DE MONIALIBUS IN BYZANTINO ORBE

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Essays on Byzantine Women Monasticism

In the context of a growing interest in female Byzantine monasticism, recent scholarly work by English-language scholars, such as Averil Cameron, Mary Alice Talbot, Judith Herrin and Rosemary Morris, has been fruitful in establishing a frame of reference for the further development of this topic. Nonetheless, a work of synthesis on women monasticism is still a *desideratum*.

The monographic section proposed here aims to take stock of some of the main trends of interpretation of the female monastic phenomenon.

As is well known, it is very difficult to reconstruct the profile of women's monasticism, except in the case of saintly or aristocratic founders, who may author their own *typikon*. A case in point is that of the wife of Alexius Comnenus, Empress Irene Dukaina Comnena, who founded both the Christ Philanthropos and more directly the Monastery of the Mother of God Kecharitomene in Constantinople, for which she composed a *typikon*, dated to 1110-1116[1]. In this monastery Alexius confined Anna after the failure of the coup against his brother, and her husband's death. The Mamas and the Lips monasteries, to name just a few, will depend on it for their *typikon*.

Ascetic ideals, canon law and monastic rules, however, almost never speak specifically of nuns.

As in the West, so in the East, women entered the convent for different reasons: a girl could embrace the monastic life more by necessity than by vocation if, for example, she was considered unfit for marriage because she had been marked by smallpox or did not possess an entirely healthy mind. Others took the monastic habit after being widowed, thus finding in the monastic context spiritual comfort, companionship and support in old age. If, from a purely canonical point of view, the ascetic vocation must be the result of a free decision and not a forced taking of monastic vows, the reality, especially concerning aristocratic families, goes in the opposite direction. Emperor Basil I founded the monastery of Euphemia in Patrios for keeping his daughters. Later, this same foundation welcomed Zoe Karbonopsina and Theodora (1031) who had fallen into disgrace. At Kanikleiou and against their will the sisters of Romanos II became nuns; three sisters of Michael III fled to Karia-

[1] S. Thomas - A. Constantinides Hero (eds.), *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents. A Complete Translation of the surviving Founder's Typika and Testaments*, with the assistance of Giles Constable («Dumbartons Oaks Studies», XXXV), Washington 2000, II, pp. 649ff.

nos; at Piperoudion Nicephoros Botaniates enclosed his mother; in Despoton the wife of Leo V was imprisoned. Often then nunneries welcomed graves and mausoleums of the imperial family members: Basil I was buried with members of his family at Euphemia in Patrios.

There are not only emperors who founded convents with their own family in mind, but monks too: Peter of Atroa, for example, founded a convent of which he was abbot, and where his sister and his daughters received the tonsure.

Women foundations are closely connected with the problem of double monasteries already in *Codex Justinianus* I, 3.43, 529, that had prevented monks from living with nuns, abolishing double monasteries and establishing that the majority element, whether male or female, could stay put, while the other was to leave. But actually double monasteries (*Dipla Monasteria*) continue to exist even in the Byzantine era. Canon 20 of the Council of Nicaea (787), which incorporates the rules of the Quinisext 46-47, again bans the foundation of mixed monasteries: if both spouses want to embrace the monastic life together, the man will go to a male monastery, the woman into a female. As for the existing mixed monasteries, monks and nuns should not live in the same building and should not talk face to face. A monk should not sleep in a monastery of nuns and should not eat alone with a nun. These rules compound into the elimination of mixed communities. Patriarch Nicephorus I in the ninth century decreed their abolition and Patriarch Alexis the Studite will reiterate such prohibition in the eleventh century. In the twelfth century, canon lawyer Theodore Balsamon, starting from the axiom that the sexes should not be mixed in life and in death, states that one cannot hold funerals of members of the opposite sex in monasteries, a prohibition which is also found in the *typikon* of Kecharitomene. In Byzantium we know of the enduring existence of double monasteries still down to the twelfth and even the fourteenth century, such as the Theotokos Kecharitomene and Christos Philanthropos, where in the fourteenth century the Princess Irene Eulogia Choumna enters with her family, and Nea Mone, a double monastery founded by Patriarch Athanasius I, a former Athonite monk, who was Patriarch twice, in 1289-1293 and 1303-1309.

Female houses are similar to men's in practical organization, although they tend to be smaller and usually located in the urban compound and not in rural areas. However, even when they are secluded, nuns have currency with the opposite sex, to the extent that they need priests, confessors, doctors, usually strategically chosen among the elderly or eunuchs. Nunneries are therefore never entirely independent of a male presence, especially from the liturgical point of view.

This central issue is dealt with in the study by Cozma-Giorda on mixed/double/twin/symbiotic monasteries: in contrast to the imperial legislation that would abolish them from Justinian, these forms of monastic life had a *longue durée* in Byzantium, some even displaying their official sanctioning

as patriarchal foundations. The research focuses on Orthodox monasticism, particularly the Orthodox-Byzantine monastic tradition and is the result of methodological experimentation: a diachronic analysis conducted through the historical-critical method, based on literary and documentary sources, produced by and on ancient monasticism.

Unlike monks, whose *stabilitas loci* seems to be mere utopia, the nuns actually practiced life as a recluse: Theodora of Thessalonica and Irene of Chrysobalanton in the ninth century spent their lives in the monastery, with the exception of brief official releases. The most enterprising nuns who wanted to go on pilgrimage or meet a saint in the monastery resorted to dressing up as men or, often, as eunuchs, because there were monasteries, for example, in Bithynia, who accepted these[2]. Herrin notes that the monastic disguise of women who pretend to be eunuchs allowed them to simulate a holiness reserved by the Byzantine church authorities only to men.

In her article in this section, Barbara Crostini attempts to redress the balance of an overall negative judgement of women monasteries as restricting institutions. According to historical data, monasteries were acting more like prisons to passive victims, than (sometimes last-resort) opportunities when other alternatives in life might have actually turned out even more restrictive and limiting to these women. Though in itself not a consolation, figures such as Irene of Chrysobalanton and Kassia emerge as ambassadors of such freedom that could be gained by women within monastic institutions. The contribution of women to their own spiritual guidance, as well as that of other laymen, and to the liturgical life of the church appear as outstanding achievements even against the background of the political function of monasteries as enforced places of penance for aristocratic women in disgrace.

Ekaterini Mitsiou surveys the central topic of silence: the aim of her contribution is to bring silence to the forefront of the discussion about communication in monastic realities (male and female) and to investigate an aspect which, though central to the monastic experience, has been neglected from the point of view of Gender Studies.

Finally, the article by Rosa Maria Parrinello aims to make better known the dynamics of election of leaders in female monasteries. She highlights instances of criticism by the elders where, despite the selection criteria, abbesses do not live up to the expectations of the elders.

Even from such a brief outline of Byzantine women's monastic experience, the distance between Eastern and Western female experience comes to the fore. In Byzantium, we lack stories of forced entry into the cloister, such as that of Gertrude in Manzoni's *Promessi Sposi*, or of the lesser-known Anna Maddalena Valdina[3], nor do we hear of the cloister as an

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[2] On this widespread phenomenon in middle-Byzantine monasticism, see S. Tougher, *«The Angelic Life»: Monasteries for Eunuchs*, in E.M. Jeffreys (ed.), *Byzantine Style, Religion and Civilization. In Honour of Sir Steven Runciman*, Cambridge 2006, pp. 238-252. See also Ch. Messis, *Les Eunuques à Byzance, entre réalité et imaginaire*, Paris 2014.

[3] Giovanna Fiume, *Monacazioni forzate, strategie giudiziarie e logiche nobiliari. Suor*

infernal place, such as for Arcangela Tarabotti[4]. Nevertheless, the articles here gathered throw light on some interesting aspects of women monastic experience in Byzantium.

Anna Maddalena Valdina, in «Rivista di storia del cristianesimo» 1 (2017), pp. 397-428.

[4] See, e.g., Francesca Medioli, *L'«Inferno monacale» di Arcangela Tarabotti*, Torino 1990.