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Adolescence in the Late Byzantine Society (14th – 15th centuries)

It is well known that the late Byzantine Saints' Lives are not distinguished for their originality. Although many of them are not "old wine in new bottles", as Alice-Mary Talbot insightfully puts it, writing about new saints during the Palaeologan period is characterised by the basic rules of the genre.¹ Even so, there is still evidence. Precisely, because they narrate the life of a person from birth until death, they have much to contribute to the subject that concerns us here, namely the notion of the adolescence in the Late Byzantine society, i. e. what adolescence meant in the Byzantine collective consciousness during the 14th and 15th centuries.

I am primarily interested in investigating how the authors of the Saints' Lives measure time, so that I can evaluate the information that they offer us on this subject. For the purpose of this paper, I have selected only a few Lives, which I consider representative: firstly, because they concern figures who lived during the Palaeologan period; secondly, because they concern figures with different qualities for which they were sanctified; and, thirdly, because their authors did not all have the same level of education. I have therefore examined the Lives of Patriarch Athanasios I, Athanasios of Meteora, Bishop Ioannis of Herakleia, Germanos of Athos, Romylos of Vidin, and Maximos of Kausokalyvia.

When reading these texts, we can immediately see that, just as during the middle period,² so now the saint is constructed as a historical and therefore living person. He is located, that is, within a specific place and time. In other words, the author locates the saint within historical time, either determining the action in relation to himself (since the author often knew the saint and was his student), or by interweaving the action with events that the audience of the text apparently knew of. This is followed by the usual narrative motifs, relating the life of the saint in chronological order. The author puts the time of the saint's life into broader historical time, which is a neatly arranged time. I believe that the author articulates his text on

1 A.-M. TALBOT, *Old Wine in New Bottles: The Rewriting of Saints Lives in the Palaeologan Period*, in: *The Twilight of Byzantium*, ed. S. Curčić – D. Mouriki. Princeton 1991, 15–26. For saints of the Palaeologan period see also A. LAIOU-THOMADAKIS, *Saints and Society in the Late Byzantine Empire*, in: *Charanis Studies. Essays in Honor of Peter Charanis*, ed. A. Laiou – Thomadakis. New Brunswick N.J. 1980, 84–114; R. MACRIDES, *Saints and Sainthood in the Early Palaeologan Period*, in: *The Byzantine Saint*, ed. S. Hackel. London 1981, 67–87 and recently A.-M. TALBOT, *Hagiography in Late Byzantium 1204–1453*, in: *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography I*, ed. St. Efthymiadis. Farnham – Burlington 2011, 173–195.

2 A. ΚΙΟΥΣΟΠΟΥΛΟΥ, *Χρόνος και Ηλικίες στη βυζαντινή κοινωνία. Η κλίμακα των ηλικιών από τα αγιολογικά κείμενα της μέσης εποχής (7ος-11ος αι.) (Ιστορικό Αρχείο Ελληνικής Νεολαίας 30)*. Athen 1997, 137–141.

the basis of the concept of time, not simply because this is what the rules of the genre demand, but also as a narrative choice.

The narrative always begins with a reference to the family origins and childhood of the biographical person.³ There follows a series of *topoi*, such as his noble descent, the effort his parents made so he would learn the Holy Scripture, his unusual behaviour as a child and, of course, his inclination towards the divine.

The decision of the individuals under investigation to abandon the family home with the ultimate aim of becoming a monk marks their passage to the next phase of their lives, adolescence. During this period or, more precisely, towards its end, the saint withdraws from secular life, often preferring to become a hermit rather than getting married. However, the limits of adolescence, just as with those of childhood, do not always correspond to particular numbers. In order to make them clear, the biographers either select biological characteristics, such as the appearance of facial hair, or point to the parents' decision to marry their child, or they may even refer to ecclesiastical offices, which one is only eligible for after a certain age.

For example, Romylos of Vidin leaves his house in secret and goes to the Monastery of Hodegetria at Turnovo at an age, which is not specified but, nonetheless, coincides with the appropriate age for marriage according to his parents.⁴ Germanos also refuses to marry and leaves his family,⁵ as does Maximos who was ordained a monk at the age of seventeen⁶. Athanasios of Meteora, after his captivity, and having also indirectly had to face the dilemma of marriage or monastery, withdrew to a deserted place, "his facial hair having recently grown".⁷ Athanasios served barefoot in the refectory of Esphigmenou, before being accepted in the Monastery of Lazaros in the Galesion as "very beautiful and strong young man" (νεανίας μάλα καλός και στερρός).⁸ Finally, Ioannis was made a eunuch on reaching adolescence and, having rejected the life of luxury of a eunuch in the imperial court, became a monk at the age of twenty.⁹ It is worth noting, however, that while the saint of the middle period

³ KIOUSOPOULOU, Χρόνος 61–75; B. CHEVALIER-CASEAU, Childhood in Byzantine Saints Lives, in: *Becoming Byzantine. Children and Childhood in Byzantium*, ed. A. PAPACONSTANTINOU – A.-M. TALBOT. Washington D.C. 2009, 127–166. D. ARIANTZI, Kindheit in Byzanz. Emotionale, geistige und materielle Entwicklung im familiären Umfeld vom 6. bis zum 11. Jahrhundert (*Millennium-Studien* 36). Berlin–Boston 2012.

⁴ F. HALKIN, Un érmitte des Balkans au XIV^e siècle. La vie grecque inédite de St. Romylos. *Byz* 31 (1961) 116–145.

⁵ P. IOANNOU, Vie de S. Germain l'Hagiotite par son contemporain le Patriarche Philothée de Constantinople. *AnBoll* 70 (1952) 35–115.

⁶ F. HALKIN, Deux vies de S. Maxime le Kausokalybe, érmitte au Mont Athos (XIV^e s.). *AnBoll* 54 (1936) 38–112, esp. 68–69.

⁷ N. BEES, Συμβολή εις την ιστορίαν των Μονῶν των Μετεώρων. *Βυζαντίς* 1 (1909) 191–330, esp. 208–260.

⁸ H. DELEHAYE, La Vie d'Athanase patriarche de Constantinople (1289–1293, 1303–1309), in: *Mélanges d'Hagiographie grecque et latine*. Bruxelles 1966, 125–149, esp. 131–132.

⁹ V. LAURENT, La vie de Jean, Métropolitte d'Héraclée du Pont par Nicéphore Grégoras. *Ἀρχαῖον Πόντου* 6 (1934) 4–66.

often has to struggle with his carnal desires, which in any case define him as an adolescent and a youth,¹⁰ the saint of the period which we are studying here also has to struggle with the social dictates of marriage, which he rejects by running away from the family home.

In each case we can see that, until the saint begins his timeless path to perfection, time is measured on the basis of his age. The distinction between childhood and adolescence is thus clearly made, if not always numerically. Also, in contrast with the preceding period, few details are given about the life of the saint as a youth. Only the most educated of the authors, such as Nikephoros Gregoras, place importance on the role of education in the parents' plans for their child.¹¹

Given all this, the question that arises is what information the Lives offer us regarding the meaning of adolescence. The answer to this is linked to the question of what the biographer's aim is when specifically referring to the saint's childhood and adolescence.

I am of the opinion that the biographer wants to construct the saint as a person who must be familiar with the addressees of his text. For this reason, and until he begins his harsh asceticism, the saint must be almost a normal person by the standards of his time. In seeking to teach his public, the biographer was obliged to use elements that, in order for them to work, the audience could comprehend. As such, the notion of time, divided according to the phases of a human life, as used by the biographer, would have to be understandable and acceptable. I will not expand further on this argument, but I would like to point out that, because in pre-capitalist societies time is defined by its content and because it cannot be conceived abstractly, the biographer uses the phases of the different ages as his audience was familiar with this way of measuring time.

If we bear in mind, as I believe the case is, that the Lives sought to secure the cohesion of the monastic communities and to legitimize the hesychast values, then for their audience, who were the monks, adolescence involved the same dilemma as for the individuals about whom the biographies were written. For both, the saints and the monks, separation from their families was a momentous passage to the next phase of their lives. In late byzantine period, however, it did not have the characteristics of a rupture.¹² In rural societies, a rupture with one's family was nei-

10 KIOUSOPOULOU, *Χρόνος* 96–116; D. ARIANTZI, Terminologische und sozialhistorische Untersuchungen zur Adoleszenz in Byzanz (6.–11. Jahrhundert). Teil I. Theorien, Konzepte, narrative Quellen. *JÖB* 63 (2013) 1–31, here 14–23.

11 M. Hinterberger suggests that the Life of Ioannis, written by Nikephoros Gregoras, is more secular biography than a work of hagiography: M. HINTERBERGER, *Les Vies des Saints du XI^e siècle en tant que biographie historique. L'oeuvre de Nicéphore Grégoras*, in: *Les Vies des Saints a Byzance. Genre littéraire ou biographie historique?*, ed. P. Odorico – P. Agapitos. Paris 2004, 295–301.

12 É. PATLAGEAN, *L'entrée dans l'âge adulte à Byzance aux XIII^e-XIV^e siècles*, in: *Historicité de l'enfance et de la jeunesse. Actes du colloque international Athènes 1–5 octobre 1984*. Athen 1986, 261–269.

ther possible nor desirable, on account of the need to preserve the relationships of production in the countryside. Consequently, the passage to adolescence was undergone silently for the members of the family. This can more clearly be seen in the court decisions of Demetrius Chomatenos, Archbishop of Achris and Ioannis Apokaukos, Bishop of Naupaktos. Evelyne Patlagean has observed that, for demographic and economic reasons, rural society in practice did not consider being underage an obstacle to marriage, as we can indeed see in the many early marriages that took place and which Apokaukos called the “Naupakteian disease”.¹³ The saint, however, was a person who was destined to acquire particular social power. A preparation stage was thus needed, which all monks were obliged to imitate.

Within a different environment, that of Thessaloniki in the early 15th century, Katablattas, later to become a judge, was showing the first signs of his nefarious life. In the invective that Ioannis Argyropoulos wrote against him,¹⁴ Katablattas is said to have been of humble origins, in contrast with the author, who was from an aristocratic family. At an age when Argyropoulos was still continuing his education, Katablattas was making one mistake after another. He wandered around the streets of the city accompanying the mime artists on his untuned kithara. At some point he found himself serving in the Ottoman army at Prousa, from where he returned to Thessaloniki with many “barbaric”, so Argyropoulos claims, experiences, including sexual experiences with men. After his return, Katablattas went to school and, indeed perhaps a little older than his classmates, initiated them into the act of sodomy, which was the destruction of the youth. He was expelled from the school and for a time led a life of immorality, although not specifically defined. Finally, he found himself – an illiterate – running a school and, as was to be expected, failing to discipline the youths he had undertaken to educate. Worst of all, he helped to fill Thessaloniki with all the evils that homosexuality entailed.

Katablattas’ biography is obviously exaggerated and there is clearly no point in investigating how true it is. Nonetheless, it is certainly worth commenting on the narrative choices of the author. Argyropoulos seeks to morally shame his rival and, in this way, to undermine the potential for social mobility illustrated by Katablattas’ career path. He thus selects to place the first indications of Katablattas’ depravity in his adolescence, during which he consorted with theatre people, did not get an education, and acquired barbaric habits. The author thus echoes the collective understanding that in adolescence one is initiated into whatever will comprise the content of his adult life. By this measure, Katablattas is the opposite of a saint, who, at the same age, adolescence, manifests the signs of his moral integrity. It is indeed at this age that Katablattas, as a teacher, educates his students in singing, dancing and lewd acts.

¹³ A. ΚΙΟΥΣΟΠΟΥΛΟΥ, Ο Θεσμός της οικογένειας στην Ήπειρο κατά τον 13^ο αιώνα. Athen 1990, 27–30.

¹⁴ P. CANIVET – N. ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΔΗΣ, [Jean Argyropoulos], La comédie de Katablattas: Invective byzantine du XVe siècle. *Diptycha* 3 (1982–1983) 5–97.

If we place the saints and Katablattas within the same social context – more specifically, if we consider them as members of the same medieval society – then we can see that the biological changes, as they are manifested in the body and through sexual desire, that marks the passage from childhood to adolescence, are a feature of their parallel paths. Education among the higher social strata made this passage controllable, just as this passage was also made controllable by marriage. So, adolescence is the passage to a definitive age category, the category of youth, and its end does not therefore need to be defined. Indeed, Argyropoulos' insistence on describing Katablattas' behaviour at school leads me to think that sodomy may have been chose by him as a literary rite of passage, analogous to the process of hardening and physical asceticism through which the saints go. At almost the same time, in Constantinople, Mazaris criticize a person who refuses to bear a title of the Great Church and to sing the glorious hymns of the holy liturgy. He prefers to be found with a promiscuous crowd of intoxicated, depraved youths, singing, dancing and babbling away, with the incoherence of a madman.¹⁵

The difference between the countryside and the cities lies in the fact that in a city, such as Thessaloniki, the passage to youth via adolescence was much more expressed, primarily through education in letters or the military arts. The potential for it to be expressed existed in the cities, because the urban life permitted or enforced the rites of passage and the socialisation. In any case, what a text such as that of Argyropoulos or his near-contemporary Mazaris shows us is not that the vaguely defined “young men” sing and dance, but that the scholars of the 15th century were willing to describe the secular version of adolescence, by individualizing it, even if only to condemn it. And their audience was willing to amuse themselves by listening to it. This was an innovation in relation to earlier periods.

15 Mazaris' *Journey to Hades, or Interviews with Dead Men about Certain Officials of the Imperial Court*, (ed. J. N BARRY – M. J. SHARE – A. SMITHIES – L.G. WESTERNICK). Buffalo 1975, 52–54.

