

An Introduction to Byzantine Monasticism*

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The institution of monasticism was one of the most important characteristics of Byzantine society, and touched the life of virtually every imperial subject in many ways. First of all, a substantial number of Byzantine men and women took monastic vows: some in their youth, who pledged themselves to a lifetime of dedication to Christ; some in middle age, when their children were grown; many more at the end of their lives. Countless Byzantines, when they realized they were on their deathbed, took the monastic habit for their final hours or days, in the belief that, by dying in the holier monastic state, they were more likely to achieve salvation in the world to come.

*There is as yet no definitive work on Byzantine monasticism. The following are recommended as an introduction; they will guide the interested reader to further bibliography. C. Mango, *Byzantium: the Empire of New Rome* (New York 1980), ch. 5 on Monasticism; R. Janin, "Le monachisme byzantin au moyen âge. Commende et typica (X^e-XIV^e siècle)," *Revue des Études Byzantines* 22 (1964), 15-44; P. Charanis, "The Monk as an Element of Byzantine Society," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 25 (1971), 61-84; N. M. Vaporis, ed., *Byzantine Saints and Monasteries* (Brookline, Mass. 1985), a series of articles reprinted from *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 30 (1985); a group of essays on female monasticism in *Byzantinische Forschungen* 9 (1985).

Among the most important primary sources for monasticism are the documents preserved in the archives of Mt. Athos (currently being published in the series, *Archives de l'Athos*, ed., P. Lemerle), and the *typika* or foundation charters of monasteries. New critical editions of five eleventh and twelfth-century *typika* were recently published with French translation by the late Paul Gautier in *Revue des Études Byzantines* 32 (1974), 39 (1981), 40 (1982), 42 (1984) and 43 (1985). A project currently in progress, the Dumbarton Oaks/N.E.H. Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents Project, is preparing annotated translations of all 52 surviving Byzantine monastic *typika*. Lives of Byzantine saints, who were usually monks or nuns, also throw much light on Byzantine monasticism; available in English are Helen Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* (Ann Arbor, Mich. 1957) and Elizabeth Dawes and Norman Baynes, *Three Byzantine Saints* (Oxford 1948).

The monastery was often the spiritual center of a rural village or urban quarter; local inhabitants might attend services at the monastic church, seek out monks for spiritual advice, or ask for help in time of need. If a Byzantine fell ill, he or she might find medical care in a hospital attached to the monastic complex, or alternatively seek healing at the tomb of a saint whose relics were preserved in the church. A traveler who hesitated to stop for the night at an inn (which was usually a euphemism for a brothel) might find accommodation at a hostel run by monks. An elderly widow without children to look after her could find spiritual companionship and nursing care in a convent; the nuns would also see to her proper burial and arrange commemorative services after her death, all in exchange for a handsome donation to the nunnery. The poor could come to the monastery gate and receive loaves of bread, wine, and the leftovers from the refectory. A wealthy noble, who wanted to present a deluxe illuminated Gospelbook to a church, could commission the copying and illustration of such a manuscript in a monastic scriptorium, or workshop for the production of manuscripts. A peasant who owned a small plot of land might be pressured into selling his vineyard or olive grove to the local monastery, which wished to increase its holdings; he might on the other hand give the land to the monastery as a pious act, in exchange for commemorative requiem masses in perpetuity. Emperors as well as peasants took personal interest in monasteries; they might found new ones, or present existing ones with landed estates, or declare their immunity from taxation. Emperors sought out monks as advisers on matters of state as well as religious policy. And not a few Byzantine emperors ended their lives in monasteries, either unwillingly when they were deposed from the throne by a usurper and forced into the tonsure, or of their own accord as an act of personal faith when their end drew near. Finally, monasteries served as the bulwark of Byzantine Orthodox Christianity: in the eighth and ninth centuries monks were among the most ardent supporters of image veneration and adversaries of iconoclasm: in the thirteenth century monks were persecuted for opposing Michael VIII's policy of Union with the Roman Church at the Council of Lyons (1274). In the following century the monasteries and hermitages of Mt. Athos nurtured the burgeoning mystical movement called hesychasm, which was to give new vitality to the Orthodox religious tradition.

I. The Origins of Monasticism

Let us turn to the early centuries of the empire to seek out the origins of this institution which affected every level of Byzantine society throughout its long history. The beginnings of monasticism are closely connected with the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire; the first monks appeared during the final period of persecution of Christians in the late third century, just before the conversion of the emperor Constantine in the following century.

The word "monasticism" is derived from the Greek verb *μονάζω* ("to live alone"), and indeed the first monks were hermits. In order to escape persecution pious Christians would retire into the desert, alone, where they could lead lives of asceticism and prayer without harassment. Tradition holds that a certain Paul (called the "First Hermit," to distinguish him from the apostle) was the first Christian to adopt this rigorous life style. Fleeing persecution, perhaps that of the Emperor Decius (249–51), he withdrew to some mountains in the Egyptian desert to live in a cave. Nearby grew a palm tree, and a stream of water flowed by. He wove himself a garment of palm leaves, and every day a crow brought him half a loaf of bread. Thus he had all the necessities of life, and lived there peacefully for 60 years until his death.

His younger contemporary, St. Antony, is much better known, primarily because of the vivid Life which the Church Father Athanasius of Alexandria wrote about him in the fourth century. This became the pattern for all future biographies of saints, and was widely read in the medieval world, both east and west. Paul had lived completely alone, but disciples flocked to St. Antony, and so communities of monks developed. The monks remained in their separate cells during the week, praying and weaving rush mats, but met on weekends for church services. This kind of monastic community was called a *lavra*. St. Antony is significant in that he demonstrated a new way of achieving sanctity, without martyrdom, but through extreme mortification of the body.

He kept vigil to such an extent that he often continued the whole night without sleep, and this not once but often, to the marvel of others. He ate once a day, after sunset; sometimes once in two days, and often even in four. His food was bread and salt; his drink, water only; of flesh and wine it is superfluous even to speak, since no such thing was found with the other earnest men. A rush mat served him to sleep upon, but for the most part he lay upon the bare ground.¹

In the early fourth century people flocked to the desert to follow Antony's example. One might think that the establishment of Christianity would have contributed to the decline of monasticism, since in the beginning so many monks had fled to the desert to avoid persecution. But curiously enough, once Christianity was tolerated, the number of monks increased even more. Many Christians felt that now their faith was not being sufficiently tested, so they retired to the desert to create their own rigorous discipline. And not just men, but women, too, became hermits; a number of these hermitesses, however, disguised themselves as men, to

¹ Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, tr. H. Ellershaw and A. Robertson, in *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters* [= *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 4] (New York 1892), pp. 197–98.

protect themselves against rape, or as a denial of their own sexuality.² In the biography of St. Antony, Satan is heard to complain: "I am become weak. . . . I no longer have a place, a weapon, a city. The Christians are spread everywhere, and at length even the desert is filled with monks."³

Problems began to arise, however, when Christians became monks for non-spiritual reasons, for example to escape taxes and military service. And I quote again from the *Life of St. Antony*:

So their cells were in the mountains like tabernacles, filled with holy bands of men who sang psalms, loved reading, fasted, prayed, rejoiced in the hope of things to come. . . . And truly it was possible, as it were, to behold a land set by itself, filled with piety and justice. For then there was neither the evil-doer nor the injured, nor the reproaches of the tax-gatherer: but instead a multitude of ascetics, and the one purpose of them all was to aim at virtue . . . many soldiers and men who had great possessions laid aside the burdens of life, and became monks for the rest of their days.⁴

In fact so many young men retired to the desert that later in the fourth century an emperor ordered the removal of those monks who fled to monasteries in order to evade public duties.

In addition to the hermits and monks who lived in *lavrās*, another form of monasticism developed in Egypt around 300. This was the cenobitic monastery, derived from the Greek words κοινὸς βίος, or "common life." Pachomius was the founder of this highly organized form of monasticism in Upper Egypt, just north of Thebes and Luxor. In cenobitic monasteries, a third virtue, that of obedience, was added to the virtues of poverty and chastity practised by hermits. For the monastery was headed by an abbot to whom the monks owed obedience. Hermit monks decided on their own life style, and, as it were, their personal spiritual program for attaining salvation. At cenobitic monasteries regular religious services were held, and all monks were required to attend. Each monk was also expected to perform some manual labor, working in the fields or weaving, for example. The Pachomian monasteries were enormous, often numbering hundreds of monks or even thousands.

If one reads stories of these early "desert fathers," certain themes keep cropping up in one edifying tale after another. One is the monks' abhorrence of the female sex; they went to great lengths to avoid any contact with women. One monk, for example, found himself in a situation where he was forced to carry his mother across a river. He covered his hands with his garment when carrying her, so as not to touch her. When his mother asked him why he covered his hands, he replied: "Because the body of a

²E. Patlagean, "L'histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l'évolution de la sainteté féminine à Byzance," *Studi Medievali*, ser. 3, 17 (1976), 597-623.

³*Life of Antony*, p. 207.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 208, 219.

woman is fire. And even from my touching thee came the memory of other women into my soul.”⁵

Connected with this sexual obsession was abhorrence of one's own body. The Egyptian monks never washed or changed their clothes; the Pachomian rule provided for a bath only if a monk was sick. We read of St. Antony that

he had a garment of hair on the inside, while the outside was skin, which he kept until his end. And he never bathed his body with water to free himself from filth, nor did he ever wash his feet, nor even endure so much as to put them into water, unless compelled by necessity. Nor did anyone ever see him unclothed, nor his body naked at all, except after his death, when he was buried.⁶

The monks' obsession with abstinence from sex was almost equalled by their obsessive abstinence from food; the monks competed with each other to see who could eat the least. Makarios the Great, for example, once observed the Lenten fast by eating only once a week, a few cabbage leaves on Sunday!

II. St. Basil of Caesarea

The Pachomian type of monastery was the basis of all later monasteries that evolved in both the western and eastern Mediterranean; specifically it gave rise to the Basilian monastery of eastern orthodoxy, and to the Benedictine monastery in the west. “Basilian” monasticism takes its name from one of the Fathers of the Eastern Church, St. Basil of Caesarea, who played an important role in synthesizing the classical tradition with Christian faith. This fusion was the basis of most later Byzantine theology.

In the mid-fourth century Basil set out to formulate a rule for his monastery in Cappadocia (in central Anatolia). He was dissatisfied with the forms of monasticism that had developed in Egypt, Syria and Palestine, and sought to introduce a modified form of Pachomian monasticism into Asia Minor. He strongly endorsed the cenobitic monastery, and did not approve at all of the solitary life. He thought it was difficult and even dangerous for a monk to live alone, unless he had tremendous self-control. Also it was hard for a hermit to be self-sufficient; he had to depend on the charity of visitors for his daily needs. Basil argued that the majority of monks cannot muster sufficient discipline to become hermits, and need a communal form of monasticism. Each member of the community would be expected to contribute to providing for the physical necessities of the monastery, and the monks would encourage and criticize each other in their spiritual development.

⁵ Waddell, *Desert Fathers*, p. 74.

⁶ *Life of Antony*, p. 209.

Basil's system was based on the Pachomian rule, but differed from it in several ways.

1. He reduced the size of monasteries, since he felt the huge aggregates of monks in Egypt were too large.

2. Obedience to the abbot was considered the primary virtue.

3. He forbade extraordinary feats of asceticism and mortification; if a monk wanted to make a special fast, he had to ask the abbot's permission.

4. Another important difference from the rule of Pachomius was that Basil established monasteries in towns instead of in deserts, so that monks would not be isolated from their fellow men, but could practise charity towards them. Also by their conduct, monks were to provide their secular brethren with a model of the true Christian life.⁷

Here we see the beginnings of a characteristic of medieval monasteries, which provided service to the lay community, as well as supporting the monk's individual search for personal salvation. What impresses one most, however, in reading the *Long Rules* of Basil is the tone of moderation and practicality, compared with the fanaticism of the monks of Egypt, or the stylite saints of Syria who lived on top of columns. One can clearly detect here the influence of Greek rationalism, and the ancient Greek adage, "nothing in excess."

III. Byzantine Monasticism in its Fully Developed Form

One of the most important differences that emerged between eastern and western monasticism in the Middle Ages was that Byzantine monks were not organized into separate orders like their Benedictine, Franciscan or Dominican counterparts in the west. In a sense all Byzantine monasteries belonged to one order, and followed the Rule of St. Basil; at the same time each monastery was organized on an individual basis, and provided with rules by its founder. About fifty of these foundation documents, called *typika*, survive, an invaluable source of information about ideals of monasticism and the realities of daily life in Byzantine monasteries from the ninth to the fifteenth century.

Normally these documents include a preamble which explains the founder's motivation for establishing a new monastery, followed by detailed guidelines for the monks or nuns. Topics covered include the election of the superior, the length of the novitiate, rules of enclosure, behavior in the refectory, dietary rules for feasts and fasts, the monastic habit, and discipline of disobedient monks or nuns. All the *typika* place strong

⁷ An English translation of the *Long Rules* can be found in *Saint Basil. Ascetical Works*, tr. by Monica Wagner (New York 1950), pp. 223-337.

emphasis on strict adherence to the cenobitic form of monasticism, especially with regard to eating. Monks and nuns were to take their meals together in the refectory, eat the same food, and not keep snacks in their cells. The *typika* follow the basic precepts of Basil, particularly with respect to the spirit of moderation, but there are countless variations between monasteries as far as specific rules are concerned.

Still I shall hazard a description of a fairly typical Byzantine monastery.⁸ It was founded in Constantinople in the fourteenth century by an aristocratic lady, and provided a home for several members of her family, including a daughter. Fifty nuns lived at the monastery, thirty of them choir sisters, responsible for singing the daily offices: twenty of the nuns performed basic housekeeping duties. Each nun had her own cell, but ate in common with her sisters in the refectory. The diet included bread, vegetables, fruit, fish, eggs and cheese, but never meat. Wine was considered a staple, and was served in generous portions; in cold weather a hot drink of cumin-flavored water was also available. Each nun had specific duties, whether singing in the choir, working in the kitchen, overseeing the refectory, serving as infirmarian or gatekeeper. The nuns also did handwork such as spinning and weaving, reciting psalms as they worked; if literate, they would devote many hours to study of the Scriptures or saints' lives. They received a new habit once a year, and a monthly supply of soap, and oil for their lamps. The nuns were expected to remain within the convent, except on special occasions, such as a visit to a sick relative. When a nun did go outside the convent, she was always to be accompanied by two elderly nuns. Nuns might also leave the cloister to visit a local shrine, to attend a funeral of a relative, or on convent business, such as to give testimony in a lawsuit involving monastic property.

The convent was headed by a superior, elected by members of the monastic community. She had responsibility for the spiritual and material well-being of the nuns in her charge, and had to combine the talents of businesswoman, psychologist and spiritual leader. The abbess held this position for life, and could be deposed only for grave cause.

Why did Byzantine men and women enter monasteries?⁹ For many it was a true vocation; from childhood some Byzantine boys and girls dreamed of renouncing the world, and dedicating themselves to Christ. Usually this decision met with parental approval, since the monastic vocation was so common and so admired in the Byzantine world. Some parents in fact dedicated their children to God at infancy, often in thanksgiving at the birth of a child after a long period of infertility. Sometimes whole families took

⁸ The following paragraph is a summary of the *typikon* of the nunnery of the Virgin of Sure Hope (Θεοτόκος τῆς Βεβαίας Ἐλπίδος), published by H. Delehaye in *Deux typica byzantins de l'époque des Paléologues* (Brussels 1921), pp. 18–105.

⁹ On this topic, see A. M. Talbot, "Late Byzantine Nuns: By Choice or Necessity?" *Byzantinische Forschungen* 9 (1985), 103–17.

the monastic habit together, especially at a time of crisis, such as the death of one of the parents. The mother of Gregory Palamas, one of the most famous of Orthodox theologians, wanted to enter a convent right after her husband died, even though it would have meant abandoning her five children, who ranged in age from a few months to seven years. It was only with difficulty that she was persuaded to remain at home until her children were grown; when they were teenagers, they all ended up taking monastic vows.

Even if they did not take the habit themselves, many Byzantines became benefactors of monasteries, making donations of cash, sacred vessels or liturgical books for the church, land or income-producing properties such as a factory or mill. The reward for such donations was commemoration after one's death; the perusal of *typika* makes it clear that prayers for one's salvation in perpetuity were of immense importance to the pious Byzantine. Notices in the *typika* might read as follows:

Since the bishop of Ephesus . . . gave our convent 400 gold pieces a requiem should be celebrated for him . . . and also celebrate the requiem of the bishop of Mytilene on the anniversary of his death, as best you can. For he donated to the convent a solid gold icon of the Mother of God, decorated with precious stones and pearls, and stoles and armlets, also with pearls.¹⁰

IV. Cultural Activities

My description of a typical nunnery deliberately omitted any mention of intellectual or artistic activities, because nuns rarely engaged in the copying or illumination of manuscripts, or the composition of hymns, saints' lives, theological treatises or historical chronicles.¹¹ In a number of male monasteries, however, there were scriptoria for the production of manuscripts, and many of the most important literary figures of Byzantium were monks who worked in the confines of a cloister. Monastic libraries were usually limited to the basic liturgical books, with perhaps a few volumes of patristic commentaries or saints' lives; they almost never contained works of ancient Greek authors. A few libraries, however, benefited from the personal collection of their founders, and held a wider range of books. Such was the library of Chora in fourteenth-century Constantinople, the best library in the capital, where a number of the leading classical philologists of the day prepared editions and commentaries on classical authors. Monasteries tended to specialize in certain areas. One might have a scriptorium that produced only liturgical manuscripts in a

¹⁰ *Typikon of Convent of Sure Hope*, ed. Delehay, *Deux typika*, p. 102.

¹¹ On the limited cultural activities of Byzantine convents, see A. M. Talbot, "Bluestocking Nuns: Intellectual Life in the Convents of Late Byzantium," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 7 (1983), 604-18.

distinctive script; another monastery might be an important center for the composition of hymns and religious poetry.

Formal schooling was not a function of Byzantine monasteries; in fact, a number of *typika* specifically forbade the admission of children for educational purposes, but monasteries played a significant role in maintaining the culture of Byzantium. Literate nuns were encouraged to teach their illiterate sisters their letters, since a certain degree of literacy was required in order to chant the office, maintain the monastery accounts or serve as librarian or archivist. A high percentage of Byzantine manuscripts were produced in monastic scriptoria, and the monastic environment provided the tranquillity and spiritual stimulation necessary for the composition of religious poetry or a theological tract.

V. Charitable Functions

Monks and nuns provided a variety of community services.¹² I have already mentioned that free food was generally made available for the poor; distributions were made at the monastery gate on a regular schedule. On special feastdays, there might even be distributions of small coins.

Several monasteries had hospitals attached, where the best medical care available was provided. The *typikon* for a twelfth-century monastery in Constantinople, the Pantokrator, supplies a detailed description of the organization and management of such a hospital.¹³ It had five wards, with 61 beds in all. One ward was for patients with wounds and injuries, another for patients with diseases of the eyes or internal organs; there was also a 12-bed ward for women. The patients wore special hospital gowns; their own clothes were washed and made ready for them to wear when cured!

Hospital personnel were numerous: about one staff member per patient. The female ward was served by a woman doctor, whose salary was half that of her male colleagues. The staff also included pharmacists to prepare herbal medicines, laundresses, cooks, and four gravediggers (which seems a rather high figure for a 61-bed hospital!). The patients were limited to a strictly vegetarian diet, consisting mostly of bread and vegetables. There was a large bathroom, where the patients were entitled to two baths a week. This hospital was reserved for the use of laymen; the monks had their own six-bed infirmary.

The monastic complex of the Pantokrator also included a hospice or old people's home, designated for the care of 24 men who were crippled or

¹² Much material on monastic philanthropy is found in two books by Demetrios Constantelos, *Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare* (New Brunswick, New Jersey 1968), and *Poverty, Society and Philanthropy in the Late Medieval Greek World* (forthcoming).

¹³ P. Gautier, ed., "Le typikon du Christ Sauveur Pantocrator," *Revue des Études Byzantines* 32 (1974), 82-113; T. S. Miller, *The Birth of the Hospital in the Byzantine Empire* (Baltimore 1985), pp. 12-19.

invalid. No one was eligible who was in good health and could provide for his own living by his own work. Each resident received an annual ration of bread, wine, dried vegetables, cheese and oil, plus wood for heating. If the pensioner became gravely ill, he could be admitted to the hospital. Separately from the monastic complex, the monastery also ran a leprosarium.

In addition to running old-age homes, where the elderly pensioners retained their lay status, monasteries also served the needs of the elderly Byzantine who decided to take monastic vows at an advanced age. Retirement to a monastery was a frequent solution to the problem of an older man or woman who either could not or did not wish to live with his children, and needed to find support and lodging outside the family circle. Sometimes it was even necessary for a married couple to separate and live in different monasteries. This was the case for the Byzantine historian George Sphrantzes and his wife Helen who found adoption of the monastic habit a welcome refuge, after their lives took a tragic turn in the wake of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453. Their two surviving children had died during captivity in the sultan's entourage, and by 1467 the formerly prosperous couple were without means of support. As Sphrantzes comments in his *History*, because he was "old, sick and penniless since the days of his enslavement [by the Turks]," he went first to the island of Leukas to seek a pension, "some yearly compensation," from its ruler. He was unsuccessful in his mission, however, and the next year, plagued by chronic rheumatism, he renounced his "secular clothes and assumed the habit," together with his wife.¹⁴

Even more frequently it was a widow or widower who would seek the solace of a monastery, which could provide food and lodging, companionship, nursing care, spiritual comfort, burial and commemoration in requiem masses, for those able to make the appropriate donation. Thus we read about a woman who was a refugee from the fourteenth-century Turkish occupation of Asia Minor and turned to monastic life, because she

was deprived of everything, and had no relative or any other consolation . . . she had no one to help her . . . she was in a strange and alien land and had no parents or husband.¹⁵

Many of the older inhabitants of monasteries, who retired there late in life, and might be considered a burden on monastic resources, were supported by a kind of pension, which they received in exchange for a contribution of land or money, usually 100 gold pieces. The case of a thirteenth-century widow called Zoe exemplifies the type of financial transaction which might

¹⁴ M. Philippides, tr., *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire: A Chronicle by George Sphrantzes, 1401-1477* (Amherst, Mass. 1980), p. 90.

¹⁵ B. Papoulia, "Die Vita des hl. Philotheos vom Athos," *Südostforschungen* 22 (1963), 274-76.

take place between a monastic community and an individual seeking security in her declining years. Toward the end of her life Zoe found herself without any familial support, and turned to the nunnery of Nea Petra in Thessaly to provide for her old age. In return for a donation of her ancestral property, including three vineyards, four fields, a fig tree and two houses, the convent agreed to admit her as a nun and support her for the rest of her life. Equally important, from Zoe's point of view, at the time of her death she was assured of proper burial and commemoration at the convent in requiem masses.

Younger monks and nuns considered it a pious duty to care for their aged colleagues. A tenth-century saint's life has preserved a graphic description of the final illness of Anna, the retired abbess of a convent in Thessalonike. Because of her failing vision, the centenarian had slipped and fallen in the courtyard, dislocated her hip, and consequently was bedridden for the seven years until her death. During the entire period she was tended by a younger nun, Theodora, who looked after her every need and even fed her. Theodora's patience was sorely tried during the final three years when Anna had become senile, and struck and cursed her dutiful attendant. She persevered, however, mindful of the Biblical injunction, "Child, care for your father in his old age, and do not cause him grief in his lifetime. And if he should lose his senses, have mercy on him and do not dishonor him. . . ." ¹⁶

VI. Economic Aspects of Monasticism

Monastic complexes were able to function, and to support cultural and philanthropic activities, only if they had a strong financial base. Many Byzantine monasteries were well endowed and survived for centuries, some to this day. Others could not afford to repair the roof and fell into ruins. As previously noted, Byzantines considered it a pious duty to make donations to monasteries, and many monastic institutions were able to accumulate substantial wealth and real estate, both in the form of farmland and urban workshops and houses at lease. Both urban and rural monasteries ran agricultural estates, and appointed a steward to handle business affairs, such as collecting rents from tenants and selling the harvest. The following excerpts from a property inventory give an idea of the holdings of an urban convent of ca. 1300; most of the donations were made by the foundress, the Dowager Empress Theodora Palaiologina, mother of Michael VIII:

From the estates of Achilleion and Barys . . . a portion worth 300 gold pieces; included . . . is the fish hatchery . . . in addition the mill of Thermene . . . also the vineyard of Emporianos . . . the village called

¹⁶ *Vita S. Theodorae Thess.*, ed. E. Kurtz, *Des Klerikers Gregorius Bericht über Leben, Wunderthaten und Translation der hl. Theodora von Thessalonich nebst der Metaphrase des Johannes Staurakios* [=Записки И. Академии Наук 8, сер. по историко-филологическому обществу, том 6, № 1] (St. Petersburg 1902), p. 21.

Nymphai . . . whose revenues from *paroikoi* (dependent peasants) and arable land are 260 gold pieces . . . another village, Skoteinon . . . whose income from *paroikoi* is 183 gold pieces plus 70 gold pieces from four mills, and 100 gold pieces from arable land of 2600 units.

Within Constantinople, among the properties owned by the nunnery were three vineyards, numerous gardens, six mills, and about 20 houses.¹⁷

Since monastic properties were generally exempt from taxation, vast amounts of land were removed from the tax rolls; at various times emperors tried to limit the foundation of new monasteries or their acquisition of more land.¹⁸ At the same time the monasteries saved the state money by performing some health and welfare services that in other societies might be provided by the government.

VII. Centers of Byzantine Monasticism

Byzantine monasteries were located both in cities and in isolated rural areas. As one would expect, the capital of Constantinople was an important monastic center, housing several hundred monasteries and convents. Some were distinguished for their libraries and scriptoria, others for their icons and relics, a few for their hospital or old-age home. Little survives today of these religious houses except for a few churches, like Chora and Pammakaristos, whose gleaming mosaics testify to the wealth of their aristocratic patrons.¹⁹ At the site of the Stoudios monastery, which once held hundreds of monks, now stands only a roofless basilica.

Rural monasteries have fared much better in surviving the centuries of Arab and/or Turkish occupation. A visitor to St. Catherine's in the Sinai desert, to the mountainous peninsula of Athos, or to the rocky spires of Meteora in Thessaly, can still witness and experience the living tradition of Byzantine monasticism. Oldest and most remote is St. Catherine's, built by the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century with a massive fortification wall to protect the monks from Bedouin raids. Continuously inhabited for 14 centuries, the monastery is an incomparable repository of the Byzantine heritage, housing a collection of over 2,000 icons, including extremely rare examples of encaustic painting from the pre-iconoclastic period. The library contains more than 3,000 manuscripts in a variety of languages (Greek, Arabic, Georgian, Syriac and Slavic) which reflect the diversity of the monks who have lived at Sinai.²⁰

¹⁷ *Typikon* of convent of Lips, ed. Delehaye, *Deux typica*, pp. 130-34.

¹⁸ See P. Charanis, "The Monastic Properties and the State in the Byzantine Empire," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 4 (1948), 51-118.

¹⁹ P. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami*, 4 vols. (New York-Princeton 1966-1975; H. Belting, C. Mango, D. Mouriki, *The Mosaics and Frescoes of St. Mary Pammakaristos (Fethiye Camii) at Istanbul* (Washington, D.C. 1978).

²⁰ J. Galey, *Sinai and the Monastery of St. Catherine* (London 1979); G. H. Forsyth, K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of St. Catherine at Mt. Sinai. The Church and Fortress of Justinian*.

The Athos promontory was inhabited only by hermits until the tenth century, when the first monasteries were established there. At its zenith the "Holy Mountain" attracted thousands of monks, because it combined the reputation of its holy men with an isolated locale of stunning rugged beauty and proximity to the major cities of Thessalonike and Constantinople. Its dozens of monasteries, many of them still functioning, have played a vital role in preserving the traditions of Orthodoxy and hundreds of Byzantine manuscripts.²¹

The Meteora (literally "floating in the air") monasteries were a relatively late foundation, as monks did not begin to inhabit the rocky pillars until the fourteenth century. The eroded conglomerate formations, reminiscent of an other-worldly lunar landscape, are riddled with caves which provided shelter for hermits; more ambitious monks laboriously constructed entire monastic complexes atop some of the larger spires. Originally accessible only by rope ladders or by baskets hauled up by windlass, the monasteries offered particularly safe refuge during the final turbulent years of the Byzantine Empire, and during the four centuries of Turkish occupation.²²

VIII. Conclusion

Byzantine monasticism appeared in many forms, ranging from isolated mountain hermitages to populous urban monasteries: many monks moved frequently from one monastery to another, or shifted back and forth between a cenobitic and eremitic life style. People could take monastic vows at various stages of life, and in the monastery could pursue intellectual interests, engage in artistic or philanthropic activity, manual labor or a life of asceticism and prayer. Monasticism played such a key role in the Byzantine Empire, because it was a varied, flexible and fluid institution, which responded to the needs of society and affected the lives of people of all classes. At the same time monastic routines and rituals offered security and stability, a safe haven from the tempestuous events of the outside world. Monastic spirituality reflected the essence of Eastern Orthodoxy, a tradition that lives on today in the hymnography, music, art and architecture which still survive and demonstrate Byzantine creativity at its best.[‡]

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Plates (Ann Arbor, Mich. 1973); K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of St. Catherine at Mt. Sinai. The Icons. I. From the 6th to the 10th c.* (Princeton 1976).

²¹ E. Amand de Mendieta, *La presque île des caloyers: le Mont Athos* (Bruges 1955); S. M. Pelekanides, *The Treasures of Mt. Athos*, 4 vols. (Athens 1974-).

²² D. M. Nicol, *Meteora, the Rock Monasteries of Thessaly* (London 1975).

[‡] *Editor's Note:* The author of this article is Executive Editor of the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (in preparation).

