

(FEMALE) MONASTICISM

AN OUTLINE

LATE BYZANTINE FEMALE monasticism can be better understood when placed in its historical perspective and context. The following provides a brief outline of the formation, establishment, and development of the Byzantine monastic experience, setting the foundation for this book's investigation.

From the Emergence of Monasticism up to the Twelfth Century¹

The emergence of monasticism cannot be attributed to specific individuals or regions alone; rather, it appears as a near-simultaneous phenomenon in various locations, such as Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. On one hand, an anchoritic form of monasticism developed with major figures such as Antony the Great in Egypt and Ephraim in Syria. On the other hand, coenobitic (communal) monasticism emerged as an effort to bring order to unregulated anchoritic practices. A significant figure in coenobitic monasticism in Egypt was Pachomios, who founded a monastic community at Tabennisi, in Upper Egypt, around 321. This community was governed by rigid rules covering all aspects of communal life, including prayer, work, clothing, and food. The monks were accountable to an abbot and were prohibited from owning personal possessions. While there was no formal novitiate or vows, there was an obligation to obey all superiors within the community's hierarchy.²

The roots of what we now refer to as Byzantine monasticism can be traced back to the teachings and rules of Basil the Great in fourth-century Asia Minor. Recent studies highlight the significant influence of Basil's older sister, Makrina,³ who established a monastery well before her brother and served as abbess over a mixed community of women and men. However, Basil, as a bishop, wielded greater authority and imposed order on monastic

1 Mitsiou and Preiser-Kapeller, "Church and Religion," 251–79.

2 Harmless, *Desert Christians*. On the Coptic monasteries in Egypt, such as the famous White Monastery of Shenoute, see Gabra and Vivian, *Coptic Monasteries*, 94–100.

3 Silvas, *Macrina the Younger*.

life through his leadership. His most notable works include the *Longer* and the *Shorter Rules*, which are collections of responses to questions posed by monks.⁴ Basil advocated for a monastic life within a community under the supervision of the Church, expressing skepticism towards the often-extreme behaviours of anchorites. His approach was later emulated by other significant figures, such as Theodore of Stoudios and Athanasios the Athonite.⁵

In another significant monastic centre, Palestine, a blend of anchoritism and communal life was practiced through the formation of *lavrai*. A *lavra* was a community of hermits under the authority of an abbot. The monks lived in separate cells connected by paths (from the Greek *lavra*, meaning “alley” or “lane”). During the week, they lived and worked individually, but on Saturdays and Sundays they gathered to celebrate the liturgy and share a meal. The most renowned example was the Great Lavra (*Mar Saba*), founded by St. Sabas in 483.⁶ Sabas’ rule, known as the Jerusalem *typikon* (a liturgical book detailing Church rites), was widely circulated in Asia Minor after 800 and throughout the Byzantine territories during and after the eleventh century.

In contrast to the medieval West, monastic orders (in the strict sense) did not develop in Byzantium. However, rules such as those of Basil and the *typika* of certain monasteries—like the Theotokos Evergetis (Mother of God, the Benefactress) near Constantinople (eleventh/twelfth centuries)—served as models for other communities.⁷ Authors would typically copy previous *typika*, keep some parts, modify others, and adapt them to the needs of the new community. By the tenth century, founders began to assert their independence from episcopal supervision, secure tax privileges, and ensure that their status was officially recognized by both lay and ecclesiastical authorities.⁸ New monasteries continued to increase in number steadily, and many of them, such as those on Mount Athos,⁹ also became significant economic institutions.

4 Silvas, *The Asketikon of St. Basil the Great*.

5 Dennis, “*Ath. Typikon*,” 205–31.

6 Patrich, *Sabas, Leader of Palestinian Monasticism*.

7 Gautier, “*Le typikon de la Théotokos Évergétis*,” 5–101; Jordan and Morris, *The Hypotyposis of the Monastery of the Theotokos Evergetis*. It should not be confused with Gül Mosque (Christ Evergetis) in Constantinople. See Ivanov, *In Search of Constantinople*, 289.

8 Morris, *Monks and Laymen in Byzantium*.

9 On the Athonite monasticism, see Papachryssanthou, *Ο αθωνικός μοναχισμός*.

Female Monasticism (Third–Twelfth Centuries)

In the first Christian centuries, the traditional form of asceticism for women often involved living as virgins, typically in their own homes. A document from Oxyrhynchus in Middle Egypt, dated June/July 400, indicates that ascetic women resided in towns, owned property, and engaged in business with locals, including members of the Jewish community.¹⁰ The *Life of St. Antony* (BHG 140a–g) also attests to the existence of separate women’s communities as early as the late third century. In the fourth century, Pachomios allowed his sister, Maria, and a group of women to join his community and established a special monastery for them.

The Egyptian monastic tradition records numerous exemplary lives of Desert Mothers, whose stories were collected—mostly by men—in compilations such as the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (and *Desert Mothers*), which have survived in various collections.¹¹ Among these figures, Mary of Egypt stands out as particularly notable; her story provides evidence of the presence of ascetic women along the Jordan River in the fourth and fifth centuries. Her narrative also sparked significant debate about gender, femininity, and masculinity due to her rejection of traditional femininity, which included total nudity, as depicted in various pictorial representations.¹² In contrast, late Byzantine nuns concealed their feminine features with long, dark cloaks. Another symbolic gesture of shedding femininity involved wearing male clothing, as demonstrated by around twelve saintly nuns between the fifth and eleventh centuries.¹³ Notably, Matrona, a fifth-century foundress of a nunnery in Constantinople, clothed her entire community in male monastic habits.

There were also more extreme forms of asceticism, such as nuns who barricaded themselves in enclosed spaces without leaving for extended

10 Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 24.

11 The *Apophthegmata Patrum* (*Sayings of the Fathers*) (or *Gerontikon* or *Paterikon*; BHG 1442–1450) is a collection of stories attributed to the Desert Fathers. They have an original oral tradition in Coptic and a later written tradition in Greek. They have survived in many languages and in collections (e.g., *collectio alphabetica* and *collectio systematica*). See Harmless, *Desert Christians*; Guy, *Les Apophthegmes des Pères*; Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.

12 For an understanding of Mary’s bodily appearance as transmasculinity, see Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 1–17.

13 On this category of nuns, see Patlagean, “L’histoire de la femme déguisée en moine,” 597–623; Lubinsky, *Removing Masculine Layers to Reveal a Holy Womanhood*; Constantinou, “Holy Actors and Actresses,” 343–62.

periods. Additionally, the phenomenon of holy fools, or *saloi* (from Greek, meaning “of disturbed mind”), emerged. These individuals sought sanctity through social ridicule, aiming to serve Christ and attain spiritual elevation by engaging in outrageous behaviour, seemingly irrational acts, and self-humiliation.¹⁴

After Late Antiquity, textual testimonies highlight the role of nuns in resisting Iconoclasm (726–787 and 814–843),¹⁵ while the number of eremitic women diminished. Theodosia, a legendary urban nun, is said to have been martyred while protesting the removal of the Christ icon from the Chalke Gate at the Great Palace in Constantinople.¹⁶ Her cult remained extremely popular in Constantinople, reaching its peak during the Palaio-logan period, and the nunnery of St. Theodosia became a significant pilgrimage destination in the capital.¹⁷

From the fourth century onwards, nunneries—such as those of St. Melania and St. Paula in the Holy Land—became significant pilgrimage centres. In some cases, they rivaled the popularity of early Christian martyrs. For instance, the nunnery of St. Theodora of Thessaloniki attracted pilgrims to the extent that her cult rivaled that of St. Demetrios (patron saint of the city). This is evidenced by the distribution of lead flasks, known as *koutrou-bia*, which depicted both saints.¹⁸

After the ninth century, many female monastic communities continued the tradition of maintaining contact with spiritual fathers and prominent monastic figures. For example, Theodore of Stoudios regularly corresponded with convents and individual nuns in Asia Minor and received their support during his various exiles.¹⁹

14 Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, 7, 55–58; Rydén, “The Holy Fool,” 106–13.

15 Brubaker and Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era: The Sources*; Brubaker and Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era: A History*; Bryer and Herrin, *Iconoclasm*; Kazhdan and Talbot, “Women and Iconoclasm,” 391–408.

16 Halkin, “Théodosie de Césarée,” 63–68; Constas, “Life of Saint Theodosia,” 1–8.

17 On the nunnery of St. Theodosia (Gül Camii and Ayakapı Mescidi), see Effenberger, “Theodosia von Konstantinopel,” 121–34.

18 Mitsiou, “Ευλογίες,” 195–229. On travel and pilgrimage to the Holy Land, see now Luckhardt, *The Charisma of Distant Places*, 54–90.

19 “Theodoros Studites, no. 7574,” in *PmbZ*; Pratsch, *Theodoros Studites*, 45–56 (especially on the female members of his family with whom he corresponded).

At the same time, nuns and nunneries are featured in sources concerning saintly abbesses, such as Irene of Chrysobalanton.²⁰ Her *Life* recounts a story of temptation similar to that faced by nun Elisabeth in *Black Rose*, where Irene is on the verge of leaving the nunnery for the love of a man. However, the intervention of St. Basil and St. Anastasia, along with the prayers of the entire community, led to a virtuous resolution. Irene also experienced visions (or possibly hallucinations) of demons and saints, yet she was not deemed insane or foolish by her contemporaries.

Irene of Chrysobalanton was an aristocratic nun, and her story highlights how nunneries often served as a refuge for women of high status—both fallen empresses and those destined to become empresses. Such nunneries were frequently motivated by political considerations and served as penitential sanctuaries or retirement homes for the wealthy and powerful.

A prime example is the Kecharitomene Monastery in Constantinople. Founded by Empress Irene Doukaina, wife of Emperor Alexios I (1081–1118), it served as a retreat for female members of her family, including her daughter, the historian Anna Komnena. The *typikon* of Kecharitomene had a significant influence on later Palaiologan female foundations (1258–1453).²¹ Despite the political turmoil following the Crusaders' capture of Constantinople in 1204 and the subsequent fragmentation of power, the *typikon* was copied and continued to be a model for aristocratic women, including another empress in the late thirteenth century.

Byzantine Female Monasticism, Thirteenth–Fifteenth Centuries: An Outline

The Fourth Crusade and the subsequent capture of Constantinople in 1204 had a profound and lasting impact on Byzantine female monasticism. Contemporary accounts frequently highlight the violence inflicted by the Crusaders on women (including nuns), underscoring the traumatic consequences of the conquest.²² The aftermath in Constantinople is well documented, revealing widespread disruption and hardship for monastic communities. Many churches and monasteries were seized by Latin clergy and

²⁰ Rosenqvist, *The Life of Saint Irene*, 52–56.

²¹ Gautier, “Le *typikon* de la Théotokos Kécharitôménè,” 5–165; Jordan, “*Kecharitomene*,” 649–724; Mitsiou, “The Monastery of Kecharitomene and the Contribution of the Assumptionists,” 327–44.

²² Darrouzès, “Le mémoire de Constantin Stilbès contre les Latins,” 50–100.

repurposed for Catholic worship.²³ Others, such as the Monastery of St. Anargyroi, were abandoned and fell into disrepair, only to be restored following the Byzantine reconquest of the city in 1261.²⁴

The Latin Crusaders were particularly intent on asserting control over the assets of Greek monasteries. A preliminary agreement dated March 17, 1206, placed all monasteries within and beyond Constantinople under the authority of the Latin ecclesiastical hierarchy. In the final agreement of 1219, Emperor Robert (r. 1219–1228) exempted all churches, clerics, and religious individuals—whether Greek or Latin—from lay jurisdiction. Although this arrangement likely extended to nuns, detailed evidence concerning the presence and activities of Orthodox nuns in former Byzantine territories under Latin control remains limited. A notable exception is the *praktikon* (tax record) of 1264 from the village of Avion on the island of Kephallenia, which documents a field owned by a nun.²⁵ Additional attestations of Orthodox nuns appear in Venetian Crete and Latin-ruled Cyprus, suggesting their continued—if constrained—presence in these Latin-dominated regions.

The scarcity of information extends to the territories of the Greek successor polities of Nicaea and Epiros. Records concerning nuns and female monastic communities during the Nicaean exile (1204–1261) and the immediate post-recovery period are particularly limited. A cartulary from the Smyrna region offers some insight, documenting individual donations by nuns to the Lembos Monastery and its dependent institutions (*metochia*). Similarly, in Philadelphia, there is a record of a single donation made by a nun to the Monastery of Boreine. Athanasia Mangaphaina is also mentioned in the sources, though without any clear affiliation to a specific monastic community.²⁶

Documentation concerning the activities of female monastic communities during this period remains generally limited, especially when compared to the relatively abundant historical evidence concerning imperial policy toward monasticism.²⁷ Contemporary sources emphasize the support of

23 The numerical estimates of modern historians vary. On this, see Chapter 3.

24 *Typicon monasterii sanctorum Anargyrorum*, ed. Delehaye, chap. 56, p. 137; Talbot, “Anargyroi,” 1291; Kidonopulos, *Bauten in Konstantinopel*, 1–4.

25 Tzannetatos, *Πρακτικόν τῆς Λατινικῆς Ἐπισκοπῆς Κεφαλληνίας*, p. 33, line 58.

26 *Diataxis et inventarium Maximi fundatoris monasterii Boreinae*, ed. Bompaire et al., p. 155, lines 81–83; Dennis, “Skoteine [Boreine],” 1182; Ahrweiler, “La region de Philadelphie au XIV^e siècle,” 175–97.

27 On the power relations between Byzantine emperors and monasteries, see now Benoit-Meggenis, *L'empereur et le moine*.

Emperor John III Vatatzes (1221–1254) for monasteries under Latin control, including those on Mount Athos, in Thessaloniki, and in Attika.²⁸ They also record several Imperial foundations established by John III and his wife, Irene Laskarina, such as the monasteries of Sosandra and Kouzenas in Magnesia, St. Prodromos in Prousa, and St. Antony in Nicaea.²⁹ Of these, however, only the Nicaean foundation—likely identifiable as Church C in the Roman theatre—can be confirmed as a female convent.³⁰

In contrast to other regions, Epiros offers more detailed evidence concerning female monasticism. A notable account is provided by John Apokaukos, the metropolitan of Naupaktos, who describes the Monastery of Blachernitissa in Arta.³¹ According to Apokaukos, this monastery—originally inhabited by monks—was converted into a nunnery to provide refuge for nuns who had fled Constantinople following its fall in 1204.

Apokaukos's commentary is particularly noteworthy for its progressive perspective on gender and spiritual equality. He challenges the prevailing belief that salvation is secured exclusively through the prayers of monks, emphasizing instead the equal spiritual efficacy of nuns' prayers. Apokaukos also draws attention to the difficult circumstances faced by nuns who had fled Constantinople, lamenting the stark imbalance between the number of male monasteries and the scarcity of female convents. He vividly describes how these displaced nuns were forced to live in improvised and inadequate conditions—often residing in the forecourts of churches, with little more than broken beds for shelter.³²

In the decades that followed, the capacities of the so-called Despotate of Epiros evolved, with an increasing number of nunneries becoming active. One such institution was the Monastery of St. George, later rededicated to St. Theodora of Arta. Theodora is notable as the only female saint canonized

28 Theodore Skoutariotes, *Additamenta*, ed. Heisenberg and Wirth, p. 287, fragment no. 33; Laurent, *Regestes*, nos. 1235, 1241, 1297, 1233, 1291, and 1303.

29 Mitsiou, "The Monastery of Sosandra," 665–83; Ahrweiler, "L'histoire et la géographie de la région de Smyrne," 96; Cheynet, "Le bullaire monastique à Byzance," 253, 273–77 (on Kouzenas); Belke, *Bithynien und Hellespont*, 816 (on St. Antony).

30 Foss, *Nicaea*, 108–9. Belke (*Bithynien und Hellespont*, 816, 822) does not specify which of the churches in the Roman theatre the convent was.

31 Acheimastou-Potamianou, "The Basilissa Anna Palaiologina of Arta and the Monastery of Vlacherna," 43–49; Parani, "The Joy of the Most Holy Mother of God the Hodegetria," 113–45.

32 John Apokaukos, *Praxis on the Blachernitissa Monastery*, 17; Lampropoulos, *Ιωάννης Απόκαυκος*, 284–86; Talbot, "Affirmative Action in the 13th Century," 405–6.

the social profile of monastic founders and the underlying motivations for establishing such institutions.

During this period, the influence of the traditional landowning aristocracy—long the principal patrons of monastic institutions—began to wane. In their place, a new class of aristocrats emerged, distinguished by their engagement in trade and commerce. Having amassed considerable wealth and social standing, members of this mercantile elite began to allocate portions of their capital toward the support of monasteries and convents, thereby reshaping the landscape of monastic patronage in the late Byzantine era.

A notable illustration of this shift is the case of George Goudeles, a prominent figure of the late fourteenth century who embodies the emerging class of monastic patrons. Goudeles financed the establishment of the Nunnery of St. Nicholas in the Forum Tauri in Constantinople, demonstrating how mercantile wealth had begun to supplant traditional, land-based aristocratic patronage in sustaining and expanding monastic foundations during the late Byzantine period.³⁷

The Nunnery of St. Nicholas not only exemplifies a shift in the profile of monastic patrons but also reflects the broader financial and social transformations of the late Byzantine period. This development underscores the ability of monastic institutions to adapt to an evolving economic and societal landscape.

The final centuries of Byzantium—particularly the period leading up to and including the Fall of Constantinople in 1453—offer valuable insight into the roles, resilience, and challenges of female monastics. Despite political instability, nuns remained active participants in ecclesiastical debates, contributed meaningfully to cultural and literary production, and sustained monastic life under increasingly difficult conditions.

Preliminary Conclusions

Women played a significant role in the ecclesiastical controversies that shaped the Byzantine Empire during this period. The active engagement of nuns and other female monastics in theological debates and church disputes—examined in detail in Chapter Five—underscores their influence and the esteem they held within the religious sphere. Their participation reflects

37 Ganchou, “L’ultime testament de Géorgios Goudélès,” pp. 346, line 1, p. 52, line 96; Harris, “The Goudelis Family in Italy After the Fall of Constantinople,” 168–79; Oikonomidès, *Hommes d’affaires*, 68.

not only their intellectual and spiritual authority but also the broader visibility of women within Byzantine religious life.

The late Byzantine period also witnessed a marked increase in the visibility of nuns within literary and intellectual circles, particularly in Constantinople. This era offers substantial evidence of correspondence between nuns and prominent ecclesiastical figures, including George/Gennadios Scholarios (ca. 1400–1472). Both literate and non-literate nuns played an active role in the cultural and artistic life of the empire by commissioning or donating books, icons, and other devotional objects. Their contributions—often recorded through dedicatory inscriptions and donor portraits—not only reflect their engagement with the intellectual currents of their time but also ensured the preservation of their memory and spiritual legacy (see Chapter Four).³⁸

The administration of nunneries was primarily overseen by the Patriarchate and local ecclesiastical authorities. Issues such as land disputes and internal conflicts were adjudicated in Church courts, with the Patriarchal Register offering detailed documentation of the Church's role in supporting convents and resolving such matters. This framework of institutional oversight reflects both the centralized and localized mechanisms of ecclesiastical governance and is examined in depth in Chapter Five.

Despite the political and social upheavals, including the Fall of Constantinople, nunneries remained active, particularly in major cities like Constantinople and Thessaloniki during the early fifteenth century. The Fall of Constantinople did not mark the end of Orthodox monasticism. Nunneries continued to operate and even saw new establishments under Ottoman rule. Notable examples include:

St. Theodora Nunnery in Thessaloniki: continued to function and by 1669 had 150 nuns.

Panagia Myrsiniotissa in Lesbos: founded in 1527.

St. Philothei in Athens: founded around 1572.

St. Anargyroi Kolokyntthis in Athens: established in the mid-seventeenth century.³⁹

38 Female donor portraits are attested also in areas not under the Byzantine rule. See Karamaouna et al., “Female Donors in Thirteenth Century,” 231–42.

39 Charalampous, *Γυναικείος ορθόδοξος μοναχισμός κατά τα Πατερικά Κείμενα*, 237–39nn22–24.