

INTRODUCTION

BLACK ROSE, a Modern Greek television series that aired from autumn 2022 to 2023, centres on the story of Elisabeth, a nun who briefly leaves her monastery and, while in the secular world, falls in love with a young man. The series captivated audiences eager for a romantic narrative and a “happily-ever-after” ending. However, such an outcome would be deeply troubling from the perspective of the monastic community, as it challenges the moral integrity of the group and threatens its internal cohesion. The departure of one nun could encourage others to follow, thereby destabilizing the entire institution. To mitigate such risks, both civil and canon law—along with the foundation charters of monastic communities—sought to regulate nearly every aspect of monastic life. Yet, despite this regulatory rigour, such measures were not always effective. The story of a “fallen” monk or nun has recurred throughout history, reflecting the persistent tension between individual desire and communal discipline.

The ideal of monastic life envisioned virtuous monks and nuns striving to draw closer to God through fasting, prayer, and spiritual devotion. This ideal also embraced those who emulated the martyrs by steadfastly professing their faith as well as those who resisted temptation and renounced worldly pleasures. Alongside the early Christian martyrs, medieval monastics revered the founders of monasticism and a distinguished lineage of male and female saints. The *vitae*—narratives of their lives—were widely read, copied, and disseminated across medieval contexts. In Eastern Christianity, their examples were also memorialized visually through monumental paintings and icons, which served as constant reminders of the “right path” and the proper mode of monastic living. This path was gradually shaped from the third century onward by influential ecclesiastics, monastics, and theologians.

Each successive generation drew upon the authority of established monastic tradition while simultaneously adapting it to meet contemporary needs and challenges. This dynamic of continuity and transformation remained evident well into the late Byzantine period—the focus of this study—when Byzantium, or the Eastern Roman Empire, had ceased to be

a dominant global power and had instead become a more peripheral actor within increasingly interconnected world systems.¹

Finally, the presence of Western Orders in the Eastern Mediterranean after the Crusades—particularly after 1204—influenced Byzantine monasticism, especially in matters of debate and theological discourse.² Initially marked by suspicion and animosity, the coexistence of Catholic and Orthodox monastics eventually became common, particularly in Latin-dominated areas such as Crete and Cyprus. Many Orthodox monuments, manuscripts, texts, and wall paintings depicting nuns originate from these regions, attesting to the presence and influence of Orthodox female monastics within a non-Byzantine cultural environment.

Before delving into the central focus of this study, however, it is important to review the current state of research and outline the methodological framework that guides this analysis.

State of Research

Christian asceticism, along with the origins and development of monasticism, has been extensively studied.³ Significant emphasis has been placed on the life and works of Antony the Great and the Desert Fathers, the emergence and spread of coenobitic life, and the role of the monastic rules established by Pachomios and Basil the Great.⁴ Influenced by anthropological and philosophical theories, recent scholarship has shifted its focus to more specific thematic areas, such as the body, diet, sexuality, and the performative aspects in the lives of saints. In this regard, the contributions of Peter Brown and Stavroula Constantinou have been particularly important.⁵

On the other hand, since the introduction of feminist theories and gender studies into historical research in the 1980s, Byzantine women have become

1 On world systems, see Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, 34 (map) and 137–45.

2 Mitsiou, “Die Netzwerke einer kulturellen Begegnung,” 359–74; Mitsiou, “Die Dominikaner als Experten in der Romania,” 43–53.

3 Cf. Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*.

4 Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia*; Basil of Caesarea, *Regulae fusius tractatae*, ed. Migne, cols. 901–1052; Basil of Caesarea, *Regulae brevius tractatae*, ed. Migne, cols. 1052–1305.

5 Brown, *The Body and Society*; Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances*; cf. Hatzaki, *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium*; Ringrose, “The Byzantine Body,” 362–78.

a vibrant field of study.⁶ Their social and economic circumstances have been analyzed by scholars such as Angeliki Laiou, Judith Herrin, Liz James, and Joëlle Beaucamp. Laiou focused on their socio-economic conditions,⁷ while Herrin and James explored issues of power,⁸ and Beaucamp examined women's legal status.⁹

There has also been extensive research on the role of women in the monastic movement. Susan Elm's book *Virgins of God* has been a milestone in this regard.¹⁰ Additionally, studies like Theresa Shaw's *The Burden of the Flesh*, which focuses on the sexuality and asceticism of nuns, have analyzed the perception of the female body and the practice of fasting in ascetical texts.¹¹ However, there is a distinct lack of focused studies on female coenobitical monasticism in Byzantium from Late Antiquity up to the twelfth century, with the topic typically receiving only indirect mentions or brief treatments within broader studies. Examples of this approach can be seen in the otherwise excellent works by Peter Hatlie and Rosemary Morris, where no dedicated sub-chapter on nuns is included.¹² This contrasts with the scholarly research on female monasticism in the West, which has seen an increase in publications in recent years.¹³ A more recent study by Daniel Oltean on the stages before becoming a monk or nun is extremely helpful and insightful, though it is not gender-focused.¹⁴

Morris's statement that "we know next to nothing about female monasticism in the period up to c. 1100" reflects more the lack of information about the economic and administrative aspects of female monasticism in the Middle Byzantine period than a lack of sources. In fact, a significant corpus of hagiographical works highlights other areas of interest, such as social and spatial entanglements, while archaeology continues to bring new evidence to light.

6 On the role of women and especially of nuns in the Western Middle Ages, see Shahar, *The Fourth Estate*, 22–64; Erler and Kowaleski, *Gendering the Master Narrative*.

7 Laiou, *Gender, Society and Economic Life in Byzantium*; Laiou, *Mariage, amour et parenté à Byzance*; Laiou, "Sex, Consent and Coercion in Byzantium," 109–221.

8 Herrin, "Femina Byzantina," 115–32; Herrin, *Women in Purple*; Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence*; James, *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium*.

9 Beaucamp, "La situation juridique de la femme à Byzance," 145–76; Beaucamp, *Le statut de la femme à Byzance*.

10 Elm, "Virgins of God."

11 Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*; cf. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

12 Hatlie, *The Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople*; Morris, *Monks and Laymen*.

13 See, for example, Lähnemann and Schlotheuber, *Unerhörte Frauen*.

14 Oltean, *Devenir moine à Byzance*.

Although Morris notes that “from the beginning of the twelfth century, the figure of the Byzantine nun appears much more frequently in the sources,” a dedicated monograph on this topic in the late Byzantine period is still missing.¹⁵

Nevertheless, some important articles have been published on certain aspects of female monasticism during the Palaiologan period. Alice-Mary Talbot has done significant preliminary work on the subject, contributing numerous dictionary entries on women and monasticism as well as several pathbreaking articles. A key focus of her research is the age at which nuns entered the convent as well as their initial motivations for doing so.¹⁶ Additionally, Talbot has explored the concept of gendered space within a nunnery. She has also addressed topics such as female piety, the founding of monasteries, and the lives of saints—areas that have been examined by many other scholars as well.¹⁷

At this point, we must mention the congresses and collective volumes.¹⁸ One of the few congresses exclusively focused on female monasticism was held in Athens in 1988 (“Les femmes et le monachisme byzantine”), with many contributions dedicated to female monasticism in the late Byzantine period. Monasticism has been systematically included in round tables at international congresses and symposia, with the proceedings typically published soon after, such as *Monastères, images, pouvoirs et société à Byzance*. In the proceedings of the International Symposium “Τάσεις του Ορθόδοξου Μοναχισμού (Trends in Orthodox Monasticism),” only Elisabeth Malamut’s contribution, “La moniale à Byzance aux 8e–12e siècles,” specifically addressed female monasticism, focusing on the nuns of the Middle Byzantine period.

Additionally, the important papers from the section entitled “Women and Monasticism,” presented at the Seventh Annual Byzantine Studies Conference at Boston University, were published in volume nine of the journal *Byzantinische Forschungen*. Finally, it is worth mentioning the workshop “Women and Monasticism in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean: Decoding a Cultural Map,” which sought to explore the role of women not only within the Byzantine Empire but also in comparison with Western and Eastern traditions.¹⁹

15 Morris, *Monks and Laymen in Byzantium*, 52.

16 On these topics, see Chapter 3.

17 See Talbot's publications and especially her latest books, *Varieties of Monastic Experience* and *Studies in Byzantine Monasticism*.

18 The full titles of the cited volumes in this section can be found in the bibliography.

19 Kountoura-Galake and Mitsiou, *Women and Monasticism in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean*.

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention to the often-overlooked contributions of modern nunneries. Their publications primarily address the development of Orthodox female monasticism and offer spiritual resources valuable to their communities, although their scope is not limited to these subjects.²⁰

The Present Study: Framework, Sources, and Methods

This book examines female monasticism in Late Byzantium (1204–1453), with a particular emphasis on the coenobitic tradition rather than semi-monastic brotherhoods. This focus provides a lens through which to explore how monasticism—a long-standing social institution—was shaped by an era marked by political collapse and widespread social transformation. It is important to recognize that after 1204, not only did the political landscape undergo significant change, but the ecclesiastical framework was also profoundly altered. In regions under Latin rule, a new ecclesiastical structure was imposed, and Orthodox monasteries were frequently converted into Latin ones.

Given the fluidity of political borders during this period, this study focuses on regions that remained under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. These include substantial parts of Asia Minor, the Balkan Peninsula (excluding Serbia and Bulgaria), and the Aegean and Ionian islands. For practical reasons, areas such as Russia, Wallachia, and Moldavia fall outside the scope of this research.

The research question is closely tied to the availability and nature of the written evidence. The primary sources include *typika*—monastic foundation documents—that offer detailed regulations concerning the governance and daily life of nunneries. Additional insight is provided by the rulings of ecclesiastical courts, notably those issued by Archbishop Demetrios Chomatenos of Ohrid in the thirteenth century.²¹ Equally important are the synodic and patriarchal decisions from the Patriarchate of Constantinople during the fourteenth century.²² These documents illuminate broader ecclesiastical policies and the Church's responses to various monastic issues, offering a

20 Cf., for example, Theotekne (Hagiostephanitissa), *Ἡ θέσις τῆς μοναχῆς στὴν Ὁρθόδοξη Ἐκκλησία*.

21 Demetrios Chomatenos, *Ponemata*, ed. Prinzing.

22 *Patriarchal Register*, vols. 1–3; Miklosich and Müller, *Acta et Diplomata graeca Medii Aevi sacra et profana*, vols. 1–2; Darrouzès, *Le registre synodal*.

comprehensive view of the administrative and spiritual governance of Byzantine nunneries in the late Byzantine period.

The *typika* represent some of the most thoroughly analyzed and frequently cited sources in Byzantine studies. Several of these documents are available through the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (TLG), and many have been translated and compiled in the volumes of *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents*, edited by Dumbarton Oaks. For the period under consideration, the most pertinent texts include the Constantinopolitan *typika* of Lips (1294–1301), Anargyroi (1294–1301), Bebaia Elpis (1327–1335), and Philanthropos Soter (after 1307) as well as the Cretan *typikon* of Baionaia (1400). The twelfth-century *typikon* of Kecharitomene will also be referenced for comparative purposes.²³

Additional sources include original documents and cartularies, such as the one from Lembos in the region of Smyrna.²⁴ Contemporary historians and chroniclers—most notably George Pachymeres—also offer valuable testimonies, as do the letter collections of key figures, such as Gregory of Cyprus, Athanasios I, Theoleptos of Philadelphia, and Irene Choumnaina, the foundress and abbess of the Philanthropos Soter monastery.²⁵ A 1455 Ottoman survey of Constantinople, now available in English translation, provides unique insight into the urban context of nunneries in the Byzantine capital.²⁶ Furthermore, archaeological evidence—including monuments (churches, monasteries, and dwellings) as well as religious and liturgical objects such as icons, vessels, and manuscripts—constitutes an indispensable part of the research. Less frequently encountered are lead seals from female monasteries and nuns, as the number of such seals declined after the thirteenth

23 *Typicon monasterii Lips*, ed. Delehay, 106–36; *Typicon monasterii Theotoci Bebaias Elpidos*, ed. Delehay, 18–105; Meyer, “Bruchstücke zweier τυπικά κτητορικά,” 45–58; Pétridès, “Le *typikon* de Nil Damilas,” 95–109. Contrary to other documents, the official *typikon* of Baionaia was written in Latin by the notary George Delagronda and was later translated into Greek by Damilas for the nuns. Pétridès, “Le *typikon* de Nil Damilas,” chaps. 18 and 20, p. 108; Talbot, “*Neilos Damilas*,” 1477–78; Gautier, “Le *typikon* de la Théotokos Kécharitôménè,” 5–165.

24 Miklosich and Müller, *Acta et Diplomata graeca Medii Aevi sacra et profana*, vol. 4, pp. 1–291.

25 Pachymeres, *History*, ed. Failler and Laurent, vols. 1–5; Gregory of Cyprus, *Letters*, ed. Kotzabassi; Gregory of Cyprus, *Letters*, ed. Eustratiades; Athanasios I, *Epistulae*, ed. Talbot; Irene Eulogia Choumnaina, *Correspondence*, ed. Constantinides Hero; Theoleptos of Philadelphia, *Letters*, ed. Constantinides Hero.

26 İnalçık, *The Survey of Istanbul*.

century in comparison to earlier periods.²⁷ Taken together, these sources offer a comprehensive perspective on the religious, social, and cultural life of Byzantine female monastic communities, enabling a multidimensional analysis that integrates both textual and material evidence.

This study is not structured according to generational categories (such as childhood, adulthood, or old age);²⁸ while such an approach may prove useful in broader surveys on the role of women in society, the complexity of female monasticism necessitates analysis within a continuous and integrated framework. The material is being structured according to the framework: chronology, geography, the organization of monastic life, and the economic and social dimensions of Byzantine nunneries. In addition, the methodological approach of Social Network Analysis (SNA) will sometimes be used in an attempt to further visualize specific aspects of Byzantine monasticism. This framework, which has been significantly refined in recent years, is increasingly employed by scholars working in the field of medieval history.²⁹

SNA allows us to examine the research topic from the perspective of social entanglements. Female monasticism is understood as a network of actions, agents, and objects that form, constitute, and sustain complex systems. This approach enables us to perceive the foundation, administration, and economy of nunneries as well as the involvement of nuns in the ecclesiastical controversies of their time as complex networks of spatial, political, and economic relations. Based on evidence from *typika*, documents, and other sources, this study describes the networks of patronage, female monastic spaces, and cultural production and, in some cases suited for a digital approach, visualizes aspects of these networks.³⁰

27 See now Cheynet, “Le bullaire monastique à Byzance,” 271–73. The number of seals belonging to women dated after the thirteenth century is significantly smaller than the specimens from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. See the search results for women’s seals in “Coins and Seals Collection, Dumbarton Oaks.” <https://www.doaks.org/resources/seals>. Byzantine women preferred the image of Theotokos for their seals, Cotsonis, “Onomastics, Gender, Office and Images on Byzantine Lead Seals,” 10–18. An example is the seal of the nun Zoe Senacheirina (first half of the twelfth century), which features the bust of Theotokos orans on the obverse. See Seibt, “The Sons of Senek’erim Yovhannēs,” 126–27.

28 This tendency can be detected, for example, in Davies, “From Womb to the Tomb.”

29 Mitsiou, “Networks of Nicaea,” 91–104; Mitsiou and Preiser-Kapeller, “Moving Hands,” 29–67; Mitsiou, “Byzantine Monastic Space,” 365–81.

30 On women and Network Analysis, see Preiser-Kapeller, “Mapping Networks of Women in the Late Medieval Eastern Mediterranean,” 349–63.

At this point, it is necessary to shortly explain the meaning of a social network within the framework of Social Network Analysis (SNA). According to Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust, “a social network consists of a finite set or sets of actors and the relation or relations between them. The presence of relational information is a critical and defining feature of a social network.”³¹ SNA maps relations (called “links” or “edges”) between actors (called “nodes”) in social networks.³² In addition to individuals and groups, nodes can also represent corporate actors, such as organizations, nation-states, or economic firms. In SNA, actors and their actions are viewed as interdependent rather than independent, autonomous units. Furthermore, the relational ties (or “linkages”) between actors (nodes) serve as channels for the transfer, or “flow,” of resources, whether material or non-material. Memberships, relations, interactions, and flows are the most important forms of social ties.³³

Network models that focus on individuals view the network’s structural environment as providing either opportunities or constraints on individual actions. In general, network models conceptualize structure³⁴—whether social, economic, political, and so forth—as enduring patterns of relations among actors.³⁵ The elementary forms of structure in networks are dyads (constellations of two nodes) and triads (three nodes), with the latter playing a significant role in maintaining structural balance.³⁶ Finally, in SNA terms, a society is seen as the superposition of various socioeconomic networks constructed at the local level, which can represent different types of relations and exchanges. Per Szell et al., “this superposition is typically referred to as a multiplex, multirelational, multimodal, or multivariate network.”³⁷

SNA focuses on nodes and their ties (links or edges) to other nodes. There are quantitative markers for nodes, such as their number and strength,³⁸ as

31 Wasserman and Faust, *Social Network Analysis*, 20; Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks*, 14.

32 Rawlings et al., *Network Analysis*, 47–50.

33 Rawlings et al., *Network Analysis*, 49.

34 On the meaning of structure, see Rawlings et al., *Network Analysis*, 2–5.

35 Wasserman and Faust, *Social Network Analysis*, 4.

36 Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks*, 22–26, 29; Crossley et al., *Social Network Analysis for Ego-Nets*, 15–16; Rawlings et al., *Network Analysis*, 148–59.

37 Szell et al., “Trade, Conflict and Sentiments,” 1.

38 Rawlings et al., *Network Analysis*, 50.

well as qualitative markers for links, such as homophily,³⁹ and for nodes, such as types.⁴⁰ Additionally, there are concepts describing an entire network, such as structural holes,⁴¹ distance,⁴² and segmentation through clusters and cliques.⁴³ All of these elements can be analyzed using various measures and visualized with the help of graphs.⁴⁴ Where possible, some metrics are used in this book:⁴⁵

Degree measures the number of links a node has in a network.⁴⁶

Degree Centralization assesses whether some nodes are significantly more strongly connected than others, indicating the overall centralization of connections within the network.

Clustering Coefficient indicates the likelihood that two associates of a node are also associates themselves. A higher clustering coefficient reflects greater “cliquishness.”⁴⁷

Betweenness measures the extent to which a node lies between other nodes in the network. It reflects the connectivity of a node’s neighbours

39 Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks*, 18–21. Homophily means that “if two people have characteristics that match in a proportion greater than expected in the population from which they are drawn or the network of which they are a part, then they are more likely to be connected.” At the same time, “if two people are connected, then they are more likely to have common characteristics or attributes,” Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks*, 18; Crossley et al., *Social Network Analysis for Ego-Nets*, 7, 14.

40 Rawlings et al., *Network Analysis*, 195–98.

41 Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks*, 27: “a category concerned with the lack of connections”; see also 29–30.

42 Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks*, 27: “the radius of distances from any given node”; Crossley et al., *Social Network Analysis for Ego-Nets*, 11–12.

43 Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks*, 46–49; Crossley et al., *Social Network Analysis for Ego-Nets*, 13; Rawlings et al., *Network Analysis*, 176–78.

44 For more on the concepts of SNA, see Newman, Barabási, and Watts, *The Structure and Dynamics of Networks*; Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks*, 13–55; Preiser-Kapeller, “Mapping Networks of Women in the Late Medieval Eastern Mediterranean,” 349–52, with further references. The SNA tool used in all network graphs in this book is ORA. “ORA-LITE,” <http://www.casos.cs.cmu.edu/projects/ora/>.

45 Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks*, 27: it “demonstrates that some nodes have more connections than others and those connections serve as links to other nodes.” See also Crossley et al., *Social Network Analysis for Ego-Nets*, 14.

46 Crossley et al., *Social Network Analysis for Ego-Nets*, 14; Rawlings et al., *Network Analysis*, 50, 198.

47 Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks*, 120–21.

and gives higher values to nodes that bridge clusters. A high betweenness indicates a node's potential importance in connecting otherwise disconnected clusters.

Betweenness Centralization measures the degree to which the potential for connecting nodes is concentrated among a small number of nodes in the network.⁴⁸

Closeness measures the sum of all path distances from a node to all other nodes, providing a relative measure of its centrality. A node with high closeness is closer, on average, to all other nodes in the network.⁴⁹

Density is the proportion of possible links that are actually present in the network. A network where every node is connected to every other node has a density of 1.⁵⁰

Female monastics—especially those from aristocratic backgrounds—were members of various networks (such as kinship networks) before taking their monastic vows. Entering a nunnery did not sever their connections to the outside world; rather, they transferred the benefits of their social position and entanglements to their new environment. A recent example of the application of SNA in Gender Studies is the article “Mapping Networks of Women” by Johannes Preiser-Kapeller.⁵¹ This study explores female aristocratic networks and highlights a specific, well-documented case in the sources: that of the nun and scholar Theodora Raoulaina. This paper is exemplary for various reasons, and it demonstrates the significant advantages of SNA in researching complex social phenomena in the Middle Ages.

In relation to women of the late Byzantine elite, Preiser-Kapeller demonstrated that:

Even if fragmentary tradition does not allow the use of quantitative methods or only to a limited extent [as in the present volume, Ekaterini Mitsiou], it is worthwhile to take systematically in the focus the social connections between individuals and groups as the context of their actions. Every single actor was embedded in an abundance of relationships, which she or he had received by birth (e. g. kinship), or that she or he actively established and

48 Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks*, 95–96; Rawlings et al., *Network Analysis*, 199–200.

49 Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks*, 96.

50 Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks*, 27: density indicates “the number of connections contained within the network.”

51 Preiser-Kapeller, “Mapping Networks of Women in the Late Medieval Eastern Mediterranean,” 349–63.

maintained (e. g., the membership in a literary circle). These links could be connected with different positions in more or less formalized and institutionalized systems of order (as the patron of followers or as a follower of a higher-ranking patron, for instance) and could play an essential role for the identity and overall social position of an individual (e.g., the integration into networks of peers as a confirmation of the noble status). Such networks could serve as a resource (support from relatives, friends, allies, patrons), but also limit the room for manoeuvre, due to obligations as a follower of a patron, for instance.⁵²

On various occasions, this study demonstrates some of the possibilities of SNA with specific examples and case studies. The second chapter explores life inside nunneries, analyzing their foundation as networks of patronage and the spatial consequences of these networks. The subsequent chapter focuses on another driving force of human activity: finances. Here, maps and, to a certain extent, Network Analysis enables the visualization of complex economic relations in specific geographic areas. Based on the *typikon* of individual institutions, we have mapped the landed properties of nunneries and, in one instance, we reconstructed the entanglements of individuals, landed properties, land prices, and locations. The fourth chapter examines networks of art and knowledge, including the donation and possession of movable objects by female monasteries and nuns. The final chapter addresses the involvement of female monastics in social and ecclesiastical upheavals, such as the Arsenite Schism and the Anti-Union movement following the Synod of Lyons (1274) and the Council of Ferrara-Florence. In addition, it detects the church efforts to protect and supervise the nunneries under its authority.

52 Preiser-Kapeller, "Mapping Networks of Women in the Late Medieval Eastern Mediterranean," 354.

