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Four Scandinavian ship graffiti from Hagia Sophia*

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This paper is the first presentation of four graffiti from the church of Hagia Sophia, Constantinople, and a contribution to the study of Viking graffiti of sailing vessels.

The term 'graffiti' signifies the act of writing or drawing on a hard surface. It also has a connotation of frivolity and destruction of the original. Graffiti are to be found incised on the walls and pillars of innumerable churches and often in places where they remain invisible for a long time. Most of them are valuable as examples of medieval art and some are important for their preservation of particular styles of epigraphy. In Constantinople in particular, they are to be found in the Great Church, the church of the Holy Wisdom Hagia Sophia, which was the greatest Christian cathedral for the Byzantine Christian world and the most important religious edifice in Constantinople.[1] It is not surprising that all visitors to the imperial city, be they worshippers or ordinary tourists, first went to Hagia Sophia, a building of great fame; nor is it surprising that the individual worshippers have succumbed to the temptation of scratching graffiti on the marble revetments, balustrades, window-frames, doors and columns of the church. Some visitors inscribed their names, perhaps in the belief that they would receive salvation if their names were located inside the church of Hagia Sophia. Others may have written there because their freedom of expression was restricted elsewhere.

Curiously, the vast majority of graffiti are concentrated in almost all parts of the second-story aisles or galleries in Hagia Sophia.[2] It is also appropriate to recall here that these places are called *catechoumena* or, very rarely, *gynaikeion*.[3] Each is a corridor

* I would like to express my warmest thanks to Professor J. Bill for his help and valuable suggestions. Needless to say, any errors are my own.

1 Regarding the church of Hagia Sophia, see W. Müller-Wiener, *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbuls: Byzantion-Konstantinopolis-Istanbul bis zum Beginn des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen 1977) 84–96, and R. Janin, *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'empire byzantin. I. Le siège de Constantinople et le patriarcat oecuménique, 3. Les églises et les monastères*, 2nd edn (Paris 1969) 455–70.

2 In the nave and aisles below, I found only four graffiti, in the western end of the church.

3 According to T. Mathews (*The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy* (University Park 1971) 133) 'the original and principal use of the galleries was probably for catechumens'. R. Taft ('Women at church in Byzantium: Where, when — and why?', *DOP* 52 (1998) 31) has good grounds for

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situated over the narthex and aisles of the church, usually open to the nave through arcades or colonnades.[4] The public entrance to the galleries is at the northern end of the narthex, where a spiral ramp leads to the western and northern galleries. For the sake of brevity, I cannot embark into details here[5], but suffice it to say that, according to the traditional view, the upper galleries were considered to be a place for women or used as a means of segregation of genders and social classes.[6] However, if we accept the view of scholars such as Thomas Mathews and Robert Taft, then it would be incorrect to state that 'the galleries were the place of the women exclusively' or that they 'were reserved for the exclusive use of either catechumens or women'.[7] In confirmation, it should be noted that certain sections of these galleries were exclusively reserved for the empress and her female attendants, or for the emperor and his male entourage, while other parts were used, on occasion, for synods of the Church.[8] Although a significant number of imperial rituals took place in the galleries, liturgical activity was insubstantial there.[9] Moreover, some galleries seem to have been used for a bewildering variety of activities, both legitimate and less so.[10] Nevertheless, in the absence of any textual evidence, it is hard to conclude anything *pro* or *contra* regarding the presence (or not) of ordinary laity, male or female, in the other galleries.[11] In my view, some support for

Continued

arguing that the term *gynaikion* 'is used to designate areas on the ground floor assigned, presumably, to the women'.

4 Regarding the galleries of Hagia Sophia and some of their functions, see Mathews, *The Early Churches*, 128–33.

5 The reader is directed to the relevant passages and conclusions in Taft, 'Women at church', 31, 34, 41–2, 49, 55–6, 59, 62, 86–7.

6 Regarding the different views on the galleries cf. Mathews, *The Early Churches*, 125–6, 130–3. In Hagia Sophia, as in all the large churches in the East, women and men were segregated for cultural and moral reasons; in most churches, women occupied the north side and men the south side (churches were always oriented to the east). See S. Gerstel, 'Painted sources for female piety in medieval Byzantium', *DOP* 52 (1998) 91–92. See also Taft, 'Women at church', 57, who even notes a funeral rubric in an eleventh-century codex that calls for the body of the deceased to be placed on the right (south) side of the church if male, and on the left (north) side if female. However, most textual evidence for Hagia Sophia indicates that women occupied both the north and south aisles, with men in the central part of the nave.

7 See Mathews, *The Early Churches*, 131 and Taft, 'Women at church', 49, 62.

8 For details, see Taft, 'Women at church', 42.

9 We should note that ordinations to the priesthood, loyalty oaths, ecclesiastical synods, miraculous cures, and exorcisms were all administered there. There can be added to this, reference to distributing stipends (*roga*) of the clergy, to imperial receptions and dinners, to sessions of the ecclesiastical tribunal and meetings of the standing synod, etc. See in particular Taft, 'Women at church', 59.

10 Taft (loc. cit.) emphasized that the galleries were employed 'for just about every imaginable purpose, legitimate or not, including even temporary lodgings and sexual dalliance'. He also noted that 'women and the imperial party attend liturgy in the galleries and have the sacrament brought to them there' and that 'oratories and the imperial apartment, refectory, and loge-*metatorion* could all be located there.' Cf. Mathews, *The Early Churches*, 133.

11 This is the conclusion of R. Taft ('Women at church', 42).

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'*pro*' comes from the graffiti on the columns, walls and balustrades in the galleries. They seem to provide some evidence for the presence of ordinary people there. The question is whether the graffiti were scratched during a service or not. The answer to this question opens the door to various hypotheses. It is true that a significant proportion of the worshippers had plenty of time to scratch something into the marble due to the long services in the church. However, such an assumption would make us conclude that the galleries were open for everyone at any time. While this explanation is quite plausible, it is also possible that the visitor would walk through the empty galleries just to see how large the church was. In so doing, he might succumb to the temptation of scratching his name, following the example of many others before him. It should be said here that both explanations are plausible but we are not yet in a position to say precisely, in every individual case, whether the graffito was inscribed during the liturgy or not. In supporting one of the above possibilities we must turn our attention to the location, dimensions, depth and details of each graffito. All we can say with any assurance is that the upper galleries were a preferable place for graffiti because they were far from the direct view of any clergy officiating in the chancel.

Thematically, the graffiti may be divided into memoranda, inscribed mainly on the occasion of attendance at the church, various inscriptions of an invocative nature, human and animal figures, magical figures, ships, coats-of-arms, weapons, monograms and mason's marks. The autographic, supplicatory inscriptions containing the formula 'Lord, help Your servant X' and those with the formula 'X wrote' occur frequently. The graffiti are written in Greek, Cyrillic, Armenian and Latin script letters.[12] The forms of the letters in the graffiti of the eleventh to fifteenth centuries mainly agree with the paleography of written documents, the differences being accounted for by the specific technique of scratching out the inscriptions. The dating of the graffiti (except for dated inscriptions) was ascertained by paleographical comparison with dated

12 I directed my investigation mainly to the Cyrillic inscriptions. At Hagia Sophia I had ample opportunity to find separate letters and short texts scratched as graffiti in the Glagolitic and Cyrillic alphabets. Today they number a total of 62 signs. I have published some of them: 'Edin patriarcheski grafit ot hrama "Sv. Sofia" v Konstantinopol' in Srednovekonnijat bulgarin I „drugite", *Sbornik v chest na 60-godishninata na prof. Petâr Angelov* (Sofia 2012) 227–30; 'Igra na "dama" v hrama "Sv. Sofia", Konstantinopol' in *Bŭlgarsko srednovekovie: obstestvo, vlast, istorija, Sbornik v chest na prof. Miljana Kajmakamova* (Sofia 2012) 439–55; 'Tri grafita na kirilitsa ot hrama "Sv. Sofia" v Konstantinopol' in *Duhovnijat svjat na Aton* (V. Tŭrnovo 2013); 'Edin grafit za Hristovite strasti v "Sv. Sofia", Konstantinopol' in *QUOD DEUS VULT! Sbornik v chest na prof. Krasimira Gagova* (http://www.mediaevalia.eu); 'Tri risynki-grafiti ot "Sv. Sofia", Konstantinopol' in *Srednovekovnijat tchovek I negovijat svjat* (V. Tŭrnovo 2013). A Russian team of scholars-epigraphers (I. Zaitzev, J. Artamonov and A. Gyppius) searched the galleries of Hagia Sophia and published their findings in a series of articles. For a detailed survey of their publications, see Iu. Artamonov, A. Gippiys, 'Drevnerusskie nadpisi Sofii Konstantinopol'skoj', in *Slavjanskij al'manach 2011* (Moscow 2012). Here I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Professor Alexej Gyppius who kindly sent me information about his discoveries and a copy of the paper cited above. A paleographic analysis shows without doubt the Russian origin of almost all the Cyrillic inscriptions. It seems to me that Bulgarians wrote only three of them.

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written records.[13] We must also bear in mind that only a small number have been published because much interest has been focused on the structure, interior decoration and arrangement of Hagia Sophia. On the other hand, each graffito-inscription is a piece in the gigantic puzzle of the church's medieval history. If the graffiti were studied together, they would reveal an uncommon perspective on its history because the graffiti have not undergone any alteration. Furthermore, they reflect the thoughts of the authors who were often uneducated. The role of the historian is to piece the puzzle together and interpret its meaning.

The ship graffiti incised into the walls and columns of the upper gallery of Hagia Sophia was the subject of my fieldwork in 2010 and 2011. My research revealed drawings of sea vessels, nearly 35 in all, some crude and schematic, others remarkably detailed.[14] Since these graffiti are drawings by crew members, we might expect an emphasis on those parts of the ships with which the sailors were most directly involved, namely the sails, the oars and the rudder. In fact, an analytical study of these graffiti confirms this observation. The great diversity of the types of vessels represented in these drawings is clearly noticeable. Some of the ships' graffiti represent galleys, Viking ships, cogs, carracks, caravels and galleons. However, other graffiti are somewhat ambiguous, primarily due to poor carving. For this reason, it is not easy to determine the particular classification of a vessel based on a single graffito. Moreover, correlating the ships with the exact types mentioned in the historical texts and with shipwrecks is not always possible. Another difficulty with the pictorial studies of ships is to ascertain the 'nationality' to which the ships belonged. The types of ships and details of their rigging may give a hint of a ship's origins, but this is not always reliable because of common ship-building traditions around the Mediterranean. On the other hand, several graffiti can be identified as Genoese ships by the banner on the stern with St. George's cross.

In general, it may be said that ship graffiti provide an important source of information about the sailing vessels and their equipment in the Byzantine seas. They are physical evidence of people with anxieties and beliefs, passions and fears. They serve as a visual link between the present and the past; between the modern visitor and the man who wrote on the walls so many years ago. Only four of the maritime graffiti are connected to Viking sailing vessels and, in the present paper, I concentrate my attention

13 Unfortunately, there are only two inscriptions containing the typical datatio formula: 'In the year of ...'. I submitted one of them for publication in 'In the year of 6905', *Bulgaria Medievalis* 4 (2013) (in press).

14 I am planning to publish them in another study. Unfortunately, I am not yet in a position to say definitely that there are only 35 ship graffiti. As one can easily verify, it is extremely difficult to see what is concealed behind the enormous photos arranged in the entire north gallery. Nevertheless, I was able to look behind the photos in the central part of the gallery and to discover one galley with human figures on board and two cogs. However, such an action is banned today. It should be noted that only two ship graffiti have been published so far. For them, see O. Meinardus, 'Medieval navigation according to akidographemata in Byzantine churches and monasteries', *Δελτίον τῆς Χριστιανικῆς Ἀρχαιολογικῆς Ἑταιρείας* 6 (1970–72) 39; L. Bash, 'Graffiti navals grecs', *Le petit perroquet* 22 (1978) 54–5.

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on these.[15] The first, located in the south gallery, shows a ship with a dragonhead on the prow. In the same place as the first graffito, we can see the second, which portrays the stems of three ships in a line. Another graffito, also in the same gallery, depicts two vessels in profile with high bows. Situated at the western end of the north gallery, the fourth graffito depicts a warship.

As I shall explain more fully, the graffiti indicate that various sea peoples, who probably originated from Scandinavia, visited Hagia Sophia. The information gathered from the analysis of the graffiti will also provide a primary research source for naval archaeologists and historians, helping them to understand the evolution of shipping types through the ages.

Focusing on the first graffito, we see that it is of particular interest because it is in the form of a complete ship. It is to be found in the western bay of the south gallery of the church. It was scratched into the northwest column (that is to say, immediately after entering the gallery) at approximately 1.39 cm from the floor by someone who was apparently standing up. The hull is long and narrow with a length of 14 cm and a height of 1.5 cm. Unfortunately, the technical details specific to the ship that can be extrapolated from the picture are few because only the stem, the most conspicuous part of the ship, (but not the whole vessel), is incised deeply into the marble (Photo 1). The ship, depicted from the port side, has a dragon-head adorning the prow. The animal head has a length of approximately 2.5 centimetres and a height of 4.5 centimetres. It is also worth noting the decorated stempost.[16] Some of the lines on the stem could be interpreted as lines of the planking. This might be a convincing sign that the graffito-vessel was almost certainly Scandinavian, resembling the Oseberg ship, for example.[17] The motif on the aft-stem is more difficult to define nowadays. Two round shields of the warriors are hung over the vessel's sheer strake (that is to say, the top strake of the hull). This may have been their position in harbour and perhaps when

15 The marble also bears witness, in the form of a runic inscription (on balustrades and under a blind window on the eastern bay of the north gallery) and drawing of axes (situated on the wall-slab of the west pillar in the north gallery), to a Viking visit. For runic inscriptions, see E. Svfärdström, 'Runorna i Hagia Sophia', *Fornvännen* 3 (1970) 247.

16 A number of finds have revealed that the upper woodwork of vessels might have been decorated. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the carving to be seen on both of the stems of the early ninth-century Oseberg ship from Norway. The upper strakes of the later ninth-century Norwegian Gokstad ship have zigzag lines carved into them which may have been painted; and the Ladby vessel from Denmark also appears to have had mouldings incised along the edges of some of her planking which were very similar, it is thought, to those on the Gokstad ship. For this, see A. N. Sørensen, 'Ladby: A ship grave from the Viking age', in O. Crumlin-Pedersen and O. Olsen (eds.), *Ships and Boats of the North*, III (Roskilde: Viking Ship Museum 2001) 239–40; O. Crumlin-Pedersen and O. Olsen, 'The Skuldelev ships: Topography, archaeology, history, conservation and display', in O. Crumlin-Pedersen and O. Olsen (eds.), *Ships and Boats of the North*, IV (Roskilde: Viking Ship Museum 2001) 274–5.

17 The Oseberg ship, the best preserved Viking ship, has carved spirals at the bow and stern. See A. Brögger, *The Oseberg Ship* (New York 1921); A. Hagen, *Les Bateaux Vikings* (Oslo 1961) 6–18; Kulturhistorisk museum: http://www.khm.uio.no/utstilling/faste/vikingskipene/oseberg_eng.html

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Photo 1 A ship with dragonhead. South gallery, Hagia Sophia

sailing, but obviously they would have to be moved for rowing, and they can hardly have been secure when the ship was under sail.[18] One vertical line in the middle of the ship constitutes the mainmast. Typically, the Viking ships had a central mast which was mounted in a block of wood. The mast, which could be raised and lowered, supported a large square sail made of heavy woollen or linen cloth. In our graffito-vessel the mast is raised and without a sail. On the side of the vessel two lightly sloping lines towards the prow and two downwards signify her oars. The Viking ship had a single bank of oars which were either rowed from benches affixed to the frames of the hull, or the rowers sat on hide-covered chests which contained their personal possessions. However, in our graffito we are given a hint of moorings instead of oars. Collating this with the position of the shields and the lack of a sail on the mast, we suggest that the ship-graffito represented a vessel in harbour. Another detail is a side rudder at the aft.[19] As one

18 Both coins and picture stones from the Viking Age depict shields arrayed along the gunwale of a Viking ship. Additionally, the sagas state that shields were displayed. In Brennu-Njáls saga (*The Story of Burnt Njal*, English, transl. George W. Dasent, http://www.njala.is/en/burnt-njal/burnt-njal-in-english/ ch. 83), for example, Kári and his ten ships rowed hard to join a sea battle, with row after row of shields on display along the sides of the ships. Icelandic law ('Landnámabók') (H. Pálsson, P. Edwards, *The Book of Settlements: Landnamabok* (Winnipeg 1972) §156, 74) tells of Hella-Björn Herfinnsson who sailed into Bjarnarfjörður with his ship lined with shields. Afterwards, he was called 'Skjalda-Björn' (Shield-Björn).

19 The rudder on a ship of the Viking Age was a side rudder. We may also refer to the examples from Bergen, Gokstad and Oseberg in Norway, and Osrra Aros in Sweden. Two rudders found at Vorsa and

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can easily verify, the rudder was essentially a huge oar attached to the starboard side of the ship. In our case, however, it is shown as being on the port side. The other structure in the aft (with two vertical lines meeting one line slanting downwards to the aft) could be a type of cabin. As is always the case with graffiti, the problem resides in how far one can trust them.

If we try to compare the graffito ship with our knowledge of Viking vessels and archaeological evidence, we can see clearly that the narrow design of the hull, the animal head and the row of overlapping shields, as well as the tall, slender character of the stem, indicate that it can be considered as a Viking-Age warship with a dragon-head.

Warships were built for speed and manoeuvrability, and for the transport of men and loot from raids.[20] They were slender and had holes for the oars in a continuous line along the length of the ship, a mast that could be lowered, as well as a large, square sail.[21] Their main source of propulsion was the oar, with the mast lowered to reduce wind resistance and to improve stability. They are also distinct from other types of ships through having a shield-batten on the outer side of the top strake, and some ships were furnished with figureheads (and sometimes tails).

Without going into unnecessary details it will be sufficient to recall that the interest in the appearance and functions of Viking ships dates back a considerable time. Most of our knowledge in this field has been gained both from the sagas and from the excavation of the burial-sites at Tune, Gokstad, and Oseberg in Norway.[22] The ritual purpose of the burial ships was to transport the departed to another world. The ships excavated at these famous sites provided an insight into the shipbuilding of the early Viking Age and presumably represent a universal ship-type used for warfare, trade or voyages of colonization.[23] The archaeological evidence, provided by the vessels excavated at Ladby (1934–36), Skuldelev, Hedeby and Roskilde fjord in Denmark, between 1962 and 1997, reveals ship-types for more specialized activities such as trading (cargo ships) or warfare (warships, used also for travel). In other words, by the year AD 1000, a clear difference in the details of hull design and rigging had been established between the ships of the late Viking Age and the earlier ship-type from Norway. However, all of

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Lungshoved in Denmark are described by O. Crumlin-Pedersen, 'Two Danish side rudders', *Mariner's Mirror* 52 (1966) 251–61. The ships in Duke William's invasion fleet are shown in the Bayeux Tapestry as having side rudders. The rudder of the Scandinavian ships remained side-mounted until approximately 1250–1300, when they started to rear-mount the rudder instead.

20 J. Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, 3rd edn (London 2001) 46.

21 K. Wolf, *Daily Life of the Vikings* (Toronto 2004) 85.

22 We know a great deal about Viking ships from the memorial stones (particularly from Gotland in Sweden), coins, tapestries (such as the Bayeux Tapestry), and graffiti from Dublin, Shetland, and Norway. Poems and law codes also provide important information. Modern reconstructions of Viking Age ships offer insights into the construction and sailing characteristics of the originals.

23 F. Logan, *The Viking in History*, 2nd edn (London 1991) 29.

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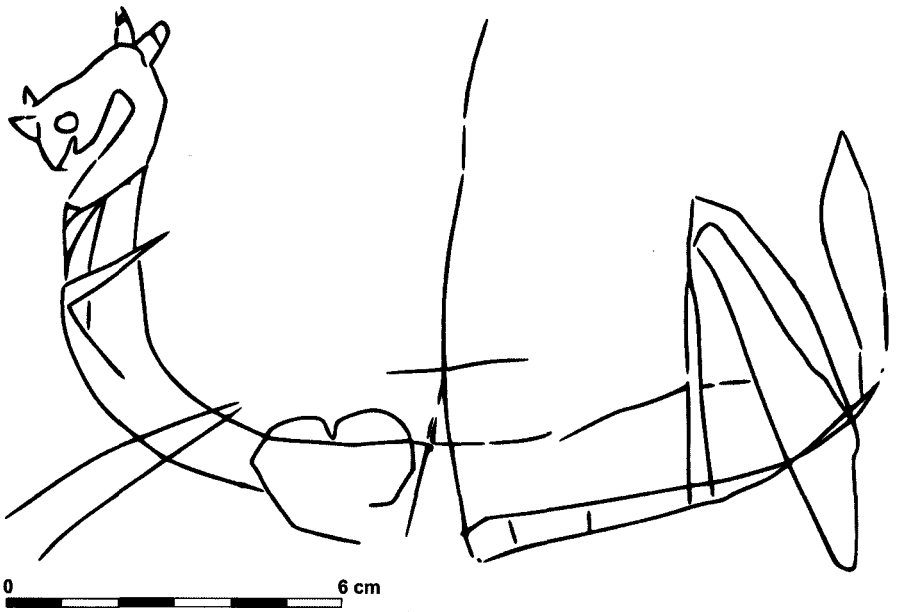


Figure 1

them belong to the same tradition of shipbuilding, being ckinker-built (the hull is constructed of overlapping planks), with a double-ended hull.[24]

It is generally acknowledged that 'long ships' or *langskips* are 'Viking' ships. However, it is worth remembering that any kind of ship could be long and that 'long ship' is not a technical term.[25] The most general term for a vessel which can denote both a warship and a cargo-ship is *skip* or *knorr* (in Sweden at least).[26] It also occurs in compounds such as *herskip* (warship), *langskip* (long ship) or *kaupskip* (merchant ship).[27] *Skeið* is a warship, but it is unclear whether or not it denotes a particular type of warship.[28] Another name is *snekkja* which appears from the middle of the eleventh century and apparently it was smaller than a *skeið*.[29] For this reason, I am inclined to use the term 'warship' for the graffito-vessel. In this scheme of things, behind the kenning *dreki* (drake), we can probably see a poetic conceit for a large warship and not a ship-term proper.[30]

24 O. Crumlin-Pedersen, 'Ship types and sizes AD 800–1200', in O. Crumlin-Pedersen (ed.), *Aspects of Maritime Scandinavia AD 200–1200* (Roskilde 1991) 69–82; O. Crumlin-Pedersen, *The Skuldelev Ships I: Topography, Archaeology, History, Conservation and Display* (Roskilde: Viking Ship Museum 2002) 303–8.

25 Attention has already been drawn to this fact by J. Jesch. For details, see J. Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age* (Woodbridge 2001) 122.

26 Jesch, *Ships and Men*, 120, 130, 136.

27 Ibid., 122.

28 Ibid., 123.

29 Ibid., 126.

30 Ibid., 127.

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The problem now is to identify the ship-type represented by the graffito. It appears to depict relatively short vessels, rather than the extremely elongated form of some of the warships from the late Viking Age. It is also questionable whether true longships would have been particularly suitable for the lengthy voyage on the Russian rivers to Constantinople instead of relatively small and shallow vessels. It should also be noted that in many places, such as Russia, the journey involved carrying the ships themselves overland for short distances, and the smaller ships were apparently much more suitable for this.[31] The obvious conclusion to be drawn from the above factors is that the graffiti represent a universal ship-type from the early Viking Age used for warfare or trade. Some support for this earlier date derives from the drawing style of the dragon-head. The ribbon-shaped body with protruding ears shows similarities with the Borre style (c. AD 840–970).

However, what is most important in the graffito-vessel is that the drawing is focused on the dragon-head, rather than on the whole ship. It is not difficult to provide a reason for this. The dragon-head was also intended to express the status of the ship's owner. It served as a visual symbol of power, wealth, and prestige.[32] Any ship could be called a dragon if equipped with an animal-shaped head on the stem.

Grotesque, carved animal heads (particularly of dragons - 'serpents') were often used by the Vikings to adorn the prows of their warships and were one of the most prominent parts of the ship. It is a northern European custom dating back to at least the 1st–2nd centuries AD, as is confirmed by Norwegian rock-carvings.[33] Dragons were a favourite figure-head for Viking ships, but unfortunately no actual example has survived.[34] Such vessels were the pride of their owners, displaying craftsmanship of superb quality.[35]

There is also good reason to believe that in some cases, if not in all, the dragon-head was not permanently fixed to the prow, but could be attached and detached at will.[36] Moreover, when not being used, the ships were kept in sheds and while they were there everything that was not secure was removed, even planks of the deck and the

31 O. Crumlin-Pedersen, 'Schiffe und Schiffahrtswege im Ostseeraum während des 9-12. Jahrhunderts', *Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission*, 69 (1988) 530–63.

32 M. Sprague, *Norse Warfare: The Unconventional Battle Strategies of the Ancient Vikings* (New York 2007) 90.

33 They are known from picture stones in Gotland, from the Bayeux Tapestry and from a carved piece of wood found in Bergen. See A. S. Gräslund, 'Drakar i Uppåkra', in B. Hårdh (Hrg.), *Fler fynd i centrum. Materialstudier i och kring Uppåkra* (Stockholm 2003) 179–88 with reference.

34 P. du Chaillu, *The Viking Age*, II (Paris 1890) 132; Jesch, *Ships and Men* 145. Five animal heads were found in the Oseberg grave, but none of them belonged to the ship. The figures were probably used in religious processions. The carving found in the Gokstad ship burial decorated a chieftain's bed post. However, these beautiful animal heads can give us an indication of how the dragon heads that adorned the Viking ships might have appeared.

35 Chaillu, *The Viking Age*, 152; See also G. Jones, *The Norse Atlantic Saga* (London 1964) 191–201; Jesch, *Ships and Men*, 150 (it could easily be cut down to make access to the warriors on the enemy ship easier).

36 Chaillu, *The Viking Age*, 153; A. Forte, R. Oram, Fr. Pedersen, *Viking Empire* (Cambridge 2005) 149.

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dragon-heads.[37] This gives us the reason for the disappearance of the dragon-heads. They have not survived mainly because of their mobility. Icelandic law ('Landnámabók') stated that the stem dragons should be removed on approaching land lest the island's guardian spirits took flight.[38] This also indicates that the dragon-heads had an apotropaic effect.[39] Ships without removable dragon-heads sometimes had spiralling snakes at the bow and stern.[40] The toothy and bug-eyed figureheads on Viking ships would scare away enemies and evil spirits both on land and sea. They would provide protection for ships and their crews. The dragon-head made it easy to recognize a certain ship and clearly showed *who* the leader was and *where* he was in battle. As with the ornamentation of the stern, the purpose of the figure-head was often to indicate the name of the ship in a non-literate society (albeit in a sometimes convoluted manner)[41] and *possibly,* in the case of naval ships, to demonstrate the owner's status and prestige. This also means that common people would have owned or served on plainer vessels.

In Viking culture, the warship was the ultimate expression of their dynamism, its importance reflected in the proliferation of ship representations found on their memorial stones, coinage and in their graffiti. Love of their ships also continued into the afterlife, as indicated by the magnificent Gokstad and Oseberg ship burials and by the custom of using a man's ship as his funeral pyre.[42]

The obvious conclusion drawn from the findings above is that we are dealing with the ship graffito of a Scandinavian vessel from the early Viking Age, which represented the property of a wealthy man. Thus, the problem is to identify the ship's owner. Given the meagre evidence at our disposal, it would be unwise to attempt such an identification. This individual must be sought from among those Nordic leaders (sometimes expelled or banished from their lands who acted as naval condotiers, undertaking service with whoever appeared to offer the best prospects of pay and loot.[43] It is well-known that there was significant contact between Byzantium and the northerners from the ninth century onwards. The latter came to the Byzantine capital through the mediation of the Kievan Rus, who were partly of Nordic origin.[44] Many such Vikings,

37 Chaillu, *The Viking Age* 148.

38 The evidence comes from the redaction known as 'Hauksbók', which was written c. 1306–8, a translation that is in R. Page, *Chronicles of the Vikings: Records, Memorials, and Myths* (Toronto 1995) 174.

39 *Old Norse Religion in Longterm Perspectives. Origins, Changes and Interactions*, ed. A. Andrén, K. Jennlert, C. Randvere (Lund 2006) 125.

40 Sprague, *Norse Warfare*, 331.

41 Ibid., 90.

42 H. Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe* (London 1993) 19.

43 K. N. Ciggaar, *Western Travellers to Constantinople: the West and Byzantium, 962-1204: Cultural and Political Relations* (Leiden 1996) 106; *Kulturistorisk Leksikon for Nordisk Middelalder*, XIX (Copenhagen/Malmö 1975) s.v. 'Varjagar'. For the early period it is difficult to distinguish between Russians and Scandinavians.

44 Swedish Vikings, who established themselves in Kiev as rulers over the native Slavic population, who called them Rus hence 'Russia'. In AD 860 they launched a daring – albeit unsuccessful – attack on Constantinople (Miklagaard or 'The Great Town', as they called it) by sailing their ships down the Dnieper and across

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referred to by the Rus, Arabs and Byzantines alike as 'Varangians', went on to Constantinople and joined the Byzantine army, after a spell in Russia[45] as happened in AD 911, 935, 941, 955 and 968. Twenty years later, in 988, prince Vladimir of Kiev sent as many as 6000 Vikings to assist the emperor Basil II, and it was from among these warriors that the renowned Varangian guard was subsequently established. [46]

In seeking the evidence for our assumption, proposed above, we need to consult written sources such as the sagas. They narrate the journey of some northerners to Byzantium. However, the only certain visitor among the Nordic leaders to Constantinople was Harald Sigurdsson (or Harald Hardrada).[47] There is reason to think that the journeys of all the others are historically somewhat dubious.

The second graffito (Fig. 2) is to be found at the western end of the north gallery. It has been incised into the marble column which is located near the public entrance, at approximately 1.70 cm from the floor (Photo 2). It is clearly a warship because of the shape of its hull. The sailing direction is towards the left and the vessel is 10 cm long. The forward slanting, straight stem is not present on Viking ships, but there are depictions with straight, vertical stems. Parallels for this graffito can be found among the ship graffiti from Himmelev Church.[48] The vessel also has a single mast and a square sail. The slanting line behind the mast perhaps indicates a side rudder.

The third graffito (Fig. 3) is on the opposite side of the marble column from the first graffito. At approximately 1.52 cm from the floor the stems of three ships can be seen, in

Continued

the Black Sea. Further major campaigns against the Byzantine Empire were to follow in 907, 941 and 944, by which time the Rus had already begun to be assimilated by their Slavic subjects and could no longer truly be regarded as Vikings. The Byzantines, expressing their contempt, called the open craft of the Russians *monoxyla* or mere dug-out canoes but the sagas and the rune-stones assert that the Swedish and the Danish vessels were the equals of those of the Norse. S. Franklin, J. Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus 750-1200* (New York 1996) 29–50, 91–100, 113–51.

45 Sizable groups of them were hired as mercenaries by successive Kievan and Novgorodian princes — a practice that continued well into the eleventh century, the last reference to Viking mercenaries in Russia dating to 1043.

46 V.G. Vasil'evskij, 'Varjago-russkaja i varjago-anglijskaja druzina v Konstantinopole', in *Trudy*, I (St. Petersburg 1908); E.A. R'dzevskaja, *Drevnjaja Rus' I Skandinavija IX-XIV vv.* (Moscow 1978); E.A. Mel'nikova, 'Varjagi, varangi, veringi: skandinavts' na Rusi I v Vizantii', *VV* 55 (1998) 159–64; G. Schramm, 'Die Waräger: Osteuropäsche Schiksale einer nordgermanischen Gruppenbezeichnung', *Die Welt der Slawen* 28 (1983) 38–67; S. Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium: an Aspect of Byzantine Military History*, transl., rev. edn. by B. Benedikz (New York 1978) 194–5; H. R. E. Davidson, *The Viking Road to Byzantium* (London 1976) 159, 162. Cf. also Ciggaar, *Western Travellers*, 107. The latest evidence of their visit to the church is a Cyrillic inscription from the eleventh century, which is the following: 'Игорь оулминге тутї s' (Igor Ulminge wrote this).

47 He was the half-brother of King Olaf of Norway (who was to be canonized shortly afterwards) and one of the most illustrious Varangians. See Ciggaar, *Western Travellers*, 108.

48 The church was erected in the first half of the twelfth century on a ridge overlooking the inner waters of Roskilde Fjord in Denmark. See O. Kastolm, 'Six ship graffiti from Himmelev Church', *Maritime Archaeology Newsletter of Denmark* 26 (2011) 30.

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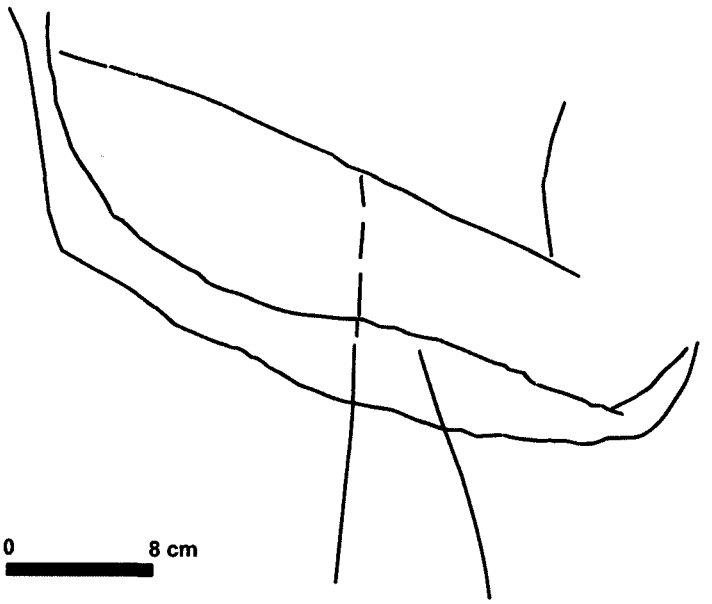


Figure 2



Photo 2 Warship. North gallery, west end, Hagia Sophia.

a line, overlapping each other so that one has the impression of looking at a fleet of ships (Photo 3). Most often only the stems and not whole ships are depicted. It is not difficult to

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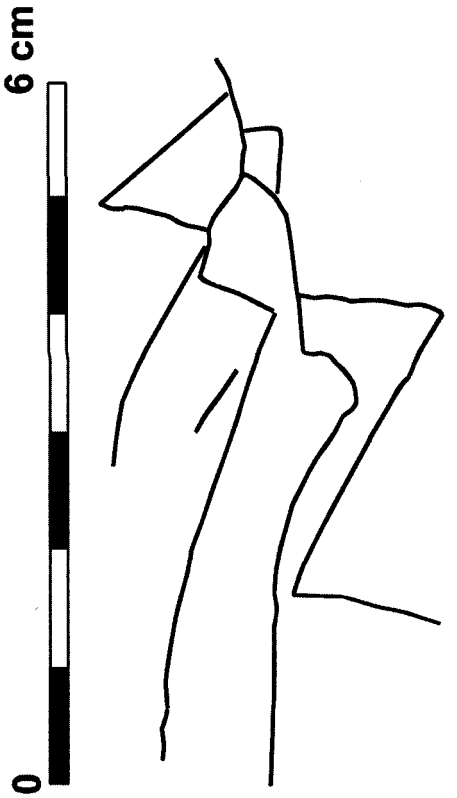


Figure 3

provide reasons for this, bearing in mind that the stem was the most prominent feature of the ship. Support for such a view comes from the text in Snorri Sturluson's Saga about Olav Tryggvason's ship called 'Long Serpent'.[49] Unlike a literary text, our graffito does not tell us anything else about the ships. What then is the explanation? If we carefully examine the graffito, we shall find that the figure-heads, together with the tall, slender character of the stems, clearly show that the ships depicted in the fleet are indeed warships with dragon-heads arranged in battle order. As already stated, any Viking ship could be called a *drakar* if it was equipped with an animal-shaped head on the stem.

We can discern the same motif of ships in a line and some continuity of ship design on a piece of wood known as the 'Bryggen stick' found in Bergen, Norway. The stick was discovered in a stratum dating from between 1248 and 1332.[50] It shows a row of vessels

49 Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla, § 95 (http://omacl.org/Heimskringla/trygvason3.html): 'The ship was a dragon ... but this ship was far larger, and more carefully put together in all her parts. The king called this ship the Long Serpent ... The Long Serpent had thirty-four benches for rowers. The head and the arched tail were both gilt, and the bulwarks were as high as in sea-going ships. This ship was the best and most costly ship ever made in Norway.'

50 J. Bill, 'Ship graffiti', in http://www.vikingeskibsmuseet.dk/en/the-sea-stallion-past-and-present/longships-magnified/picture-sources/ship-graffiti/

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Photo 3 The stems of three ships in a row. South gallery, Hagia Sophia.

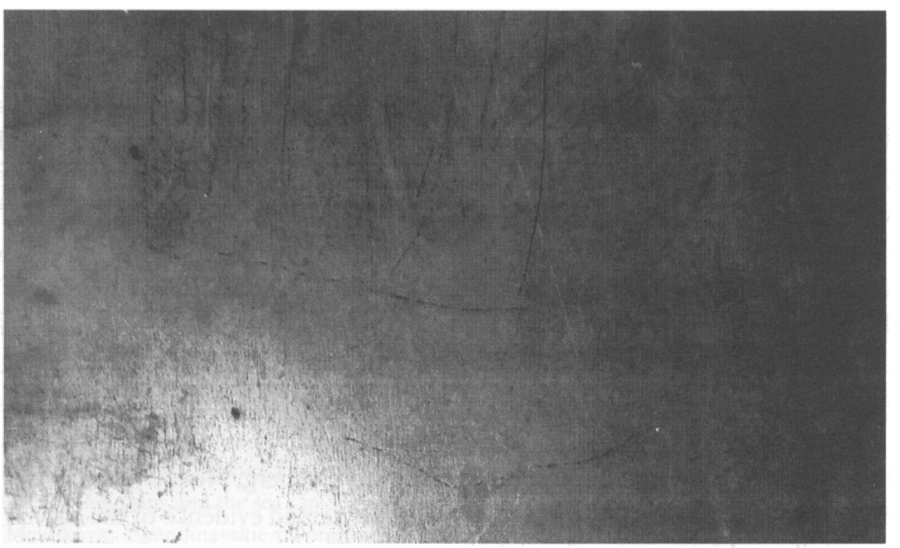


Photo 4 Two vessels in profile with high bows. South gallery, Hagia Sophia.

lying abreast of one another. Some of these ships have animal heads on their prows, others show vessels with wind vanes.

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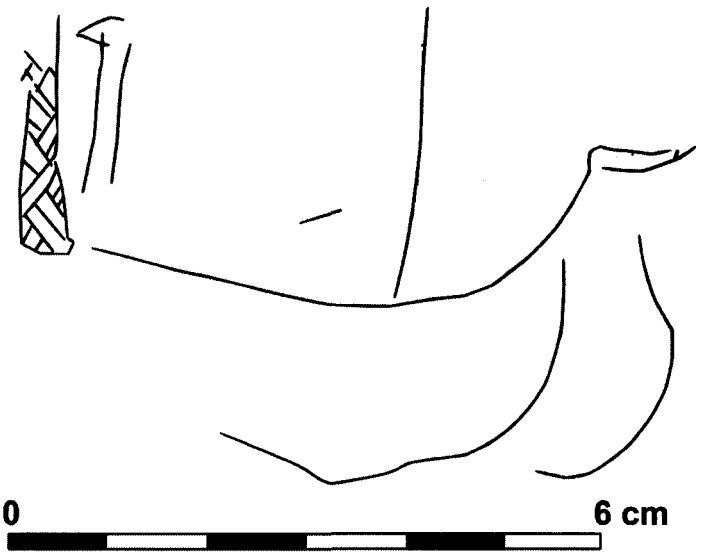


Figure 4

The fourth graffito is to be found on the east wall of the south gallery (Photo 4, Fig. 4). It has been incised into the right-hand side of the first marble window-frame, at approximately 1.30 cm from the floor. The two vessels depicted in profile are relatively small (7 x 4.5 cm), with high bows, and the sailing direction is to the left. The first ship shows the stem decorated with zigzag bends and the stern in the form of a tail. It has one mast and possibly a sail. Again, we can see that the drawing clearly depicts only the stem of the ship. We can conclude that the ship depicted is indeed a Viking warship because of the tall, slender character of the decorated stem. The second ship seems somewhat harder to categorize, primarily because of its poor carving. Only the high prow, without any decoration, is clearly visible, and it differs from the first one. However, it is more likely that the ship belongs to the type of Viking long ship. More specifically, the prow can be considered to be a pointer in that direction.

We can find parallels for this graffito in the Viking ships graffiti from the 'Bryggen stick' and from the north wall of the nave in the stave church at Fortun in Norway.[51] It is appropriate to recall that in common with other Viking objects, wooden ships were sometimes decorated. Striking examples of Viking wood carving, on both stems, were found in the early ninth-century ship burial site near Oseberg, Norway. The latter ninth-century Norwegian Gokstad ship burial site also contained evidence of the carved zigzag lines that follow the upper strakes of the vessel. The case of the Ladby vessel from Denmark is very similar; it also appears to have had mouldings incised along the edges

51 J. Bill, 'Ship graffiti', in http://www.vikingeskibsmuseet.dk/en/the-sea-stallion-past-and-present/longships-magnified/picture-sources/ship-graffiti/

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of some of the planking.[52] During the thirteenth century, the decorations, which proliferated in the Viking Age ships, gradually disappeared.[53]

The scratchings or carvings of ships are difficult to date but as a rule it is possible to give a *terminus ante quem* or a *terminus post quem* – a time before which or a time after which the graffito was made. The established contact between Byzantium and the northerners from the ninth century onwards and the similarities between the graffiti and the universal ship-type used for warfare or trade from the early Viking Age provide a *terminus post quem* of the second part of the ninth- beginning of the tenth century. The *terminus ante quem* is the year AD 1000, when a clear difference in the details of hull design and rigging had been established between the ships of the early and late Viking Age. In this scheme of things, we are dealing with a period not earlier than the middle of the ninth century, nor later than the end of the tenth century.

The place where these ship graffiti were incised should be mentioned. Their location in the most renowned Byzantine church which was also the biggest in the world at the time was not by chance. We might note that if a Scandinavian's first view of Constantinople inspired wonder, the church of Hagia Sophia, called *Egisif*, was the only edifice that was impressed on the collective Scandinavian memory.[54] Consequently, there is nothing strange about the appearance of the graffiti in this location.

Unfortunately, we will perhaps never know who made these drawings. However, the fact that the graffiti demonstrate surprising workmanship details such as sails, rudder, oars, mast, board and even decorated and carved prows leaves no doubt that they were made by people who knew about the sea and the ships. It seems highly probable that the drawings were made on marble by a skilled hand using a stylos, an awl or a small chisel.

I want to discover the reason for the appearance of the graffiti in question. According to M. Goudas, 'the reason for creating these representations ... cannot be other than simple amusement.'[55] Other scholars studying the graffiti have a different opinion. They characterize them as prayers of the seafarers who believed in the assistance they could receive from God or from gods.[56] Another possible explanation is given by N. Ovčarov, who writes that sailors loved their vessels as creatures with a soul and believed that their voice was heard when they creaked in a storm.[57] It is tempting, and not unreasonable, to choose one of the opinions cited above. However, if we consider their location, another possibility comes to mind. It clearly shows a complete lack of

52 Forte, Oram, Pedersen, *Viking Empire*, 148.

53 J. Bill, 'Viking ships and the sea', in S. Brink (ed.), *The Viking World* (London/ New York 2008) 179.

54 E. Melnikova, 'Skandinavskie palomniki v Konstantinopole', in *Istoriceskaya rol' Konstantinopolya* (Moscow 2003) 76.

55 M. Goudas, 'Μεσαιωνικὰ χαράγματα πλοίων ἐπὶ τοῦ Θησείου', *Βυζαντίς* 2 (1911) 329–57.

56 Maritime graffitti as prayers for divine protection are a well-established custom since Antiquity. See, for example, Meinardus, 'Medieval navigation' 31.

57 N. Ovčarov, *Ships and Shipping in the Black Sea XIV-XIX Centuries* (Sofia 1993) 9, 104–10 (in Bulgarian).

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interest in Byzantine liturgy by the artist: he was hidden behind a column or was with his back to the central part of the church. This suggests that the graffiti were a way to pass the time. Anyone who has attended the whole of a long Orthodox service can appreciate that worshippers had plenty of time to scratch something into the marble.

In conclusion, I would like to add these four ship graffiti to the Scandinavian presence in Byzantium.[58] They might be best taken as a sign of the Scandinavian activity in the Byzantine capital. Moreover, they are valuable sources in the efforts by scholars to reconstruct Viking vessels. In particular, this could be true for warships. Finally, it is important to note that many graffiti are in a bad state, mainly because of present-day vandalism. In light of this, more attention should be paid to preserving these testimonies from the past as they are an important part of our maritime heritage.

58 They are mainly runic inscriptions that have been found on a marble lion from Piraeus, now in Venice, and on a balustrade in the south gallery in Hagia Sophia.

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