

*Monks and laymen
in Byzantium, 843–1118*



Rosemary Morris

Lecturer in History, University of Manchester



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Introduction



The figure of the monk was a familiar one in the Byzantine world. But what he represented and his place in society changed in response to the tensions and challenges, the fears and aspirations, the doubts and certainties of Byzantines through the centuries. The lack of any comprehensive modern study of Byzantine monasticism should therefore come as no surprise; such a task is well nigh impossible given the variety of monastic forms within the medieval Greek church. But this study aims to examine one of the most important aspects of Byzantine monasticism, the way in which it interacted with the lay world, and to focus on the ways in which these worlds impinged upon one another.

Monasticism in the abstract was something that Byzantines of all social classes admired and respected. It is no accident that most of the saints of the church in the period after Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman empire were monks. For monks had taken the place of martyrs as those willing to undertake a death in the world, to renounce human ties and associations and to replace them by a new life in the spirit, a life 'in the world but not of it', which in its most devout practitioners could lead to the 'life of the angels', where the flesh was of so little importance as to be almost subsumed into the spirit. But monks did not constitute a separate caste within Byzantine society. They might follow different ways of life, or adhere to different spiritual priorities, but monks had all once been laymen and many laymen, after long years in the secular world, became monks. 'Abandoning the world' thus often meant not the abandonment of human relationships such as family feeling or friendship, or the discarding of claims to leadership in society, but the recasting of them in a different, spiritually orientated context.

Although liturgical observances, theological education, spiritual training and private prayer and meditation were central to the life of Byzantine monks, these were essentially internal concerns. Each

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monastic founder organised such matters in his own way and each monastery carefully preserved its own customs, for Byzantine monasticism was highly individualistic. Although adherence to the monastic precepts of St Basil of Caesarea was widespread and although the liturgical and organisational influence of such houses as the Studios Monastery in Constantinople was of importance, there were no monastic 'orders' on the Western model, and thus a variety of customs was to be found within monastic life. It is not the purpose of this book to examine in any great depth the internal workings of Byzantine monasteries, since it is unlikely that many potential novices were aware of the finer details of the liturgical, ceremonial and daily routine of the house they proposed to enter, although they afterwards certainly spent a great deal of time in learning and practising them. What attracted recruits to specific monastic houses was sometimes their geographical position – most nuns were found in urban convents near their homes, for example – but often the reputation of the founder of the house and the general style of monasticism practised in it. For founders themselves decreed what kind of life should be lived within their establishments. They laid down whether the community should be entirely or essentially coenobitic, whether it should comprise a group of solitaries or whether it should encompass a variety of monastic 'styles'. They oversaw the first building programmes and admitted the first recruits. They received the first donations of cash and land and set the tone for the future development of the house.

The first part of this book is therefore devoted to the question of what kinds of monasticism were most popular in the Middle Byzantine period, both with those who themselves entered the religious life and with those who remained in the lay world, yet through patronage expressed their interest in, and concern for, its prosperity. The importance of what has been termed 'hybrid' monasticism, the combination of elements drawn from the coenobitic and lavriote traditions, is very striking and the reasons for its attraction in the two centuries after the triumph of orthodoxy in 843 are important to identify, not the least in order to lay to rest the view that Byzantine monasticism developed chronologically from the lavriote to the coenobitic styles. Monastic life in this period was much more flexible than this model would allow.

But while monastic 'style' was important in attracting lay recruits and patronage, there is little doubt that the personalities of the monastic founders of the tenth and eleventh centuries did much to enhance the reputation of the religious life. There is, however, a contrast to be drawn between the charismatic holy men of the tenth century, responsible both for the re-establishment of the monastic life in parts of the empire ravaged by invasion and dislocation in the eighth and ninth centuries and for the

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foundation of important monastic communities such as those on Mount Athos, and the lay founders who come to prominence in the eleventh century. Their contrasting backgrounds, careers and attitudes to the monastic life are important to emphasise because of the element of choice always present among potential novices and patrons. What might attract men and women to participation in and promotion of the monastic life varied from time to time and from place to place. But the reputation of monastic leaders always played an important part in influencing lay decisions.

The relationship between monks and the laity, so important in assuring the patronage which would provide for the continuing existence, if not prosperity, of monasteries was, of course, expressed in a number of different ways. The nexus of relationships involved in spiritual fatherhood was but one of the ways in which monks and laymen came together; but with its political as well as spiritual overtones it was one of the most important. But others, also discussed in the early chapters of this book, included those of friendship, family connection and communal association on both a local and empire-wide level. For the implications of the imperially articulated protection of monasticism throughout the Byzantine state need to be compared and contrasted with more locally based associations, so that the importance of monks at all levels of Byzantine society can be clearly illustrated and understood.

While the first part of this book is essentially a story of commitment – commitment by monastic founders to furthering the ideals and virtues of the monastic life and by their disciples and patrons to their founder's original vision – Part II tells a tale of compromise. Under the pressure of the increasing popularity of monasticism, the spiritual orientation of the early founders, especially their emphasis on solitude (*eremia*), was compromised by the pressure of numbers and by the need to acquire property to feed extra mouths. This territorial expansion brought with it a change in monastic orientation which led both to increased contact and conflict with the neighbouring laity and to the involvement of more distant political authority. Monastic expansion and monastic ambitions played their part in the much discussed agrarian crisis of the tenth century; the activities of the monastic *dynatoi* have long needed to be analysed against the background of the general debate about the 'poor' and the 'powerful' which has been of such interest to modern commentators. The weapons used to defend monastic interests, the law, lay patronage, financial management and the sheer weight of spiritual tradition can all be seen in action, both then and in the eleventh century.

The implications of monastic survival and expansion for the health of the Byzantine polity are discussed in the latter part of the book. There is no doubt that, by the eleventh century, monastic interests were often

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acting to the disadvantage of the Byzantine state administration. Imperial officials were circumvented in their tasks of imposing taxation and justice by the vested interests of monasteries and their supporters. Exemptions and privileges seemed to be eating away at the resources of the state. Yet even in the reign of Alexios Komnenos (1081–1118), when an apparently much tougher line was being taken (with imperial approval) towards religious houses, we are still left with the apparent paradox of the imperial power allowing, by privileges, the very practices which appeared to be reducing the central power of the state. To attempt to explain this paradox, Alexios' own attitude to the monastic life (and that of his increasingly important family) has been discussed and his reign used as a landmark from which to survey the development of monastic–lay relationships over the previous two centuries.

As with all works on Byzantium, the shape of the present study has been dictated by the available source material. Rather than present a survey of sources in isolation from the questions which they may be used to illustrate, I have felt it more useful to pause from time to time to discuss the significance of various types of source material as and when they are relevant to the questions posed. I have cast my net widely, as all Byzantinists are bound to do, but have particularly focused my attention on archival material and on hagiography, since these are the two major groups of sources which give us information about the Byzantine countryside. Of course, the use of hagiographical texts presents enormous problems, but I remain convinced that they can with profit be used by the social and economic historian so long as a critical (and flexible) attitude is taken to the material they contain. The problems of *topoi* can, I think, be resolved by asking simple questions about the likelihood of the reliability of the information contained in the individual hagiography; about its style, its message and its provenance. I have taken the view that information should not be automatically disbelieved, simply because it appears in a hagiography; nor should it be unquestionably accepted, since the genre of a source always dictates the presentation of its contents.

This is no less true of the archival material, chiefly from the acts of the monasteries of Athos, and the evidence of the foundation charters (*typika*) which have been mainly deployed in the second part of the book. Without the steady publication of the *Archives de l'Athos*, this book could not have been written and I hope that one of its small achievements may be to bring the more recent volumes of this outstanding series to the attention of an English-language readership. The precision and detail of the French editors have enabled later commentators to be fully aware of the wide variety of types of document contained in the Athonite archives. Again, I have attempted to give each document I have used an 'identity' of its own, rather than merely 'quarrying' it for detail. The same is true of the *typika*;

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while they all clearly conform to a recognisable pattern of composition, each one has its own character and individuality and this needs to be borne in mind when reading them.

The period covered by the book is that from the triumph of orthodoxy, the re-establishment of icon veneration within the Byzantine church and final defeat of iconoclasm in 843, to the end of the reign of Alexios Komnenos. It is a period which shows a dramatic rise in monastic foundation and an enthusiasm for the various forms of the monastic life which was in no small measure the result of the heroic role that monks were believed to have played in the fight against the iconoclasts. It is a period during which source material of all kinds becomes much more plentiful: the surviving Athonite archives begin at the end of the ninth century; hagiography is plentiful (and, more importantly, unstereotyped) throughout the tenth century, although of less value in the eleventh; imperial legislation is preserved in significant quantities and personal foundation documents, such as *typika*, begin to appear. Of course, there is much that has been lost. We know very little about the workings of the patriarchate, still less about the secular church in town or countryside and its relationship with monastic houses. Many monastic archives were destroyed either by Seljuk invasion in the eleventh century, or by later depredations of Franks and Ottomans. The documents kept in the central administrative bureaux in Constantinople have, almost without exception, been lost. It is only the mercifully bureaucratic methods of Byzantine officials, with their tidy-minded issuing of duplicates and triplicates, which have enabled us to reconstruct imperial activity via copies preserved in the archives of the recipients of imperial communications.

But given all these disadvantages, the tenth and eleventh centuries are a period when monasticism and its development may be studied in a variety of sources, and it is this very variety that can provide us with an important range of insights. And these insights are not just communicated by the written word. For the monastic monuments of the period also have their story to tell, albeit one that is often puzzling and incomplete. I have tried to present their visual evidence – architecture, decoration and inscriptions – as well as that from other artistic media whenever it has seemed relevant to my major themes. The book has been unashamedly ‘source led’; it does not pretend to an overall theory or interpretation, but rather to a methodology which takes as a premise the importance of source analysis and criticism. Where there are no sources the reader will find little discussion.

Most studies of Byzantine history and society omit the study of Byzantine southern Italy from their considerations. Usually this is justified by the comment that southern Italy was in some way ‘different’,

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that it had traditions of its own which set the region apart from the Byzantine lands further to the east. But all the Byzantine provinces had their own particular characteristics. Some areas – such as the eastern themes (administrative districts) – invariably included as ‘properly’ Byzantine in any survey, contained linguistic, religious and social variations every bit as complicated as those of Italy. I have felt it important to include as much material about Byzantine monasticism in Apulia, Lucania and Calabria as possible (and there are some great and regrettable *lacunae* in our knowledge), not only because these regions *were* without question part of the empire until the late eleventh century, but because southern Italian sources help to demonstrate many of the similarities of monastic style, development and contact visible throughout the Byzantine world.

What linked the monks of southern Italy with their brethren further to the east was, above all, their use of a common language. They were part of the Greek-speaking and writing world and this is the world upon which I have concentrated. Though the monastic life of the Slavs is of great importance in this period and was a reflection of the ‘Byzantinisation’ of the Balkans and Russia, it deserves a study of its own by one competent to appreciate the Slavonic sources. So this book is not so much about monks and laymen in the ‘Byzantine Commonwealth’ as monks and laymen in the Byzantine heartlands. For they provided the setting for the establishment of the spiritual values, the personal commitment and the administrative support upon which orthodox monasticism was built. Although monasticism was one of Byzantium’s most significant cultural and political ‘exports’ to the Slav world, it was created in the Greek-speaking lands and its development needs, above all, to be studied there.