

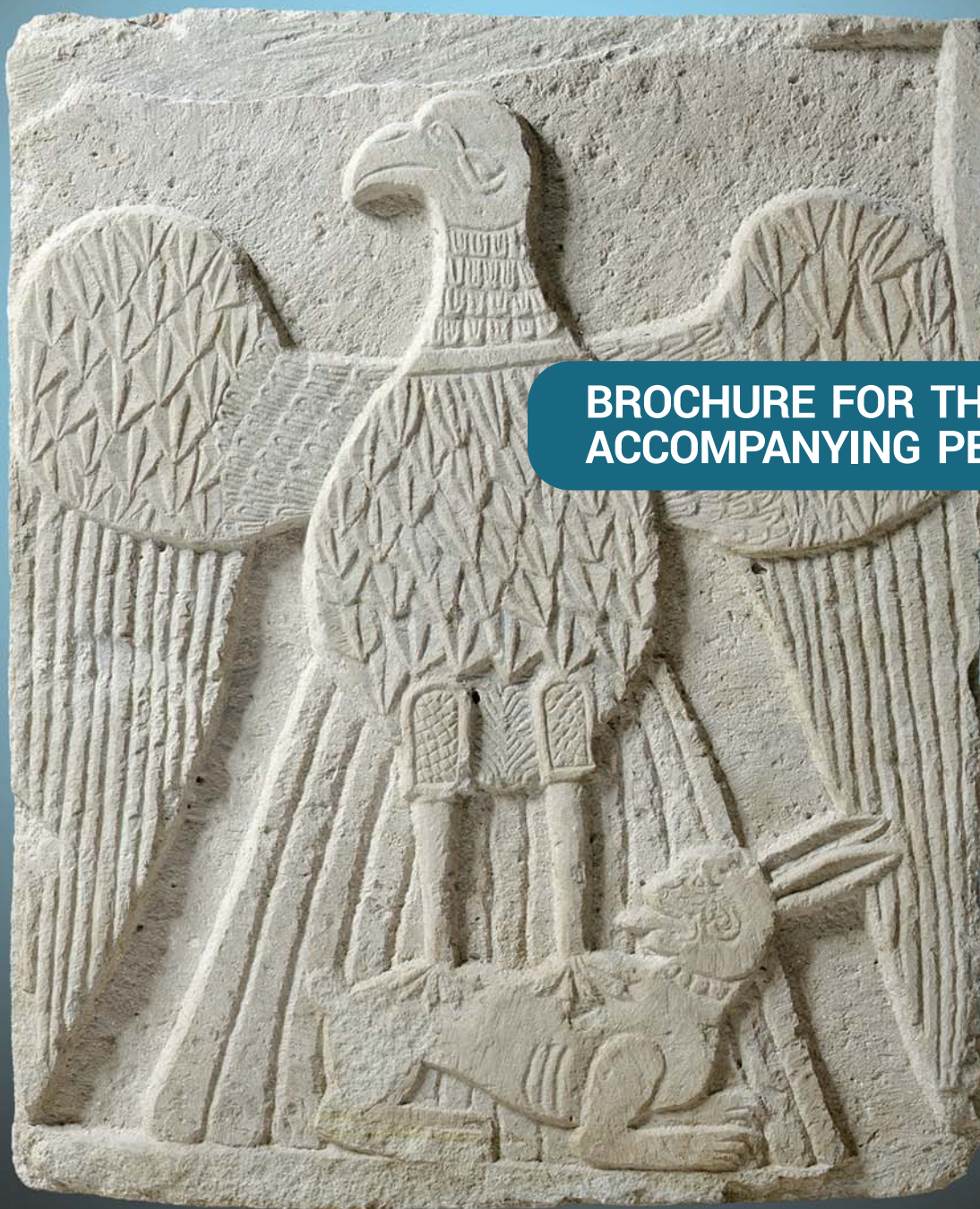
MINISTRY OF CULTURE & SPORTS  
GENERAL DIRECTORATE OF ANTIQUITIES & CULTURAL HERITAGE



MUSEUM  
OF BYZANTINE  
CULTURE

# “Touch and discover Byzantium”

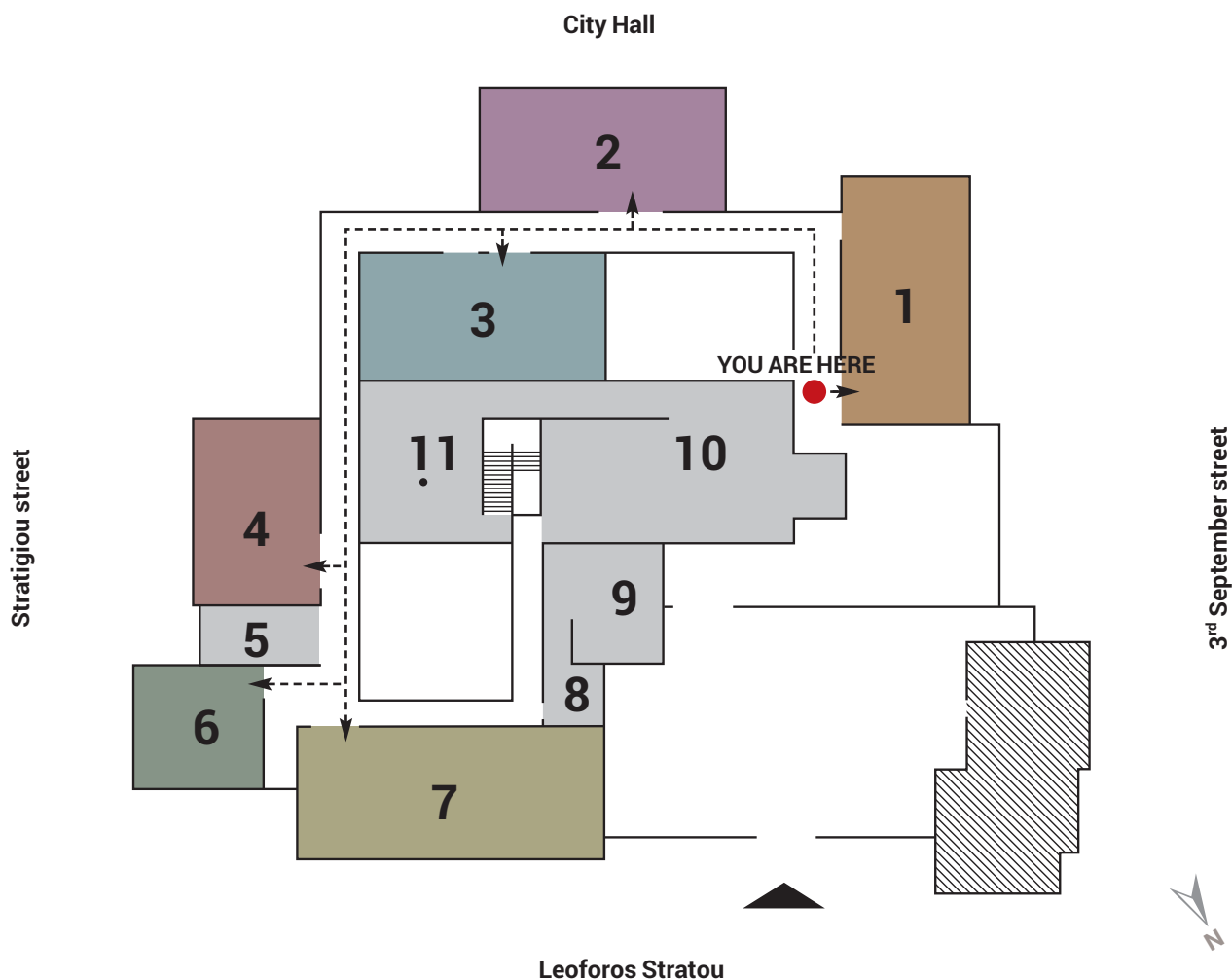
AN AUDIO - TACTILE TOUR  
FOR BLIND AND VISUALLY - IMPAIRED VISITORS



**BROCHURE FOR THE  
ACCOMPANYING PERSON**







## FLOOR PLAN OF THE PERMANENT EXHIBITION OF THE MUSEUM OF BYZANTINE CULTURE

Welcome to the Museum of Byzantine Culture, a public museum inaugurated in 1994 which received an award in 2005 from the Council of Europe. The simple building that houses the Museum, designed by architect Kyriakos Krokos, is considered one of the finest examples of Modern Greek architecture.

The Museum's 11 galleries present Byzantine culture from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The exhibits, which are thematically grouped, chronologically narrate "short stories", thus presenting Byzantine culture in a direct and pleasant way.

We will be touring six galleries opening off the left and right sides of a spacious passage with ramps. By touching 15 marble and clay exhibits dating from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, we will approach various aspects of Byzantium.

The Byzantine Empire was multi-national, with an organization based on Ancient Greek culture, Roman tradition, and Christianity.



# GALLERY 1



## EXHIBIT 1

In the first gallery, which is entitled “Early Christian Churches”, we will become acquainted with two marble exhibits. During the Early Christian period, that is from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, large churches, *basilicae*, were built that were imposing for their magnificence. These *basilicae* were large, elongated, rectangular buildings with their Sanctuary in a semi-circular niche on the eastern narrow side. Colonnades with tall marble columns separated the main nave into aisles, and marble closure slabs blocked the openings between columns. In Greek these slabs are called *thorakia*, because they are as tall as the chest - the thorax, that is - of human beings.

If you make your way towards the rear of this gallery you can touch the large marble closure slab from a basilica in Thessaloniki which dates to the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. It was made and decorated in such a way as to give the impression that it was actually two identical, joined slabs. For this reason it is called a “twin closure slab”.

Its decoration is geometric. Starting from the left, you will see four lozenges inscribed in one another and surrounded by a rectangular frame. The fourth and smallest lozenge at the center of the slab is decorated by a four-petaled flower. The corners of the lozenges end in heart-shaped and trefoil decorative motifs.

On the left side of the slab, at the four corners of the rectangular frame, are four triangles adorned with lilies. The same decoration is repeated on the right side of the slab.

Lozenges inscribed in a rectangular frame, which had first appeared on wooden furniture, were a popular decorative motif in the sculpture of this age.

## EXHIBIT 2

Turning back towards the entrance to this gallery, you will find a 5<sup>th</sup> century marble *ambo* (pulpit) from the Church of Panagia Acheiropoiitos in Thessaloniki. The *ambo*, from the verb *ana-baino*, is the raised balcony which the priest ascended to read the Gospels and Psalms. It occupies an important role on religious holidays such as the Elevation of the Cross and Sunday of Orthodoxy as well as during splendid ceremonies like the coronation of emperors.

The *ambo* you are touching is monolithic, that is, it was made of a single large piece of white marble from a quarry on nearby Thasos. At left there is a low staircase with three stairs leading to the semi-circular balcony with parapet, which is unfortunately not preserved in its entirety. The parapet was decorated on its exterior with relief colonettes (small columns) and closure slabs with crosses and a Christogram, that is, the Greek letters *Chi* and *Rho*, meaning Christ.

There were also monolithic *ambones* with staircases in the churches of Agia Sophia and Agios Menas in Thessaloniki.

## GALLERY 2



### EXHIBIT 3

We now continue to the second gallery, called “Early Christian City and Private Dwelling”, where you will see two clay vases. This gallery is organized around the *triclinium*, the reception area of a wealthy 5th century residence that was decorated with colorful mosaic floors and wall paintings. This house was discovered during excavations in Thessaloniki’s Upper City (Ano Poli). Various topics are presented around the *triclinium*, including commerce and daily household life.

Set near the floor and supported on a metal base, you will find a 4<sup>th</sup> century clay amphora from Thessaloniki. The amphora was the most widely-disseminated vase type in the Mediterranean. Its ancient Greek name, derived from the adverb *amphi* (“on both sides”) and the verb *pherein* (“carry”), precisely described its basic two-handled shape. Wine, oil, grain, honey, dried goods and salted-preserved fish were all transported and stored in amphorae.

The amphora you are touching is of reddish-brown clay. It has a cylindrical neck with small mouth that was sealed with a piece of tile and two handles extending from the neck to the shoulders so that it could be securely held. It has a ribbed body and thick walls. Its rounded base makes it obvious that it was not made to stand upright.

Its shape assisted its packing inside the cargo holds of ships in rows in such a way that the amphorae in the top row

were “nested” in the gaps created by the handles and shoulders of the row below. In this fashion the entire cargo became a single mass that would not shift position easily, and thus helped keep the ship stable.

During Byzantine times, the amphora was also called *megarikón* or *magarikón*, a name that originally referred to amphorae made in Megara in Attica, and which later prevailed for all vases of this type. From the 14<sup>th</sup> century onward, *magariká* used as transport vessels were replaced by the wooden barrels used by Italian merchants, especially the Venetians and Genovese.





## GALLERY 2



### EXHIBIT 4

At the rear of this gallery and to the left, we will make our way with the aid of a ramp to the section of exhibits that present the kitchen of the Byzantine house.

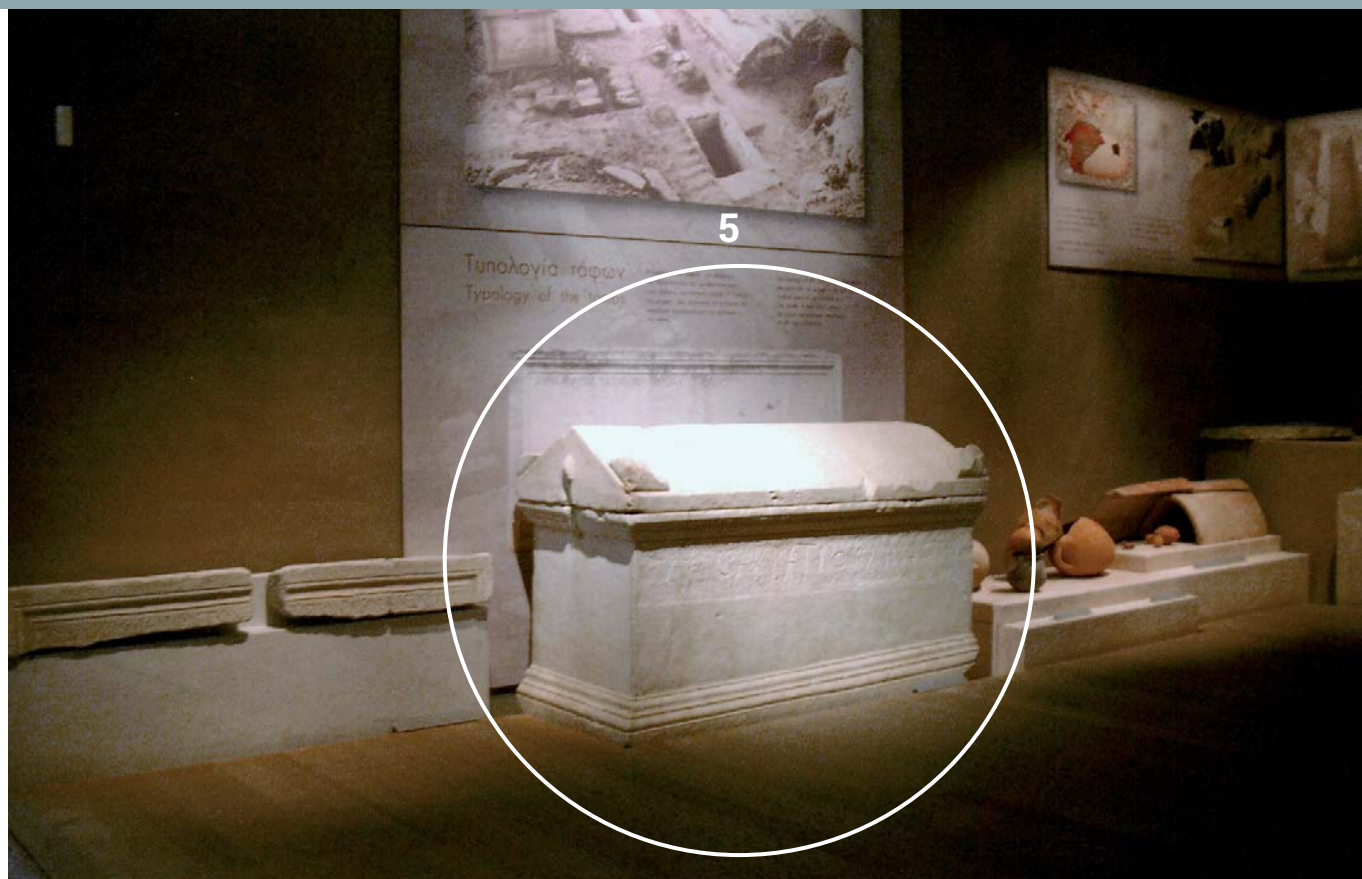
At left, on a counter filled with pottery, you will find a clay *pinákio* - a plate, that is - that dates to the 4<sup>th</sup> century and comes from Thessaloniki. It is a shallow, open vase of brownish-red clay with thin, smooth walls, appropriate for serving dry, not runny, food.

At both their daily and holiday dinners, the Byzantines used clay tableware such as plates, bowls, and cups. During this age the ancient custom still prevailed of eating in a semi-reclining position on comfortable couches with the food on small and large plates set on low tables in front of the couches.

Beginning in the 8<sup>th</sup> century this custom changed and the Byzantines gradually began to eat seated around a large table. Simple vessels like plates, bowls, and cups, however, remained the same.



## GALLERY 3



### EXHIBIT 5

We continue on to the third gallery, whose title is “From the Elysian Fields to the Christian Paradise. Tombs and Cemeteries in the Early Christian period”. Thessaloniki, like all ancient cities, was walled. For hygienic reasons, its cemeteries extended to the east and west outside its walls.

On your left you will find a large marble sarcophagus, in which the body of the deceased was placed for burial. It consists of the coffin where the deceased was buried and a gabled cover with four stylized akroteria at its corners. Below on the base and above on the rim of the coffin, you can feel the molding, a decorative band that resembles the waves of the sea.

Marble sarcophagi were a luxury tomb type which only rich families could afford, since they were expensive to construct. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, there were famous sarcophagi production workshops in Rome, Athens and Asia Minor.

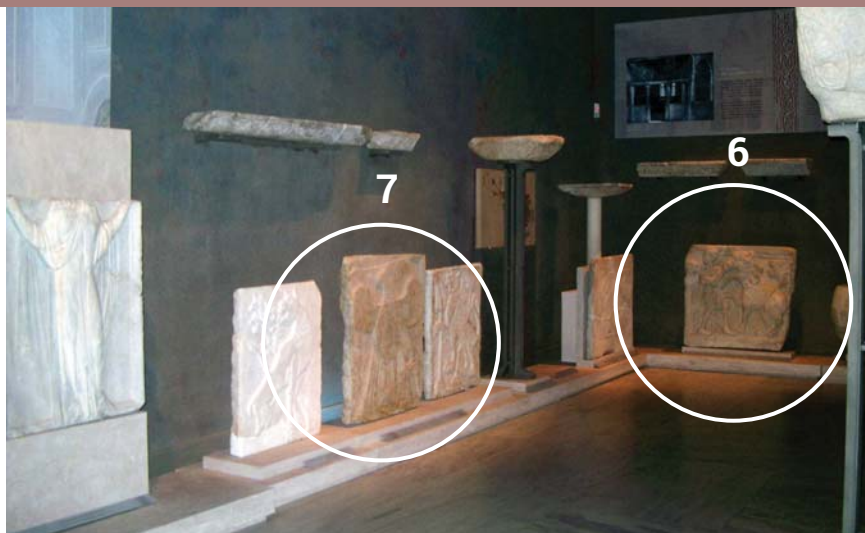
The sarcophagus you are touching was made in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and was commissioned by an unknown but wealthy family in Thessaloniki. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century it was reused. At that time, they erased the inscription on the front face and carved the information about the next person buried there, who was “Aurelius Sabbatios, son of Markos”.

The name “Sabbatios”, which is of Semitic origins, was originally given by Jews to children born on Saturday (*Sabbato*), but from the 2<sup>nd</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> century the name was also used by gentiles. The sarcophagus was found in Thessaloniki's eastern cemetery on the campus of the University of Thessaloniki, where evidence of the city's Jewish community was found. It is possible that the deceased Aurelius Sabbatios was one of its members.





## GALLERY 4



### EXHIBIT 6

In the fourth gallery, entitled "From Iconoclasm to the splendour of the Macedonian and Komnenian dynasties", we will familiarize ourselves with six objects. This gallery presents the Middle Byzantine period (9<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> century), and touches upon such subjects as Iconoclasm, church architecture and sculpture, as well as changes in burial practices.

Proceeding to the right in this gallery, you will find a 12<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> century marble closure slab from Agia Aikaterini in Thessaloniki which depicts a warrior at the moment he is being attacked by a lion.

At left the warrior, in military uniform and helmet, is attempting to fend off the open jaws of the lion. The battle is a fierce one given that the wild beast has already latched onto the warrior's thigh. In the upper right-hand corner, there appears the head of a lioness with open mouth. Below, between the warrior's legs there was vegetation, suggesting that the scene is taking place outdoors.

Some scholars believe that the warrior depicted here is Digenis Akritas, a mythical Byzantine warrior and the hero of a popular 11<sup>th</sup> century poem narrating his life and achievements. Digenis, with an Arab ruler as father and a Byzantine mother, was a warrior who guarded the furthest reaches, the *akres* (thus, "*Akri-tas*"), that is the frontiers of the empire. The struggles described by the poem are the fierce battles on the Byzantine-Arab borders in the 9th-10th century, an era of prosperity and expansion for the Arab world.

Others interpret the scene as the battle between Heracles and the lion of Nemea which was terrorizing the region's inhabitants. The mythical hero Heracles, son of the god Zeus and the mortal woman Alkmene, symbolized supernatural physical strength.

From the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a movement involving a return to classical antiquity with mythological subjects and fantastic animals appeared in sculpture.



### EXHIBIT 7

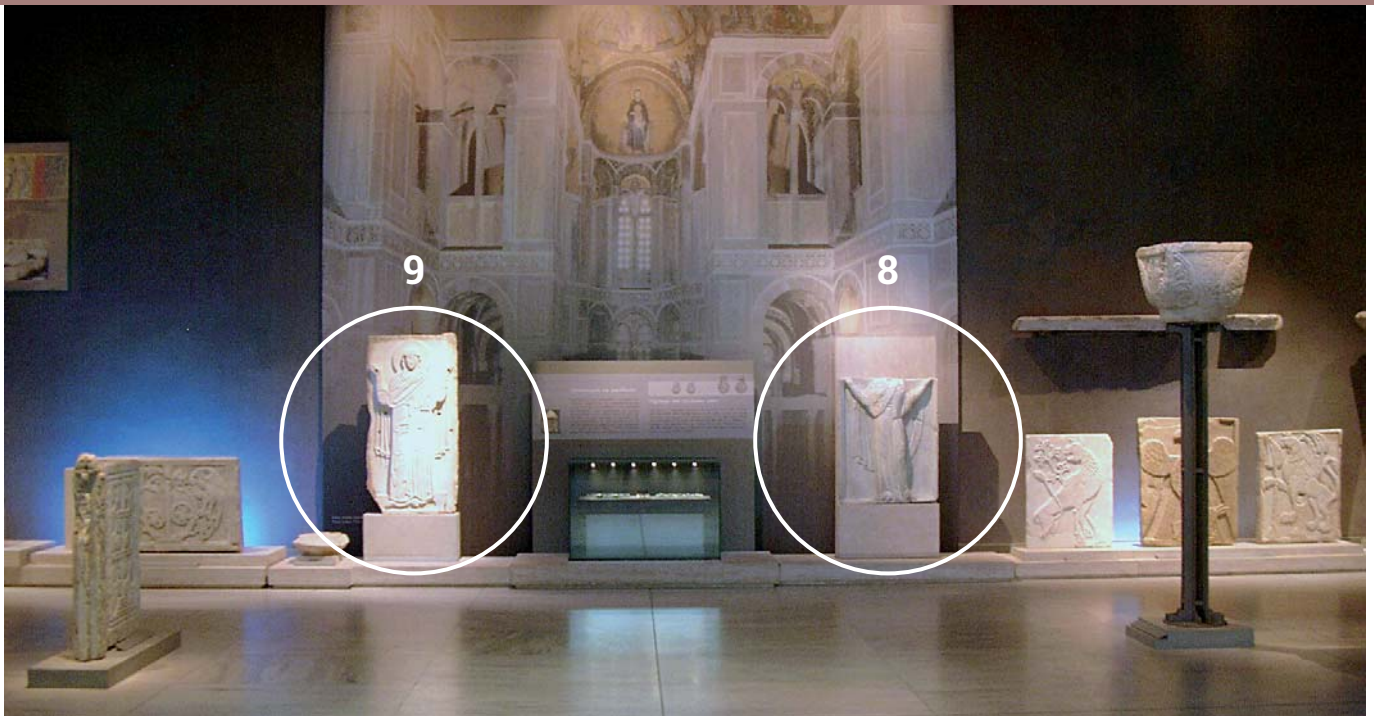
Proceeding to your left, you will find a 10<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> century stone closure slab from Thessaloniki with an eagle trapping a hare in its talons and stepping on the hare's back.

The eagle is standing with its head turned to the left and its large wings spread wide. Below it, the hare, with large ears and extended tongue, looks back fearfully, its legs gathered beneath it. The eagle's abundant feathering has been rendered with incisions that imitate embroidery.

An eagle trapping a hare decorates a number of relief plaques and fabrics between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century. These subjects, which are sometimes depicted dramatically and very vividly, frequently have an apotropaic character.



## GALLERY 4



### EXHIBIT 8

On your left you will find a marble relief icon dating to the late 11<sup>th</sup> century that was found by chance in 1926 near the church of Profitis Ilias in Thessaloniki's Upper City (Ano Poli). Though it is broken and the head is missing, it is considered one of the loveliest works of Byzantine sculpture.

The Virgin Mary is depicted standing and in an attitude of prayer with her arms raised towards heaven. She is wearing a long dress, tightened with a high, narrow belt. On her shoulders she wears a *maphorion*, a long scarf that would have covered her broken-off head. Crosses of incised dots adorn her clothing on the wrists, shoulders, knees and lower ends of the scarf. Her tall slender figure gracefully bends its left leg. Beneath the light, asymmetric drapery of her clothing the volume of her body is delicately delineated, thus recalling works of classical antiquity and suggesting an experienced Byzantine sculptor.

Relief icons of sacred personages were a new artistic genre that appeared after the period of Iconoclasm, during the 9<sup>th</sup> - 10<sup>th</sup> century. Normally rectangular in shape and relatively large, they were set in the eastern part of the Sanctuary, on icon stands, in church entrances, and even in squares, fountains and the gates of walls.

Sculpture workshops in Constantinople and Thessaloniki produced such icons, some of which were transferred as war spoils to Venice following the sack of Constantinople in 1204 by the Crusaders.

### EXHIBIT 9

At left is displayed an intact 11<sup>th</sup> century relief icon which until 1920 was built in to the Church of Ypapante in Thessaloniki.

It depicts a standing Virgin Mary praying, her feet resting on a low footstool. Left and right of the halo surrounding her round face is the inscription MHTHP ΘΕΟΥ, meaning MOTHER OF GOD, done with the Greek letters (MHP and ΘΥ) and relief crosses. The Virgin wears a long dress and headscarf (a *maphorion*) ending in a fringe. Crosses composed of incised dots adorn her wrists and elbows. Her palms are perforated by two circular openings which are believed to have served for the gushing of holy water or myrrh. Another four deep holes, two below each elbow, served to support vessels for the collection of the liquid that poured forth. The icon was probably originally set at an *agiasma*, a sacred site with a natural water source that flowed from the holes in the Virgin's palms.

Her robust figure, rendered in flat, linear relief represents an anti-classical, provincial artistic movement of the 11<sup>th</sup> century that coexisted with the classical current we discerned in the unfortunately headless icon of the Virgin Mary.

The practice of depicting the Virgin Mary as "gushing" holy water was linked with her attribute as the "source of life", an iconographic theme that later assumed definitive form as the Panagia-Zoodochos Pigi (the "Life-giving Source") in portable icons and engravings.

There is an opinion that here we have a depiction of the myrrh-gushing Saint Theodora, who lived in Thessaloniki in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and that the inscription MOTHER OF GOD is later.

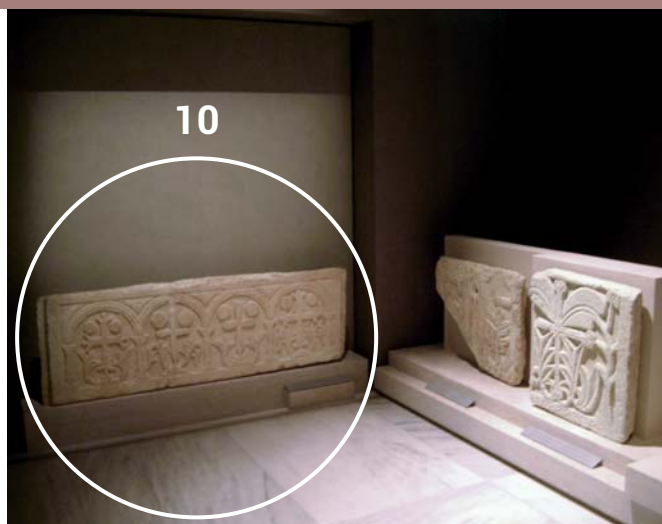
## GALLERY 4

### EXHIBIT 10

If you make your way left to the rear of the gallery, you will find a low-set relief slab dating to the 11<sup>th</sup> century from the church of Agia Sophia in Thessaloniki. The plaque, which is long and narrow, is also called a “pseudo-sarcophagus” because it closed off the visible side of a built tomb in a special wall alcove inside the church.

The slab is decorated by four arches resting on five columns. In each arch there is a cross on a stepped base from which plants are growing. Atop the horizontal arm of each cross are two patens (*diskaria*). Only in one, the first from the left, there are carved the letters ΦC of the Greek word ΦΩΣ, meaning LIGHT.

Arcades decorated sarcophagi as early as Roman times. On Christian tomb monuments, the cross shocked believers because it reminded them of the martyr's death and resurrection of the Lord, while the leafy cross expressed the idea of the cross that gives eternal life.



Cemeteries, which had previously been outside the walls, were now organized inside the city due to frequent attacks. It also became customary for prominent members of society to be buried inside churches for honorary reasons.

### EXHIBIT 11

If you return to the center of the gallery, you will see a small marble closure slab dating to the late 10<sup>th</sup> - early 11<sup>th</sup> century. It comes from the templon of a church excavated in the castle of Platamonas in Pieria.

The slab is surrounded by a band of bead-and-reel molding with an elongated element and three smaller elements in regular alternation. At the center of the slab is a Resurrection cross, i.e. a cross with two horizontal arms resting on a stepped base. Vine tendrils, vine leaves and bunches of grapes decorated with small holes sprout forth from the base of the cross.

The bead-and-reel, called an *astragal*, was a popular ancient decorative motif that reappeared during this age. The Resurrection cross, which is thus named because Christ holds a similar cross in scenes of the Descent into Hell appeared in art in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The grapes refer to the wine of the Divine Eucharist and the sacrament celebrated in the Sanctuary. It reminded the faithful of the Lord's words: "I am the vine; you are the branches" (John 15:5), suggesting the spiritual communion between Christ and believers.





# GALLERY 6

## EXHIBIT 12

Continue to Gallery 6, "Byzantine Castles", which presents the castles, which were fortified settlements built at crossroads and passes. They were an evolution of the large Early Christian urban centers which were now shrinking in size. These castles provided protection to residents, particularly during times of war, offering them security, food and water. Two clay vases that you will touch provide information about the organization of the castle and daily life inside it.

Proceed to the right rear of the gallery where you can touch a small clay jar dating to the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century that comes from Thessaloniki. It has an oval shape, open mouth, thick rim and walls, and flat base. Its body is decorated at neck and shoulder height with incised lines and isosceles triangles.

The Byzantines stored oil, wine, grain, legumes, preserved fish and meat as well as dried fruits and other foodstuffs in large and small jars like these. Normally they were set in the earthen floor of basements or the semi-underground cellars of houses and monasteries. Their presence in the castles was necessary since they held enough supplies to ensure a sufficiency of food during periods when there was a shortage, as in winter and during sieges.

Due to their high construction cost, when they broke they were repaired with lead clamps and reused for storing solid foods like cereals.



## EXHIBIT 13

Make your way to the left to a T-shaped bench filled with pottery, and touch a clay strainer from Thessaloniki that dates to the 10<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> century. It was found broken and is displayed in repaired form. This vessel is wheel-made; it was fashioned on a potter's wheel. Its rim, which is turned slightly inward, is decorated with an incised wavy line. Its body is round, with a rounded base, and it is perforated. The openings were formed while the clay was still damp, and were made from the outside to the inside of the vessel.

This is a typical vase for household use that has preserved down to the present the same use and form. It was used to strain foods such as greens and vegetables. Byzantine strainers are normally preserved in fragmentary form and are rarely found in excavations.



# GALLERY 7



## EXHIBIT 14

The gallery entitled “The Twilight of Byzantium (1204-1453)” deals with the final years of Byzantium. This was an era of crisis, a difficult age of civil wars, economic and social problems, but simultaneously rich in artistic and intellectual activity. For Thessaloniki it was an age of prosperity that influenced Mt. Athos and the neighboring Slavic peoples. Make your way to the left, where we will get to know two objects.

At the rear of the gallery in a display case filled with pottery, to your right you will find a glazed ceramic bowl dating to the 14<sup>th</sup> century from the cemetery of the Vlatadon Monastery in Thessaloniki. Made on a potter’s wheel, it has a round body, and preserves on its floor traces of the firing process in the kiln. Its decoration is incised: five lines surround the rim, and its floor is decorated with a ten-petal rosette in a medallion.

This exhibit is a representative example of the tableware of this age. The manner of making these wares evolved from the 7<sup>th</sup> century with the addition of a special coating of glass, a process called glazing. While the main purpose of glazing was to waterproof the vase’s interior, painted, relief, and incised decoration later began to be added to its smooth, glossy surface.

Tableware vases, after being covered on their interior with the glaze, were fired in a kiln, stacked in columns. Since the glaze became fluid at higher temperatures, in order to avoid their becoming stuck to one another clay supports were placed between them. These were usually shaped like a tripod, the so-called *tripodiskoi*, while other supports were shaped like a bar or cone. This firing method in columns, which appeared in Byzantine workshops around 1200, increased both kiln capacity as well as workshop production. If we find traces of *tripodiskoi* on the bottom of a vase like that you touched, we infer that this vase was made after 1200.

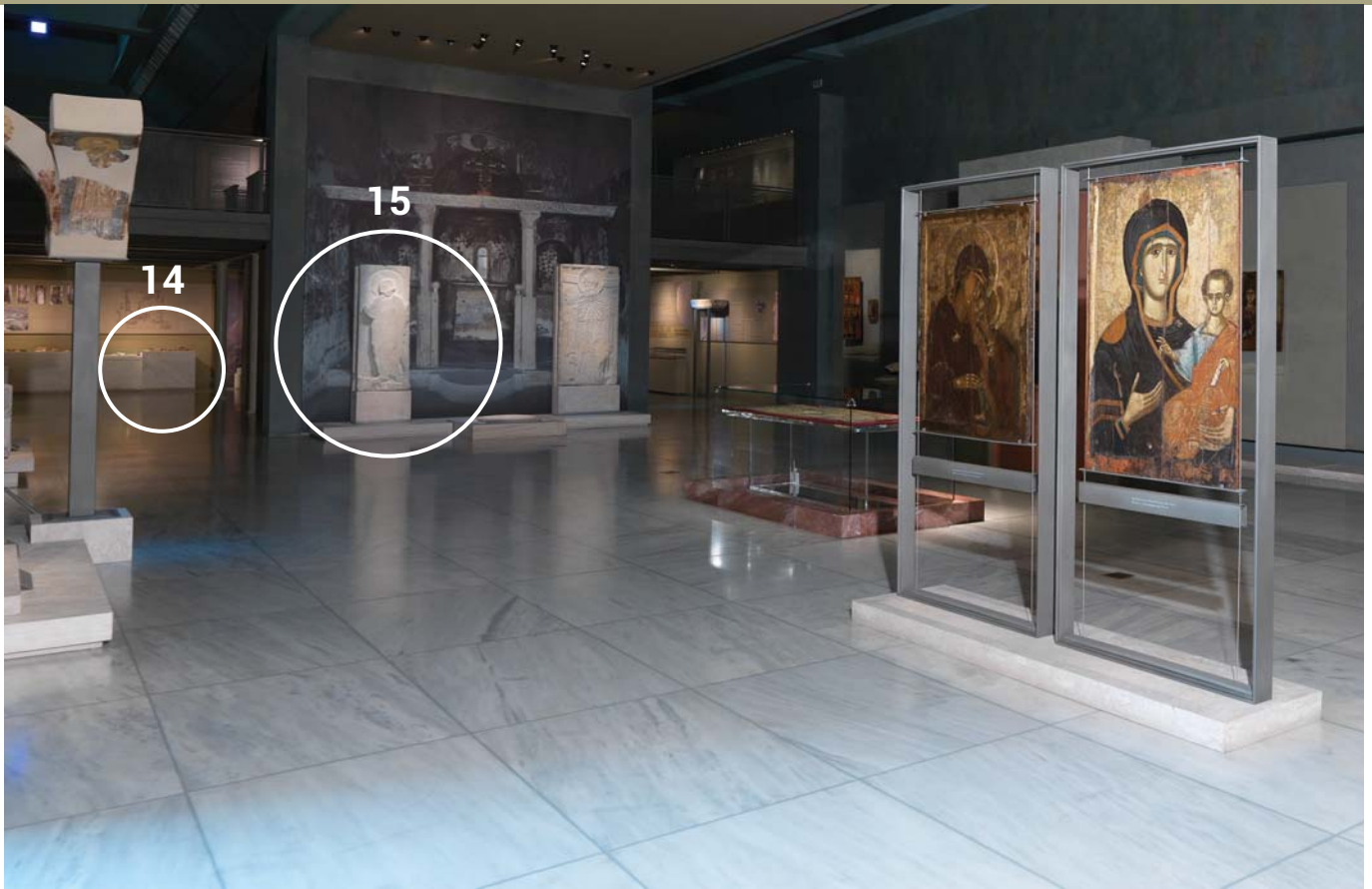
In the 13<sup>th</sup> - 14<sup>th</sup> century, bowls became smaller and deeper. These changes in shape suggest individual use and a differentiation in diet, which became more watery, poorer, and cheaper.

Important vase production centers included Constantinople, Thessaloniki, Serres, and Corinth. Pottery - intact or in the form of shards (that is, broken in pieces) is the commonest find in excavations.





## GALLERY 7



### EXHIBIT 15

Proceed to the center of the gallery and touch the rectangular, half-finished marble icon. It was found near the church of Agios Panteleimon in Thessaloniki and dates to the early 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The icon represents Christ Pantocrator holding a Gospel and offering a blessing with his right hand. Since the sculptor - for unknown reasons - stopped work on the icon, we can distinguish the stages in the processing of the relief. Initially, the sculptor carved the contours of the body, which emerges from the slab. He then carved basic elements such as the Gospel book, the major drapery folds, and Christ's beard.

The presence of this unfinished work proves that there was a sculpture workshop for producing marble icons in 14<sup>th</sup> century Thessaloniki. During this age, there reappeared in sculpture an interest in depicting the human figure; this interest was more pronounced in the capital and less so in the provinces.

There are very few surviving sculptures from this period, which was marked by the final conquest of Thessaloniki in 1430 by the Ottomans.



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