

Monasteries, Society, Economy, and the State in the Byzantine Empire

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Abstract and Keywords

The chapter provides an overview of the social, political, and economic functions of Byzantine monasteries from the ninth to the fifteenth century. Relations between monasteries and the state, the Church, and lay society were complex. The monks received donations and protection in exchange for various spiritual and material services. The great landowning monasteries engaged in large-scale agrarian production and trade, and they played a substantial role in local and regional economies. Finally, the chapter addresses the fate and significance of monasteries in the long period of crisis that began in the middle of the fourteenth century and ended with the replacement of the Byzantine by the Ottoman Empire.

Keywords: foundation, patronage, prayers, landownership, trade, Mount Athos, Ottoman Empire

In order to understand how monasteries came to occupy the central position they did in the spiritual and material life of medieval Byzantium, it is necessary to analyze the role they played within their society. This chapter will address two topics. First it will consider the multiple functions monasteries fulfilled and their relations with laypeople and the state. The second topic, the monasteries' economic activities and their place in the larger Byzantine economy, is, properly speaking, part of the first, but it deserves special treatment because of its many ramifications. The study of monastic wealth and its exploitation enables us to understand the power and longevity of certain establishments, as well as their impact on the economy. In addition, the evidence regarding their economic activities forms the basis of all work on the Byzantine economy for reasons related to documentation. Indeed, Byzantine monasticism is exceptionally well-documented, thanks to the remarkable endurance of the Orthodox Church and of several monasteries. The body of evidence regarding these institutions is significant, and it includes hagiographies, archival documents, and material remains.

This chapter offers an overview of Byzantine monastic history from 843 to about 1500, with an emphasis on the monasteries' relations with society and state as well as on their economic activities, noting some important scholarly trends. The period under discussion

can be divided into three parts. The first, extending from the ninth to the early fourteenth century, was characterized by demographic and economic growth, at least in the European lands of the empire, and by the existence of a strong and pervasive state. The second, beginning around the middle of the fourteenth and lasting until the early fifteenth century, was a time of political fragmentation and instability, as well as (p. 156) demographic and economic decline. The third period, corresponding to the early Ottoman rule, was one of renewed political stability and centralism, this time under a Muslim government. Most of this chapter is concerned with the first period, though it also discusses the transformations that took place during the period of crisis and the early Ottoman rule.

Monasteries, Society, and the State

Monasticism in Byzantium gained new momentum with the end of the iconoclast dispute in 843, when the monks came to be seen as champions of orthodoxy. Monasteries profited from their increased spiritual capital, and also from the general upturn of the economy that occurred at around the same time. Some of the increased wealth of the state, of the aristocracy, and of society at large was funnelled into the creation and patronage of monasteries. The foundation of monasteries was a mass phenomenon from at least the tenth century on, as shown by a law of 996, and it remained so for most of our period. Not only wealthy persons, but also more modest individuals—including villagers—supported the numerous establishments that populated the countryside and the cities. Some scholars have attempted to estimate the number of monasteries and the importance of the monastic population (Charanis 1971: 63–73; Bryer 1979: 219–221; Koder 1993/1994: 34–36). The fact that the present chapter focuses on the influential and better-documented great monasteries should not obscure the fact that most establishments were modest.

Constantinople contained some of the most powerful and famous monasteries of the empire, as a result of donations and privileges given by the emperor and the high aristocracy who lived in the capital. The sack of the city in 1204, however, dealt an enormous blow to their wealth. Their recovery after the Byzantines retook the city in 1261 was only partial, as the empire and its ruling class never regained the economic position they had held in the twelfth century (Talbot 1993, 2001a, 2004; Smyrlis 2006: 176).

Monasteries were a familiar feature of the Byzantine countryside. Recent scholarship has given attention to the issue of the factors that determined their location. Apart from the obvious constraints imposed by natural resources, the monastic ideal of isolation had to be somehow satisfied, and visibility, accessibility, and association with a holy site were necessary in order to maintain links with society and lay patronage. The proximity to cities, with which monasteries were in economic symbiosis, or the need to assert imperial control and ensure the defence of a region, have also been put forward as deciding factors (Koder 1993/1994: 14–22; Talbot 2007: 50–62; Kiousopoulou 2003; Bakirtzis 2012; on the issues of control and defence of a territory see later in this chapter). Of special note among the rural monasteries are those founded in remote but imposing 'Holy Mountains', such as Mount Athos in northern Greece, all of which were under a loose common gov-

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ernment (Papachryssanthou 1992; Bryer and Cunningham 1996; Talbot 2001b; Soustal 2009; *To Agion Oros ston 15o kai 16o aiona* 2012).

(p. 157) The last decades of the previous century saw considerable scholarly interest in the relations of monasteries with society, in an effort to explain the proliferation, prominence, and continuity of monasteries in medieval Byzantium. This research analyzes the mechanisms that permitted this by looking at what it was that monasteries and monks had to offer to society and the state. The most accomplished work on the topic is Rosemary Morris's *Monks and Laymen in Byzantium* (1995b). Scholars have inquired into the motives behind the foundation and patronage of monasteries, as well as into the monasteries' exchanges with, and functions within, lay society (Morris 1995b: 90–142; Mullett 2007; Kaplan 2010). Monasteries were founded both by 'professional monks' and by laypeople, who were sometimes recently tonsured monks. According to Catia Galatariotou (1987), the pursuits of 'aristocratic' founders were essentially worldly, while those of 'non-aristocratic' or monastic founders were of a more spiritual nature. However, this distinction is not always meaningful.

The longevity of all monastic establishments largely depended on their connections with laypeople—the emperor, aristocrats, churchmen, and common people—from whose ranks came recruits, donations, and protection. People founded or patronized monasteries in order to obtain or recognize the important services these establishments could offer. Several, often complementary, motives have been identified. Prime among them was the desire of the Byzantines to secure the salvation of their souls after death. Creating or endowing pious establishments and receiving the concomitant prayers of the monks were regarded as being particularly efficacious means for achieving this. The monks also catered to the needs of the living, praying to obtain protection or keep evil away, providing spiritual guidance, and offering intercession with the authorities. Some miracle-working monks could also heal disease or predict the future, but this was exceptional.

Most of the above functions of monasteries or monks concerned the whole of society, from the peasant to the emperor. But expectations from monasteries could also vary according to a person's rank. Many wealthy Byzantines wished to retire and be buried in monasteries, both for the spiritual benefits that could be obtained from joining such establishments and being commemorated after death, and also for the more practical considerations of material security and immunity from political persecution offered by the monasteries. Family monasteries, which could be joined by family members or dependents, provided foci of a clan-type devotion. They were also a way of preserving intact a part of the family fortune, which would otherwise be exposed to the threat of subdivision among heirs or, in some cases, confiscation (Lemerle 1977: 65–191; Talbot 1990). Aristocrats could confirm or enhance their positions within society by founding or patronizing monasteries. Prelates also stood to gain from their association with influential monks or monasteries. Nevertheless, relations between monks and local bishops were often antagonistic. The bishops disliked the diminution of their authority and revenues that occurred every time monasteries managed to become independent from them by, for instance, plac-

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ing themselves under the jurisdiction of the patriarch or the emperor (Morris 1995b: 148–154, 262–266; Moulet 2008).

The exchanges of monks with the less prosperous or powerful members of society have received relatively little attention in spite of their importance. Especially in (p. 158) provincial rural contexts, monasteries, which included relatively educated and sometimes charismatic monks, offered spiritual guidance to the common people and could emerge as foci of collective devotion and leaders of local societies (Galatariotou 1991: 168–183, 247–259; Morris 1995b: 90–119; Benoit-Meggenis 2012). Monks in the countryside provided valuable functions—among them intercession with the authorities, defence of territory, and economic help. At the same time, many rural monasteries were powerful landowners exercising (sometimes oppressive) authority over their dependent peasants (*paroikoi*), who owed them taxes, rents, and labour services (Laiou-Thomadakis 1977: 24–71, 142–222; Smyrlis 2010).

The relations of monasteries with the emperor or the state were particularly complex and have received considerable attention in recent scholarship (Morris 1995b: 90–142; Benoit-Meggenis 2010: 171–306; Smyrlis 2011: 61–68). It is hard to overemphasize the role of the ruler in recognizing the prominence of monastic founders and ensuring the prosperity of monasteries (Magdalino 1981). All truly powerful establishments owed their position to imperial patronage, which consisted in donations of estates, concessions of annual subventions, exemptions from taxes, and protection. All this, however, did not come for free. The monasteries offered equally important services to the rulers—services related to their imperial functions, not to those that concerned them on a personal level. The foundation or patronage of monasteries offered emperors an opportunity to display their piety as well as their philanthropy, as in the case of institutions that housed hospitals or made daily distributions at the gates such as the Pantokrator in Constantinople (Cormack 1985: 200–214). Emperors, especially if they had usurped power, could legitimize their rule in the eyes of the population through the support of prestigious monasteries. Byzantines in general believed that the prayers of monks could protect society and the empire from all sorts of dangers and could help imperial troops prevail over their enemies. Rulers were expected to see to it that the monks prayed and to thank them for it. The emperors certainly appreciated the role monasteries could play in asserting imperial authority in newly conquered or contested territories (Svoronos 1987; Morris 1995b: 119; Kiousopoulou 2009), in organizing the defence of lands exposed to raids, and in exploiting an area's resources (Haldon 1986; Oikonomides 1996a: 243; Bakirtzis 2013; Smyrlis 2016). They therefore promoted the foundation of new monasteries in such regions or conceded resources to existing houses. In general, rulers could gain from the support of the monasteries, while they stood to lose if they failed to do so. Monks could indeed be formidable adversaries to imperial policy, as was demonstrated by the two failed attempts at Church union in the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries.

An interesting aspect of the relationship between monasteries and the state is the issue of the confiscation of monastic lands, a recurring phenomenon that could acquire great significance in times of trouble (Smyrlis 2009). These expropriations have been interpreted

as instances of crisis in the antagonistic relation between monks and emperor, in which the latter tried to control the territorial expansion of the monasteries that threatened state resources; or, on the contrary, as part of a normal process of transfer of land from one public sector, in this case the monasteries, to another public sector, (p. 159) the fisc (Charanis 1948; Patlagean 2007: 213, 245–247 and *passim*). Neither interpretation is satisfactory. The idea that monastic wealth and privilege grew to an extent that state resources were seriously affected cannot be supported by a critical study of the evidence. Moreover, in spite of the frequency and relative ease with which the confiscations were accomplished, it is hard to accept that monastic estates were in fact public land, given that they were in almost all respects indistinguishable from private property, and that the emperor often had to justify the expropriations (Smyrlis 2011: 65–66).

The Monasteries as Great Landowners

Much of the interest in the economic significance of the monasteries has sprung from the broad emphasis on economic and social relations that characterized Byzantine historiography for the greater part of the twentieth century. A great deal has been written about the monasteries as wealthy landowners. Information on lay and state property is scarce, so that the relatively well-documented monasteries have been used for general studies of landownership during a time when large estates came to dominate the Byzantine countryside. The original focus was on the political and social implications of the expansion of great landownership; this was seen as a process that weakened central authority and led to the subjection of the peasantry to powerful lords. George Ostrogorsky's *Pour l'histoire de la féodalité byzantine* (1954) is the best example of this type of scholarship. More recently, monastic sources have been used extensively in works studying the evolution of Byzantine economy and settlement (Harvey 1989; Lefort 2002). What is common to all such studies is that, although they are primarily based on monastic evidence, they usually only discuss monasteries to the extent that they can be considered characteristic representatives of great landownership. Relatively little has been said about the attributes that distinguish monastic estates and their management from the lay and state ones. This is largely the result of deficiencies in our sources. Nevertheless, it is clear that this scholarship has greatly furthered our understanding of the material aspects of monasticism.

As a result of donations from the emperor, from the aristocracy, as well as from more modest individuals, some monasteries came to possess numerous estates. Their own tendency to invest most of their surplus in the purchase of land also helped to increase their fortunes. Of course, this process could also be reversed, and monasteries might sometimes become impoverished or disappear altogether, on account of internal troubles, confiscations, and foreign invasions. In the aggregate, monasteries must have played a significant role in the economy, especially in regions with a high concentration of monastic properties, such as coastal Chalkidike in northern Greece, where the Athonite houses held many estates.

Apart from owning and exploiting lands, some monasteries also owned boats, with which they transported their products and engaged in speculative trade, thereby contributing to the provisioning of cities and stimulating commercial exchanges. Potentially (p. 160) significant (though almost entirely invisible) was their role as money lenders, in particular with merchants and farmers. Most of the money they acquired from the exploitation of their properties and from donations was returned to the economy through the purchase of lands and consumption goods, payments for construction projects, and charity.

The most important question regarding monasteries as economic agents concerns the way they managed their landed fortunes. All indications suggest rather efficient management. The monks, however, seem to have invested most of their surplus in acquiring additional land rather than in improving productivity. The actual effects of this attitude are very hard to gauge, and it is not certain that it seriously affected the economy. In any case, monastic estates must have been among the best exploited ones in Byzantium, thanks to the continuity of ownership and the monasteries' relatively important resources. One of the greatest contributions of monasteries lies in their role as stable structuring elements of the countryside, especially in the period of troubles that started around the middle of the fourteenth century (Smyrlis 2006, 2011: 53–61; Smyrlis, Banev, and Konstantinidis 2015).

The Time of Troubles and the Early Ottoman Period, c.1350–c.1500

Before discussing the late medieval crisis and the early Ottoman rule, it is necessary to review the fate of monasteries in regions that had been lost to the Turks since the eleventh century. The conquest of Asia Minor after 1071 led to the destruction of many monastic establishments. The fate of those that survived the Turkish invasion is mostly unknown, but we can be sure that, overall, privileges and donations diminished because of the change of rule, and because of the displacement or gradual conversion of Christian populations (Vryonis 1971: 169–179, 194–198 and *passim*; Smyrlis 2006: 169–170). The latter development would eventually lead to the extinction of the monasteries. In the parts of Asia Minor that the Byzantines soon recovered, the blooming of the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries was interrupted at the turn of the fourteenth century by the second and definitive Turkish conquest. This conquest had effects similar to those of the first.

In Europe, troubles began in the 1320s, especially in the coastal zone which was exposed to disruptive Turkish raids. Conditions deteriorated rapidly in the 1340s on account of the civil war, the Serbian conquest of Macedonia and Greece, and the arrival of the plague. The remainder of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the fifteenth were characterized by frequent warfare, political instability, recurring waves of the epidemic, and severe economic and demographic decline. The direct destruction of monasteries, the scarcity of manpower, and the general insecurity affected the capacity of the monks to exploit their lands. Moreover, they also suffered confiscations under the Serbs (p. 161) and

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the Byzantines. The most notable of these confiscations was carried out by the Byzantines after 1371, when they took half the monastic estates in Macedonia. Nevertheless, monasteries generally fared much better than did secular landowners, who typically suffered expropriations at every change of regime. In addition, the monks' resources allowed them to maintain some degree of exploitation in their estates, by building fortifications and resettling peasants (Smyrlis 2012a: 145–147). The impact on monasteries of the Ottoman conquest of European lands in the last three decades of the fourteenth century is only partially known. It appears that several monasteries, most notably those of Mount Athos, were spared the sacking and were allowed to keep many of their properties. Their protected status and relative stability allowed them to collect, by way of donations, some of the wealth of the dying Christian aristocracy of the Balkans in the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries (Oikonomides 1996c; Zachariadou 2008; Smyrlis 2008, 2012b). Apart from offering crucial economic stability, monasteries, along with the Church, also provided ideological and religious continuity in a rapidly changing world. This was especially true after the middle of the fifteenth century, when the Ottomans were firmly established in Europe and all traces of the Byzantine secular establishment had disappeared. In many ways, the monasteries and the Church perpetuated Byzantium, and this was of greatest significance for the Christian populations.

As their position became more secure, the attitude of the Ottomans towards the monasteries hardened. As the Athonite evidence shows, soon after the second and definitive conquest of Thessalonike in 1430, the Ottomans carried out wholesale confiscations in Macedonia, which took away the largest part of monastic lands and all of their dependent peasants (Smyrlis 2012b: 38–44). Despite the dramatic reduction of their wealth, many monasteries survived. The Ottomans in fact afforded them a tolerable and at times favourable regime, protecting them from abuses and conceding them limited privileges. The sultan, as had the emperor before him, clearly recognized that these establishments offered him a valuable tool with which to govern his subjects (Kolovos 2005). Unlike in Asia Minor, the population in the European provinces remained largely Christian, and they remained attached to the monasteries at least as much as before. The donations of the Christian subjects of the sultan, the subventions by Danubian princes, and the general demographic and economic growth of the second half of the fifteenth century allowed the monasteries to begin a slow recovery (*Mount Athos in the 14th–16th centuries* 1997; *To Agion Oros ston 15o kai 16o aiona* 2012; Smyrlis 2012b).

Directions for Future Research

There is still much that can be done with the relatively rich monastic source material. Research is particularly needed in two areas. The first concerns the monasteries' function within rural society and especially their exchanges with ordinary individuals, those who were not powerful. Although information is not always plentiful, we need to try to (p. 162) understand the services that the monks and their establishments offered to such persons, in particular the monks' pastoral function and their role as spiritual leaders. Closely related to this is the issue of the many modest establishments that were typically short-lived,

and that never acquired wealth or prominence, but were nonetheless ubiquitous and must have played a significant role in the countryside.

Another matter that requires further study concerns the ways in which the Ottoman conquest transformed the monasteries' significance. Here the work of Catia Galatariotou (1991), which examines the functions Saint Neophytos and his foundation came to fulfil in Cyprus under Latin rule, may be used as a guide. It suggests new ways of exploring the role played by monasteries in a Christian society deprived of its secular leaders and needing to come to terms with the extinction of the Roman Empire. At the same time, more research is also needed to understand the reasons why and the ways in which the Ottomans instrumentalized monasteries in order to rule their Christian subjects.

Suggested Reading

There exists a vast literature on the history of monasticism and of specific monasteries in medieval Byzantium. Good discussions of some of the main historical and institutional questions can be found in the publications of Alice-Mary Talbot (1987, 1990, 2001a–c, 2004, 2007, 2011). For the history of specific establishments, Raymond Janin's books on the monasteries of Constantinople and certain provincial centers of monasticism (Janin 1969, 1975) are indispensable. *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Kazhdan et al. 1991) is an informative reference work. Also useful are the introductions on different monasteries given in the volumes of the *Archives de l'Athos* series (1946–).

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