remains explicit.[4]

The comparative material is used in a limited sense. The inscriptions from Macedonia are not presented as representative of the Balkans as a whole: they form a local dossier, against which evidence from Greece, Bulgaria, Albania, Kosovo, and Serbia may be set. The comparison does not seek a single regional model, but asks how securely women can be identified in each case: whether an inscription names a woman directly, whether her presence is probable, or whether it has been inferred only from context.[5]

The limits of the evidence are observed throughout. The relation between the *matrona* and the deaconess at Stobi remains uncertain; Peristeria's status cannot be defined beyond the wording of the inscription; nor can the southern nave of the Stobi basilica sustain more spatial interpretation than the archaeology permits.[6] These limits ultimately define the evidentiary value of the dossier.

Women and Patronage in Late Antique Christianity

Female patronage in late antique churches must be understood within the social structures in which Christian communities operated. In the Greek, Roman, and Jewish worlds, a woman's public visibility was shaped by household position, property, rank, and authority mediated through family. Christianisation did not necessarily abolish those conditions; it did, however, create settings in which women could be seen and remembered in new ways. Almsgiving, household devotion, ascetic practice, care for the dead, and service to the church did not release women from the

[2] Aleksova 1982-1983, 55-67; Wiseman and Mano-Zissi 1973, 391-403; Bitrakova-Grozdanova 1975; Madigan and Osiek 2005, s.v. "Sosia Paula."

[3] Bodel 2001, 1-18; Yasin 2009, 1-25; Rendić-Miočević 1985, 31-37.

[4] Krautheimer 1986, 1-25; Yasin 2009, 20-43.

[5] Ogereau 2024; Papazoglu 1957.

[6] Bodel 2001, 8-14.

constraints of class or kinship. They could nevertheless become forms of Christian agency, and in some cases enter ecclesiastical memory or the fabric of the church itself.[7]

The evidence resists any single social model. Late antique Christian texts could praise widows for piety, virgins for renunciation, benefactors for generosity, mothers for household virtue, and ascetic women for discipline;[8] the same textual culture also required women to obey, remain modest, and accept domestic regulation. The historical question is therefore not whether Christianity, in some general sense, improved or restricted women's status, but where women became visible, through which media, and under what institutional conditions.

Patronage offered one such medium. In the Roman world, benefaction joined an individual's name to a building, a cult, or an act of public memory. Christian patronage inherited that logic, but recast its language. A pavement could present benefaction as a vow; an annex could turn remembrance into prayer; a liturgical furnishing could associate service with the name of a donor, a relative, or an office-holder. Ecclesiastical space therefore did not merely contain patronage, but it also gave it a visible and durable form.[9]

The title of deaconess belongs within this same field of evidence. It should not be dismissed as an empty honorific, but neither should it be treated as simply equivalent to the male diaconate. The evidence differs by date and region. Even so, where the title appears in an inscription, it marks a recognised ecclesiastical identity;[10] it may not define the precise scope of female liturgical duties, but it does show that a woman could be commemorated through office, not only through kinship or donation.

The point has particular force in the Balkans, where the surviving evidence is sparse. Female names do not often survive in ecclesiastical inscriptions, and titles borne by women are rarer still. Each inscription must therefore be read as a local act of display, its wording considered together with its placement, architectural setting, and archaeological context. It cannot simply be absorbed into a general narrative about women's status in late antique Christianity.[11]

Sacred Architecture and Epigraphic Memory

Church inscriptions are architectural as well as textual objects. When a name is laid into a pavement, a memorial placed in an annex, or a dedication set near a liturgical zone, the inscription participates in the use

[7] Luke 8:1-3; John 11:27; Romans 16; Witherington III 1984; Clark 1993, 67-94.
[8] Clark 1993, 1-25; Clark 1986.
[9] Cooper 1996, 1-18; Clark 1993, 67-94.
[10] Karras 2004, 272-316; Olson 1992, 22-70; Madigan and Osiek 2005.
[11] Brown 2012, 57-84; Cooper 1996, 87-110.

and memory of the building.[12] This is most apparent in floor inscriptions. A pavement text is encountered through movement: read underfoot, and repeatedly seen by those who pass through the church. Such a text is neither incidental decoration nor a free-standing document, but an object that binds commemoration to bodily passage through the building.

The same principle applies differently to annex spaces. A memorial placed in a service-related room does not circulate visually in the manner of a nave mosaic. Its audience is different, its spatial reach narrower, and its liturgical associations determined by setting. Here architectural context limits the kind of claim the text can sustain.

The Stobi material shows why this distinction matters. The inscriptions belong to the earliest mosaic phase of the Episcopal Basilica and were integrated into the pavement of the southern nave.[13] Their wording is brief, but brevity does not diminish their evidentiary value. Read with their placement, the texts connect female names or titles to a zone of collective movement inside an episcopal church. The Plaošnik inscription offers a different configuration. It comes from the diaconicon area of the South Basilica, not from a broad nave pavement.[14] Here the inscription fixes memory within an annex tied to liturgical service. The contrast with Stobi is therefore interpretively useful, since it distinguishes two modes of female inscriptional presence: one connected with an act within the building, the other with remembrance within it.

The evidence must still be kept to scale. A female-associated inscription in a visible location does not by itself prove a stable gender map for church interiors, nor does it establish female access throughout the building;[15] it may show, however, that women could be named and commemorated in architecturally consequential places.

The Epigraphic Evidence from Stobi

The Stobi dossier consists of two mosaic inscriptions from the Episcopal Basilica, both connected with the earliest pavement phase of the building.[16] Their value lies in the conjunction of text, chronology, and setting.

The first inscription, placed in the north-west corner of the first mosaic field in the southern nave, reads:

ὑπὲρ εὐ[χῆν] / τῆς ματ[ρώας] / ἡ εὐλαβ[εστά] / τη διακ[όνισσα] / τὴν ἐξέδραν / ἐψήφω[σεν]

[12] Yasin 2009; Krautheimer 1986.

[13] Aleksova 1982, 482-490; Aleksova 1982-1983, 55-67.

[14] Yasin 2009, 1-25; Bodel 2001, 1-18.

[15] Pagels 1988; Cloke 1995; Ogereau 2024.

[16] Bitrakova-Grozdanova 1975; Ogereau 2024; Aleksova 1982-1983, 55-67; Wiseman and Mano-Zissi 1973.

"For the sake of a vow / of the matron / the most pious / deaconess / paved the exedra / with mosaic."[17]

Several points are secure. The text records a vow, refers to a *matrona*, names a deaconess, and states that an exedra was paved in mosaic. Less secure is the relation between the *matrona* and the deaconess. The inscription may distinguish two women, one marked by social status and the other by ecclesiastical office; it may instead refer to a single woman under more than one designation. The wording itself does not decide the issue.[18] What the inscription establishes is narrower, but firmer: an act of paving associated with a woman was inscribed into the basilica pavement. In a compressed record, commemorative language brings together social status, ecclesiastical office, and architectural work. Any fuller reconstruction of agency remains inferential.

The second Stobi inscription, from the lower part of a third mosaic field, is shorter:

ὑπὲρ εὐχῆς / ἐποίησεν / Περιστέρ[ρια]
"For the sake of a vow / made by / Peristeria."[19]

Here the evidence is simpler. The inscription names Peristeria and records the fulfilment of a vow; it gives her no office and offers no basis for assigning her a formal title or rank. Earlier attempts to define Peristeria's role more precisely therefore exceed the wording of the text.[20] At most, the inscription attests a named woman associated with a dedicatory act in the basilica pavement.

Read together, the two inscriptions point to a consistent pattern. Both belong to the pavement of the southern nave, and both use the language of vow; in each case, a female name or designation is connected with the making of the church floor. This does not prove the existence of a programme of female inclusion. It does, however, attest female inscriptional presence within an episcopal basilica.[21] On archaeological and numismatic grounds, the first mosaic phase is generally dated to the later fifth century;[22] the inscriptions therefore belong to a period in which episcopal building and urban Christian monumentality were being materially formed at Stobi.[23]

The terms used in the first inscription require brief comment. In late antique usage, *matrona* marks honourable female standing or elite res-

[17] Wiseman and Mano-Zissi 1973, 397; Feissel 1983.
[18] Vesevska 2018, 140-142.
[19] Wiseman and Mano-Zissi 1971, 399; Aleksova 1982-1983.
[20] Feissel 1983; Buzov 1990, 45-64.
[21] Madigan and Osiek 2005; Karras 2004.
[22] Buzov 1990.
[23] Aleksova 1982-1983; Feissel 1983.

pectability, rather than motherhood in a narrow biological sense.[24] The phrase "most pious deaconess" similarly presents ecclesiastical office through moral valuation. It cannot provide a full account of a deaconess's duties, but it does show that the office could be named in a public inscription within the church.

The southern nave context also matters, though it must be handled cautiously. Some scholars have associated that zone with a space through which men moved or in which they sat.[25] Even if that proposal remains provisional, the relevant point here is limited: the inscriptions were hardly hidden, lying in a zone of communal movement. The reference to an exedra introduces another spatial layer. The first inscription names a built feature, while both texts were set within the wider pavement field of the southern nave. The wording therefore relates a specific architectural element to the floor into which the inscription was laid. That relation shows how text and architectural setting could converge within a single inscriptional act.[26]

Lychnidos (Plaošnik) and the Deaconess Sosia Paula

The inscription from the South Basilica at Plaošnik differs from the Stobi mosaics in both form and function. It is a memorial text, and it names a deaconess directly:[27]

Ὑπὲρ μνήμης / τῆς Σοσίας Παύλας / τῆς διακόνου

"In memory / of Sosia Paula / the deaconess."[28]

The wording permits a limited but secure conclusion: Sosia Paula was commemorated within an ecclesiastical context, and the inscription identifies her by both name and title. It does not define the duties attached to the office, nor does it show that the role of deaconess remained identical across the Balkans or throughout late antiquity. It is nevertheless clear that the office carried sufficient institutional and commemorative weight to shape the memorial formula.[29]

The architectural setting strengthens that conclusion. The inscription was found in the diaconicon area of the South Basilica,[30] and its spatial logic is therefore different from that of the Stobi pavements. At Plaošnik, remembrance is fixed in an annex associated with liturgical service, rather than in a broad nave surface crossed by the congregation. The memorial claim is more concentrated and more local, but no less explicit.

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[24] Aleksova 1982, 482-490; Wiseman and Mano-Zissi 1973.
[25] Fraschetti 2001; Rawson 1986.
[26] Karras 2004; Madigan and Osiek 2005.
[27] Krautheimer 1986; Aleksova 1982; Aleksova 1982-1983.
[28] Bodel 2001; Feissel 1983.
[29] Karras 2004; Olson 1992; Madigan and Osiek 2005.
[30] Vesevska 2024, 80-81.

Stobi and Plaošnik thus preserve different modes of inscriptional presence. At Stobi, female-associated building activity is expressed through vow and pavement; at Plaošnik, female ecclesiastical identity is expressed through memorial formula and annex setting. One connects action with the making of church space; the other connects memory with the continued presence of a named office-holder within it.[31]

The phrase ὑπὲρ μνήμης belongs to a wider Christian practice of commemorative piety. In this context, memory is materialised through inscription and attached to a consecrated place. The Plaošnik text therefore preserves more than a name, fixing a woman and her office within the spatial life of the church. The evidence is small, but precise: a securely attested female title in a secure architectural setting carries more interpretative force than a larger body of diffuse literary reference. The value of the Plaošnik inscription lies in that precision.

Female Patronage in the Balkan Context

Regional comparison is useful here only if the evidence is first graded by certainty. Three levels must be kept distinct: direct attestations of women, probable identifications, and associations inferred from context. The Macedonian material falls chiefly within the first category, since the inscriptions either name women directly or preserve titles borne by women.[32]

The closest parallels are supplied by Philippi, where mosaic inscriptions set the names of Posidonia, Pancharia, and Agathe within basilical pavements.[33] These texts show that women's names could occupy church floors elsewhere in the region. They do not, however, make Stobi merely typical, since the Stobi material also includes the terms *matrona* and deaconess within its dedicatory pattern.

Further direct parallels come from Bulgaria. At Novae, the inscription of Celerina attests a deaconess in a church context; at Eleshnitsa, the epitaph of Eugenia shows that female ecclesiastical office could also be preserved in a funerary setting.[34] Macedonia was therefore not alone in preserving female clerical titles, although the total corpus remains small.

The evidence from Albania and Kosovo is less explicit. At Durrës, the female association rests on the relation between inscription, image, and chapel setting, not on a named female donor in the text itself.[35] At Ulpiana, the evidence points to donor culture within episcopal churches, but

[31] Bitrakova-Grozdanova 1975; Ogereau 2024.

[32] Ogereau 2024.

[33] Abrahamsen 1987, 17-35; Ogereau 2024; Bakirtzis 1998.

[34] Madigan and Osiek 2005, s.v. "Celerina of Novae"; Madigan and Osiek 2005, s.v. "Eugenia."

[35] Fingarova 2015, 203-218; Neri, Gratuze, and Schibille 2017, 21-32.

it does not identify women with the same security as the Stobi inscriptions.[36] The Serbian comparanda are similarly uneven. Sirmium and Justiniana Prima preserve fragmentary or probable traces, rather than direct female inscriptions of the Macedonian type.[37] These cases are useful for comparison, but they cannot be treated as equivalent to inscriptions that name women or assign titles to them directly.

The comparison therefore yields a limited but clear result. The Macedonian dossier is neither isolated nor simply representative. It belongs to a wider Balkan field in which women entered Christian epigraphy by different routes: donor formulae, ecclesiastical titles, funerary commemoration, and associations created by image, setting, and context. The Macedonian material is distinctive not because it supplies a regional rule, but because wording, church setting, and female designation coincide with unusual clarity.

The comparative material may accordingly be arranged by degree of certainty. Direct attestation is provided by Sosia Paula, the deaconess of the South Basilica at Lychnidos; by the *matrona* and deaconess of the Episcopal Basilica at Stobi; by Peristeria at Stobi; by Posidonia, Pancharia, and Agathe at Philippi; by Celerina at Novae; and by Eugenia at Eleshnitsa. Probable identifications are represented by material from Ulpiana and Justiniana Prima. Contextual associations or fragmentary traces are represented by the chapel at Dyrrhachium and by the fragmentary material from Sirmium. This arrangement keeps direct naming, probable gender attribution, and contextual association distinct.[38]

Name	Title	Medium	Church	Location in Church	Date (c.)	City
Sosia Paula	deaconess	memorial mosaic inscription	South Basilica	diaconicon / annex	5th–6th	Lychnidos
(unnamed)	*matrona*	mosaic inscription	Episc. Basilica	southern nave pavement	late 5th	Stobi
(unnamed)	deaconess	mosaic inscription	Episc. Basilica	southern nave pavement	late 5th	Stobi
Peristeria	female donor; office uncertain	mosaic inscription	Episc. Basilica	southern nave pavement	late 5th	Stobi
Posidonia	donor	mosaic inscription	basilica	nave pavement	5th–6th	Philippi

[36] Çetinkaya 2016a, 30-46; Çetinkaya 2016b, 372-377.

[37] Popović and Ferjančić 2013, 101-114; Popović and Ferjančić 2016, 129-141; Rakocija 2013.

[38] Ogereau 2024; Madigan and Osiek 2005; Fingarova 2015; Çetinkaya 2016a; Popović and Ferjančić 2013.

Name	Title	Medium	Church	Location in Church	Date (c.)	City
Pancharia	donor	mosaic inscription	basilica	nave pavement	5th c.	Philippi
Agathe	donor	mosaic inscription	basilica	nave pavement	5th c.	Philippi
(contextual female association)	not named in inscription	mosaic and inscription ensemble	amphitheatre chapel	chapel interior	5th–6th	Dyrrhach.
(probable female donor)	probable donor	mosaic inscription	episcopal complex	basilica nave	5th–6th	Ulpiana
(fragmentary female reference)	uncertain	fragment. inscription	basilica context	architect. fragment	Late Antique	Sirmium
(probable female donor)	probable donor	mosaic inscription	episcopal complex	basilica nave	6th	Justiniana Prima
Celerina	deaconess	column inscription	Episc. Basilica	architect. member	6th	Novae
Eugenia	deaconess	funerary inscription	church of St. Andrew	funerary context	538	Eleshnitsa

Table 1. Women directly or contextually associated with early Christian inscriptions connected with church architecture in the central and southern Balkans

Direct attestations carry greater weight than probable identifications, and probable identifications greater weight than contextual associations. Once this distinction is maintained, the Macedonian inscriptions emerge as some of the clearest evidence for female presence in the region's church epigraphy.

Gender, Sacred Space, and Memory

The inscriptions from Stobi and Plaošnik support a precise claim about gender and church space: they show, within narrow limits, that some women entered the monumental record of churches when acts of donation, ecclesiastical office, or commemoration were fixed in writing.[39] This claim depends on medium. Inscriptions differ from literary representations of women because they attach a name, a title, or an act to a place. The relation between person and building is therefore not incidental: it is what gives the record its particular force.

At Stobi, female presence is expressed through vow and pavement. The inscriptions connect a *matrona*, a deaconess, and Peristeria with the making of the basilica floor. At Plaošnik, female presence is expressed through memory and office. Sosia Paula is not presented as a donor, but

[39] Yasin 2009; Bodel 2001; Clark 1993.

as a deaconess remembered within an annexed church setting. These are not identical forms of evidence, and they should not be absorbed into a single narrative of female agency. One text records action in the building; another preserves memory within it. This distinction defines what each inscription can establish.

The term epigraphic memory is useful here only if it is kept precise. It denotes the way in which an inscription fixes a person or act within the material and devotional life of a church. In pavement inscriptions, that fixing is encountered through movement across the floor; in annex memorials, it is concentrated within a more specific liturgical zone.[40] The same precision is needed when speaking of visibility. These inscriptions do not make women visible across late antique church life as a whole – they do, however, attest particular moments in which a woman's name, office, or social designation acquired material durability. The evidence is episodic, but exact.

Regional comparison confirms the point. At Philippi, Novae, Eleshnitsa, and elsewhere, women appear in different inscriptional registers. In some cases, a donor formula names them. In others, an ecclesiastical title identifies them, a funerary text commemorates them, or context alone suggests their association.[41] The variation is substantial, and the evidence uneven.

The main conclusion must therefore be restricted. The Macedonian inscriptions show that women in the late antique Balkans could be written into sacred architecture through donation, office, and commemoration. They do not establish a general pattern of female ecclesiastical power, but they do show that inscription could give female presence a durable place within church space.

Conclusion

The inscriptions from Stobi and Plaošnik are best read not as detached notices, but as texts whose force depends on their place in buildings. Pavement, annex, and church setting are not background conditions; they shape the meaning and durability of the names recorded there. The Macedonian evidence preserves two distinct inscriptional modes. At Stobi, vow inscriptions are tied to the making of church space. At Plaošnik, a memorial inscription preserves the remembrance of a deaconess. Comparison with the wider Balkans shows that female inscriptional presence was real but uneven, and that direct attestations must be distinguished from probable and contextual cases.

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[40] Bodel 2001; Yasin 2009.

[41] Ogereau 2024; Madigan and Osiek 2005; Fingarova 2015; Çetinkaya 2016a; Popović and Ferjančić 2013.

The surviving material is too limited to support broad claims about women's status in late antique Christianity. It does, however, support the narrower conclusion that some women in the late antique Balkans were materially remembered within church architecture, whether through personal name, ecclesiastical title, or commemorative formula.

This conclusion depends on reading small pieces of evidence within strict limits. The inscriptions from Stobi and Lychnidos do not restore a complete history of women in the church, but they preserve local acts of donation and memory with unusual precision. In a sparse evidentiary field, this precision matters.

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