

The Monks of Byzantium



11th century Byzantine miniature representing Studion Monastery. Founded in 462 or 463, historically it is a very important monastery of Constantinople. Its laws and customs were taken as models by the monks of many other monasteries of the Orthodox world and continue to influence to this day. It is especially celebrated for its famous school of calligraphy, established by St. Theodore. Many of its manuscript illuminations from the scriptorium now reside in museums in Vatican City, Venice and Moscow. In 1204 the monastery was destroyed by the Crusaders and was restored in 1290. The greater part of the monastery was again destroyed when the Turks captured Constantinople in 1453.

by Geneva Bennett



Saint Basil the Great of Caesarea

St. Anthony the founder of Byzantine monasticism

Byzantine Basilian monk

Thesis/Hypothesis

In Byzantium, the populace respected and admired the monk Emperors loved him, shared their table with him, sought his blessing. Alexius III of Trebizond issued a chrysobull in 1364 in which he stated that ‘he relied for the defence of his Empire . . . and . . . placed greater faith in monasteries than in fortresses.’ (Peter Charanis, *The Monk as an Element of Byzantine Society*)

How and why did Byzantine monks and monasteries play such a central role in medieval Byzantine society? Did these monks and monasteries live up to the “Basilian rule” which dictated their role in society?

Basilian Rule

Basil of Caesarea, circa 329-379, detailed in his Long and Short Rules the role that monasteries should play within society: ‘they should be located in cities as well as in the countryside, and stressed the importance of supporting the population through charitable activity.’ (Alice-Mary Talbot, *A Monastic World*)



Byzantine Monks, www.classicalworld.files.wordpress.com

Perspectives

My sources indicate the following perspectives about the role of monasteries and monks in medieval Byzantium.

Monasteries inextricably involved with society

In *A Monastic World*, by Alice-Mary Talbot, she explores the many ways in which ‘fully developed Byzantine monasticism was inextricably involved with society.’ (p258) Ms. Talbot explains that monasteries were originally established to enable Christian ascetics to renounce secular material values and the bonds of kinship. Although monks and nuns vowed to withdraw from the secular world, they continued to be “inextricably entwined with virtually all aspects of Byzantine society.” (p 258) Talbot also says that as the Byzantine empire ‘Christianized,’ charitable activities that had been the responsibility of the state such as the free distribution of bread to the poor were taken over by the church, and in particular monasteries. Urban monasteries in particular played an important philanthropic role, being located in the midst of an often needy population. But rural monasteries also provided ‘essential social services.’ (p258)



The brothers Saint Cyril, Saint Methodius from Thessalonki, www.mlahanas.de

The monk was a vital element of his society

Peter Charanis, in *The Monk as an Element of Byzantine Society*, states that of the approximately ninety persons who “inhabited the Byzantine Empire from the beginning of the seventh century to the end of that Empire in the fifteenth, who achieved sainthood, seventy-five were monks.” In his discussion of the numbers of monasteries and monks inhabiting them, Mr. Charanis says that the ratio of monks to the general population was “slightly more than one monk per one hundred inhabitants,” and that the number of monasteries was ‘considerable.’ He continues to say that these statistics by themselves show the importance which Byzantine society ‘attached to the monastic life’ and that the monk ‘was a vital element of (his) society and the monastery (was) a characteristic feature of the Byzantine landscape.’

An influential element

The effects of organization and management, and the sometimes effective leadership also contributed to monks being influential. But more importantly, it was their conduct toward others that was guided by a philosophy of love, kindness and simplicity. These were ‘the factors which made the monk.’ (Charanis)

Mystical abilities

The monk also had a ‘mystical quality that gave him special status and formed his image.’ The powers of saintly monks became legendary. Stories circulated that some monks had the power to ‘heal the diseased, even to restore life to the dead, to drive evil spirits from one’s soul, and to prophesy about one’s future.’ (Charanis)

Provided practical medical advice for treatment of ailments

Byzantine monks also provided practical remedies that medicine could offer. “The monastery was often the only place where a peasant could go to receive practical medical advice for the treatment of his ailments. (Charanis)



Monk in Scriptorium, www.mlahanas.de

Contribution to literacy

Monks from uneducated families were taught to read when they entered the monastery. Orphans raised in monasteries were also taught. Anna Comnene states in her biography of her father, The Alexiad, that the ‘children who had lost their parents if not sent to the homes of relatives, were sent ‘to holy monasteries with orders to bring them up, not as slaves, but as free children and allow them a thorough education and instructions in the Holy Writings.’ (Charanis)

Hospitals

One fifty-bed hospital, attached to the monastery of the Pantocrator in Constantinople, was established in 1136. This was a “remarkable institution,” with five wards, and two physicians per ward. It included a ward for surgery, one for women only, and even one for eye ailments. There was also a psychiatric ward, and an outpatient department. The physicians were male and female and there were also nurses. This hospital also included a pharmacy, a laundry, bathing houses, a kitchen, a mill, and a baker. (Charanis)



EscaladeAtenas.jpg

sbbs.keyhole.commubbthreads

Byzantine Monks Giving Alms to the Poor

Giving to the poor

The dispensation of charity, a function that had been assumed early on by the church establishment was also assumed, in due course, by monasteries. This was not simply a matter of giving alms to the poor or of offering shelter to worn out travelers. Although these things were done, the charity given by monasteries addressed the needs of many kinds of unfortunate people. (Charanis). Alice-Mary Talbot states that ‘The mission of some monasteries included the care of ‘indigents’ through poorhouses, hospitals, or old age homes.’ The Kosmosoteira monastery in Pherrai accommodated 36 patients who were laymen or elderly monks. All their needs were supplied including clothing and the care of a doctor, church services and burial. (p261)

Those who didn’t live within the monastery also received help and monastery rules dictated that there would be distributions of food, alms, and clothing to the poor at the main gate. During the holidays or “feast days” more food was provided and the Evergetis monastery in Constantinople provided old tunics and shoes on the ‘Dormition feast day of the Virgin.’ (Talbot p266)

Confessors, spiritual advisers, and spiritual healers

Monasteries provided spiritual services for lay congregants. The laity often used monks at nearby monasteries as their confessors and spiritual advisers, and attended services at monastic churches. Laypeople enjoyed the celebration of feast days at local monasteries. They also went on pilgrimage to monastic shrines and at times sought healing from the relics of a saint located in the monastic church. (Talbot p261)



Agricultural workers, Byzantine mosaic, Nea Moni Monastery, Mosaics in Greece

Employers

Monasteries also played a significant role in Byzantine economic life as major owners of agricultural lands and urban properties. Countless Byzantine peasants farmed monastery fields or vineyards, while others worked as hired laborers on monastic lands. (Talbot p272)



St. Nicholas saving the three maidens. Legend has it that St. Nicholas anonymously put gold coins down the chimneys of homes of poor families who could not afford dowries for their daughters.

Took the place of the nuclear family

Monasteries provided services that a family was unable to provide such as the maintenance of disadvantaged members who found refuge in a monastery and 'maidens unmarriageable because of the lack of a dowry or a disfigurement,' or those suffering from mental illness. Some monasteries provided donations for the 'provision of dowries for poor maidens.' Monasteries also took in poor widows and widowers without families to look after them in their old age. 'Within the monastic precincts those in need were assured spiritual comfort, housing, regular meals, nursing care, burial, and prayers for their salvation.' (Talbot p266)

Those who didn't want to take monastic vows when entering a monastery at a later age in order to acquire support could purchase an annuity or adelphaton. (Talbot p265)



Travelers, Byzantine mosaic, Nea Moni Monastery,

Travelers' Hostels

Travelers had access to monastic hostels in rural places where inns were scarce. These provided safe refuge, bed and food. The Pakourianos monastery at Backovo in what is now Bulgaria ran three different hostels in the eleventh century. The stays were restricted normally to three days but visitors were provided with food and wine, a portable stove to use, and ‘the services of a peasant to carry wood and water.’ (Talbot p267)



Peasant at work, Byzantine mosaic, Mosaics in Greece



St. Nicholas saves Myra from famine

Provided refuge

Travelers as well as local inhabitants were also assisted by monasteries that built defensive towers in the countryside and occasionally through the ‘building and maintaining of roads and bridges.’ In 1373 the Athonite monastery of Docheiariou built a tower (whose western wall still exists) which some historians believe was one of a type of tower that may have been intended to guard monastic estates and which also served “as places of refuge for lay laborers at times of crisis.” (Talbot p267)

Rural monasteries, normally surrounded by walls, provided refuge during enemy invasions and also housed local people during times of famine. In 1308 when a famine occurred entire families from Hierissos were admitted to Athonite monastery of Vatopedi where they were fed. (Talbot p267)

Provided Schools

The schools which were run in some monasteries, such as one found in Constantinople at the time of Alexios I Komnenos, and at the Kecharitomene convent founded by Komnenos’ wife, Irene, were mainly for educating orphans who were raised in monasteries, but also included other children. Basil the Great set the precedent for monastery schools in Caesarea. These provided instruction for orphaned children and those who had parents. (Talbot p268)

Burial

Lay people donated money to monasteries as a way to contract for annual pensions or *adelphata* in their old age. Other people made monetary contributions in order that they one day gain admission to the monastery and receive ‘care in their old age, or burial within the monastic church.’ (Talbot p270)



St. Anthony burying St. Paul of Thebes, St. Paul's Monastery, Egypt

Further Perspectives

Averil Cameron, in his book, *the Byzantines*, in the chapter on *What was Byzantium?* discusses the Byzantine identity. ‘In the search for a unifying or identifying factor, religion seems at first sight to be a candidate, and this is certainly how many Byzantines saw it.’ (p15) He quotes Steven Runciman: ‘(the Byzantine) had an overriding sense of religion.’ (p15)

Angeliki A. Laiou, in *Byzantium and the West*, broadens this view of religion beyond the borders of Byzantium during these medieval times as being all-important when she describes two possible visitors from Italy to Constantinople in 1204 and how they might have reacted to a visit

to Byzantium. She concludes that they would have felt at home as they found themselves in the same cultural-social unit they knew at home in Italy. The unifying factor here was also religion, specifically, Christianity. (p16).

Furthering this view of the impact of religion in medieval Byzantium that involved all levels of society, and that put monks at the forefront, Colin Wells, in his book, *Sailing from Byzantium*, describes the influence of the monks with the ordinary people of Byzantium and the “spiritual resurgence” that they championed in the century before the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The monks’ ‘authority and power seemed to grow as those of the imperial government diminished.’ It was a time of renewal for the monks, when the “hesychia” (meaning ‘holy quiet’ or ‘peace’) or Hesychast movement took hold. These monk Hesychasts, who held contrasting views to the humanists who represented the classical heritage and philosophies, would eventually gain a dominant foothold in the Orthodox church. The humanists embroiled themselves in an often bitter public dispute with the monks. In the end the humanists turned toward the West, embracing its views. Part of their rationale was to create solidarity with other Christians in order for Byzantium to “escape political extinction at Turkish hands.” Some moved to Rome and other parts of the West and became Catholics. (pps 44,45)

The Byzantine mainstream did not agree with the view of the humanists, however. The overlying concern of the monks and mainstream society was for spiritual salvation. (Wells p45) Carl G. Gustavson, in his book, *A Preface to History*, in describing the social force of spirituality or religion, pinpoints the Middle Ages and its religious spirit or “mood” that believed that “the salvation of the soul was all important.” (pps 48,49) Saving their souls, many mainstream Byzantines believed, could not be done by following the humanists, or accepting the beliefs and doctrines of the Western Catholics.

In *the Byzantines*, Averil Cameron describes the Hesychast monks and their followers’ views near the end of the Byzantine Empire: ‘A devout people with its back to the wall can be pushed deeper and deeper into hardening religious nativism, in the end even preferring national suicide to religious compromise.’ Cameron states that this is what happened to the Byzantines. They chose their fate. ‘Military conquest by the Turks was less of an evil than spiritual submission to the hated Catholics. Without strict adherence to Orthodoxy there could be no hope of spiritual salvation, and spiritual salvation came before political survival.’ (Wells, p45)

Michael Angold, from *The Church and Monasteries*, describes the church hierarchy of bishops and priests, cathedrals and smaller churches, the separation between this hierarchy and the monks and their monasteries, and how lay society fit into the scheme. Bishops and priests ‘realized how closely intertwined monasticism was with lay society.’ It was to monks that the laity turned for their confessions although church canon law insisted that it should be made to a priest or a bishop. This loss of control over confession was an affront to Episcopal authority. (p243)

Angold continues the discussion by pointing out the distinction between social classes: “The church hierarchy belonged to the elite; society at large did not.” (p236) The general rule at the time was that most of the cathedral (in particular), and church clergy came from prominent local families and these priests, whose approach to their work in religion contrasted with the outlook and work of the monks and monasteries, were ‘anxious to preserve their traditional privileges.’ (p239) Angold states further that “....members of the elite were suspicious and contemptuous of popular participation in either religious or political matters ...” (p236)

These attitudes affected church attendance. Many ordinary people simply did not attend and Angold notes that ‘it is often suggested that this was a function of the liturgy, which underlined the distance separating the clergy from the laity.’ A screen separated the people from the priest performing the ‘mysteries around the altar.’ The exclusivity of the priesthood was further underlined by the way communion was normally reserved to the clergy; ‘the laity were encouraged to communicate only at Easter and other great feasts.’ (p245)

These views are a reflection of the sense of alienation from the official church. The monks, therefore filled a void. Pre-eminent among these was Theodore of Stoudios, who turned his monastery of Stoudios into ‘the exemplar of Byzantine monasticism.’ Theodore’s major contribution was to ‘articulate the ideal of monks forming a spiritual elite within society.’ This spiritual approach was coupled with tending to the everyday and practical needs of the people. (Charanis)

Perspectives Not Taken

This research is limited to the medieval period between roughly the eleventh century and 1453 when the Turks captured Constantinople. There is no comparison of the services provided by monasteries to those that may have been provided by the state or Emperor, by individual churches, or any other organization or institution. There is also no in-depth consideration given to the sources of income of monasteries, or their economic role in Byzantine society. Some consideration is given to their political role, mainly through Michael Angold’s essay.

The spiritual differences among monks was not considered nor were the different practices and specialties of different monasteries.



Crying Women, Nea Moni Stavros Monastery, Info@GreekMosaics.com

Arguments/Discussion/Evidence

I found Alice-Mary Talbot's paper and research to be very helpful. She supplied information from primary sources, including direct quotes. She also named monasteries, their location and time of foundation, and what their specialties were. The information provided in her paper painted a very vivid picture of monks and their various interactions with lay society and their place within it.

Peter Charanis' paper offered a good overall view of monks and their motivations, the political view, and included a lot of details as to their numbers in relation to the rest of society and the numbers of monasteries that existed during different periods, including medieval times. His research was similar to Ms. Talbot's, but not as detailed and he did not offer the depth of analysis that was found in Ms. Talbot's work.

Michael Angold's paper delved into the larger religious and political issues and their implications for the Byzantine Empire. He looked at various religious and spiritual movements and the relationships of the church hierarchy, the monks, and the populace.

While the above sources, along with Averil Cameron's and Colin Wells' books, provided the most information for my research project, I also looked at other books and encyclopedias to get a beginning and broad view of Byzantium. I used Carl Gustavson's book to gain an understanding of how social forces such as religion and spirituality can play an enormous role in history.

Because my research was based on a later period and because the topic of the lives of monks and saints was quite well documented, there is sufficient evidence to support the views given by the research I found. Many of my sources used primary sources which are listed in their bibliographies and there are many paintings and mosaics and other works of art available at various internet websites which add to the whole picture of monks and their place in the Byzantine world of the middle ages. Many of the pictures I chose were identified as to what they depicted and where they resided (monasteries, museums, etc.). Some however, were not as clearly identified but were referenced briefly as Byzantine and medieval.



The Fall of Constantinople, www.classicalfiles.wordpress.com

Relation/Significance for Contemporary Society

Ordinary people of the middle ages in Byzantium did not have the security and services provided by a democratic government. Few people had money or education. If we had lived during that time, the vast majority of us would have been illiterate peasants.

Byzantine peasants had no money for doctors, hospitals, or medicine. They often gave produce they had grown in exchange for these services. Many didn't own a wagon and went everywhere on foot. Peasants had no vote, no control, no one to support them, no unions -- no say. In comparison, we of this time period in Canada have many choices and are equal members of society with equal benefits. We all vote when of age, have access to education, have jobs, earn money, and have many choices we are free to explore.

Many of the services provided to the populace of Byzantine by the monks and monasteries are now provided in Canada by our provincial and federal governments and would mainly be described as social services. Through the collection of taxes, our government is able to provide social services that include care for the disadvantaged and the elderly, pensions for all, hospital and medical care for all, old age homes, and even contributes to burial costs. The government also provides jobs, we have free public schools, and our roads and bridges are maintained.

The religious strife and conflict of Byzantium during the several centuries before its fall reflect the differences that still, today, cause conflict and war within countries and societies, and between nations. Michael Angold stated that 'religious controversy involved society' (p253) and that what one group of popular Byzantine monks offered to people 'was a religious experience in which all could participate directly.' (p252) What the Byzantine people wanted was the same as what all of us want now. We all want to participate directly by saying that 'this is what I believe and this is how I want to experience my spiritual and religious life,' and 'this is the kind of security I want, with these essential services, for myself and for all.' We, unlike the Byzantines, have that as a right of citizenry as detailed in our Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Canada is known for its generous support of its citizens. There is a strong similarity between Canada's approach to its populace and that of the monks and monasteries of Byzantium and the citizenry of their empire.

Conclusion

How and why did Byzantine monks and monasteries play such a central role in medieval Byzantine society? Did these monks and monasteries live up to the “Basilian rule” which dictated their role in society?

I think the answers to these questions are clearly that the monk’s ‘raison d’etre’ was to support the population through charitable activity as dictated by Saint Basil the Great and was respected and admired by the Byzantine populace.

Having done my research on the Byzantine Empire and its monks, I am reminded of the famous quotation, “The measure of a civilization is how well it takes care of its weakest members.” I believe that the work of the monks measured in this way indicates that they not only lived up to the Basilian Rule but made great contributions to their civilization.

Sources/Limitations of Study

Primary Sources

The Alexiad, by Anna Komnene (Anna Komnene was a princess who wrote this biography of her father, the Emperor Alexius I while she lived in retirement in the convent of Kecharitomene). This was a primary source referenced by most of the secondary sources I used. (Peter Charanis cites ‘Anna Comnena, op. cit. (supra, note 93), Leib, 3:214; Dawes, 409. The translation used is that of Dawes’).

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Basil of Caesarea, Long Rules, ch. 11 (transl. Clarke 1925: 172-3) Also from Talbot’s essay.

Life of Lazaros (Greenfield 2000) Talbot

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Pictures and paintings of various kinds from various sources including monasteries, Greek heritage websites, travel sites, religious organizations, and educational/historical sites. See individual pictures for identification and source.

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