More than a decade ago the eminent late antique historian Elizabeth Clark, inspired by post-modern feminist theory in which gender is treated as a social and language construct,1 published a provocative and highly influential article entitled “The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the ‘Linguistic Turn’” (1998).2 In this article whose main title (“The Lady Vanishes”) is borrowed from Alfred Hitchcock’s famous 1938 film, Clark criticises the previous mode of feminist historians (including herself) who read old texts referring to women neglected by earlier historiography in an attempt to hear those women’s voices and to find out about their actual experiences. As Clark bluntly puts it, “scholars must move beyond the stage of feminist historiography in which we retrieve another forgotten woman and throw her into the historical mix. […] We cannot with certainty claim to hear the voices of ‘real’ women in early Christian texts, so appropriated have they been by male authors”.

Clark’s argument that late antique texts about women, such as the Lives of Macrina, Olympias

---

1 The most important supporter of this argument is Judith Butler who in her pioneering book: Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, New York 1990, maintained that gender is performative. In other words, according to Butler, gendered identities are constructed through language and a repetition of acts.


and Melania the Younger, do not offer information about these historical women, as previous historians thought, but that they rather express their male authors’ desires, is mainly supported by her discussion of Gregory of Nyssa’s two works whose protagonist is his sister Macrina: the Life of Macrina and the dialogue On the Soul and the Resurrection. Following David Halperin’s approach to the figure of Diotima in Plato’s Symposium whom Halperin sees not as a true woman, but as a trope for Socrates himself, Clark suggests that Macrina as portrayed in Gregory’s two aforementioned works is not a “real” woman either, but “a trope for Gregory”. “He is”, Clark states, “‘writing like a woman’. Gregory has appropriated woman’s voice”. That Gregory uses to some extent Macrina as a means allowing him to “reflect on various troubling intellectual and theological problems of his day”, seems to be valid for his dialogue On the Soul and the Resurrection, which, as Clark shows, is influenced to a high degree by Plato, whose philosophy had a great impact on Gregory. This does not seem to be the case, however, for the Life of Macrina. In her Life, in contrast to the dialogue in which despite her lack of profane education she raises philosophical and theological issues that preoccupied Gregory himself, Macrina undertakes

---

4 The edition of Macrina’s Life used here is found in P. MARAVAL, Grégoire de Nyusse. Vie de Sainte Macrine (Sources Chrétiennes, 178), Paris 1971, pp. 136–266. As for On the Soul and the Resurrection, see PG 46: 11–160.


9 CLARK, The Lady Vanishes (cit. n. 2), pp. 23–24, 27–28, and CLARK, History, Theory, Text (cit. n. 7), pp. 178–179. That Macrina, in contrast to her brothers Basil and Gregory, did not go to school and completely refrained from secular education is a piece of information given by Gregory himself in her Life (Life of Macrina, § 3.3–26). It is on this very information that Clark bases her argument that Macrina’s platonic and other philosophic ideas cannot be her own. There is, however, a counterargument: Macrina might not have read profane authors, such as Plato; there is nevertheless a possibility that she had read previous or contemporary religious works influenced by Plato. When Gregory mentions Macrina’s education, he only refers to that of her early years, the lessons she received from their own mother who was the one deciding about Macrina’s religious education. What about Macrina’s readings in her later years? The fact that Gregory does not mention anything about them does not mean that throughout her whole
roles and behaves in ways that represent a “real” woman rather than the female persona of a male author: after her father’s death she stays close to her mother whom she helps with housework; as a second mother, she looks after and instructs her younger brothers; with her mother’s consent she transforms the family house into a nunnery whose leadership she undertakes.

Of course, despite the fact that it is treated as a historical account by its author, his contemporaries and later Christian audiences, *Macrina’s Life*, like *On the Soul and the Resurrection* and all hagiographical works, is a piece of literature having intertextual relations with previous texts, such as the Bible, Homer’s *Odyssey*, Platonic works, the *Vita Plotini* of Porphyry and the *De Vita Pythagorica* of Iamblichos. However, *Macrina’s Life* and any hagiographical work venerating a historical person written shortly after its protagonist’s death should not be dismissed as mere fiction. As formulated by Andrew Jacobs, “to claim that a text is literary or rhetorically laden is not to say that it is a fantastic fiction, entirely divorced from the thoughts, ideas, and practices of its producers and consumers.”

Holy women’s Lives, therefore, should reveal more than the possible fantasies of their male authors, and the literary conventions and tastes of their times. In fact, they do tell us certain things about ancient women’s situation, the roles they undertook, their activities, and how their contemporaries saw them. Additionally, these texts give us some information about what was considered exemplary, acceptable and unacceptable female behaviour in male-dominated Christian societies in general, and in women’s monastic communities in particular where leadership was for once a female responsibility. I would, therefore, agree with Jacobs that, “we are not witnessing the final and absolute erasure of women from ancient Christian history. […] We can […] allow ourselves to imagine that women in fact existed who were believed to have acted in the fashion narrated by male authors.”

---

10 Clark rejects Gregory’s works on Macrina as sources for the woman because they are “literary constructions […] of a high rhetorical order” (Clark, The Lady Vanishes [cit. n. 2], p. 15). In this case, also Gregory’s statement concerning Macrina’s exclusively religious education should not be taken at face value, but as a hagiographical topos, see also Ashbrook Harvey, Women and Words (cit. n. 6), p. 385, and Maraval, *Vie de Sainte Macrine* (cit. n. 4), pp. 49–51.

11 For the relations between mothers and daughters in ascetic contexts see S. Ashbrook Harvey, Sacred Bonding: Mothers and Daughters in Early Syriac Hagiography, in: Journal of Early Christian Studies, 4.1, 1996, pp. 27–56.


17 The first discussion of male perception of women in Byzantium in historical, anthropological and literary contexts was undertaken in the 1980s by Catia Galatariotou, see C. Galatariotou, Holy Women and Witches. Aspects of Byzantine Conceptions of Gender, in: Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 9, 1984–85, pp. 55–94.

Certainly, we should be careful while reading ancient texts involving women, as we should be equally cautious when we reconstruct the lives of historical men. Before hastening to call Macrina a “female Socrates”, for instance, we should think of the possibility that this might not represent reality. However, even if in Gregory’s dialogue Macrina functions to a certain degree as his spokesperson, as Clark has convincingly shown, we should not give up thinking about the “real” Macrina. Possibly she did not talk like a philosopher, such as Plato, but is it legitimate to discard her ability to engage in discussions of a higher level and to form interesting arguments because she did not study ancient Greek philosophy? If Gregory considered Macrina as a useful tool allowing him to express his own views, why did he not employ her also in other works of his in which he had no problem articulating his theological theories in his own voice?

As we can assume from one of Gregory’s letters, he did indeed admire and respect the “real” Macrina for her exemplary character and conduct, which functioned as guides for his own life. He wrote that his sister was for him a teacher of how to live, a mother in place of […] mother after the latter’s death. There is no reason to doubt the honesty of Gregory’s words. Gregory wrote his two works on Macrina (especially the Life) rather with the intention of honouring his beloved sister, of showing his gratitude towards her, and of managing his grief at her loss, as suggested by Derek Krueger, and less because he wanted to participate in the theological discussions of his time.

Obviously, my intention in the present paper is not to recover the words, thoughts and feelings of certain historical women known not only from the Lives devoted to them, but also from other contemporary and later sources of less or more rhetorical value. Such an undertaking is impossible not only because the texts are male-authored—in fact the impossibility of hearing those women’s “real” voices would have been equally present even if their hagiographers were women—but also because, as already mentioned, such texts are subjected to literary conventions and, in addition, they often function as vehicles of propaganda.

What this paper shall seek to discover is how the identity of women undertaking leading roles in monastic contexts is shaped, and how their authority and power, the two important characteristics of such an identity, are attained, strengthened and retained even after their deaths.

Of course, a woman founding a monastic community whose control, protection and leadership she herself undertakes either by means of her role as abbess or through the individual she appoints as superior of her convent is by definition authoritative; she exercises full power over her foundation and the lives of the nuns inhabiting it, both as a director and spiritual guide. As formulated by the empress Irene Doukaina Komnene (1066–1123), foundress of the Kecharitomene

---

19 Krueger, Writing and Liturgy of Memory (cit. n. 6).
convent in Constantinople – and this is a case in which a woman’s “real” voice may be heard, I wish that the convent of my Lady the Mother of God Kecharitomene set up by me be administered and managed in whatever manner I myself wish (Typikon of Theotokos Kecharitomene, § 1). The foundress’s authority and power exercised both inside and outside the confines of her monastic community, however, as we shall see, are not restricted to her double role as a monastic patroness and director. They derive also from other factors that are strongly interrelated and contribute to the fashioning of the foundress-abbess’s identity. These are her vast property, her social status, her conduct, her teachings, her monastic rules, and the friendships she develops with men of authority, such as emperors and important bishops.

The texts used for the purposes of the present paper fall into two categories. The texts of the first category, on which my examination will focus, are the Greek Lives of foundress-abbesses that were produced by male authors in Byzantium. The second category is formed by monastic documents, which on the contrary are female-authored and, since they serve functional purposes, less rhetorical. The monastic documents I am referring to are typika for nunneries written by their foundresses who in most cases took monastic vows and entered their own convents. The co-examination of these typika with monastic women’s Lives is very helpful in distinguishing between literary conventions or the idealized depiction of a foundress-abbess found in hagiography, on the one hand, and the “realities” concerning a foundress-abbess’s identity, authority and power, on the other.

Unfortunately, apart from one exception the surviving female typika come from the late Byzantine period, while almost all the Lives of monastic foundress-abbesses we possess date to the early Byzantine period. Interestingly, there are no female monastic foundation documents from a period in which there is a rather remarkable production of foundress-abbesses’ Lives, whereas when a production of such documents appears, hagiographers cease to compose Lives devoted to female monastic founders and leaders. The chronological gap between the examined Lives

---

23 Even though most of the examined Lives are anonymous the hagiographers’ self-referential statements reveal male authorship.
26 These Lives will be presented below.
27 The reasons for this phenomenon constitute a desideratum in better understanding both female monasticism in Byzantium and the social and theological function of foundresses’ Lives. Unfortunately the scope and restricted length of the present paper do not allow such an investigation.
and the female monastic typika might be considered problematic, since the typika are expected to reflect monastic realities not applying to female monasticism of the earlier periods. However, some of the factors determining the identity of the foundress-abbess based on her power and authority seem to remain unchanged throughout time, as a co-examination of the typika and the Lives attests.

In comparison to the large number of monasteries founded by women throughout the Byzantine era, the number of monastic foundresses commemorated in Byzantine holy women’s Lives is rather small, but higher than that of the female saints undertaking other monastic roles, such as those of the cenobitic nun and the solitary. The Lives of foundress-abbesses that have come down to us number nine. Of these, seven were composed in the early Byzantine period, one in the middle and one in the late period.

The texts of the early period are the Lives of the following holy women: Macrina (ca. 330–379/380), Olympias (360/370–408), Melania (383–439), Domnica (fourth century), Eusebia-Xene (fifth century), Matrona (fifth/sixth century) and Sopatra (sixth/seventh century). Athanasia of Aegina (ninth century) is the holy foundress of the middle period, and Theodora of Arta (1225–ca. 1275) is that of the late period.

Written by her brother Gregory of Nyssa between 382 and 383, the Life of Macrina [BHG 1012] tells the story of a woman who showed from an early age her eagerness to dedicate herself to God. Nevertheless, her father betrothed her to a noble man who died before they could marry, and Macrina refused to marry anyone else. Upon her father’s death, Macrina persuaded her mother to transform their house into a nunnery, and along with their female servants, who were now treated as free women, to adopt a religious life. After many years of a life devoted to God and to her monastic community, Macrina became seriously ill, and died before the eyes of her brother and hagiographer.


29 For female roles of sanctity depicted in Byzantine hagiography see S. Constantinou, Female Corporeal Performances. Reading the Body in Byzantine Passions and Lives of Holy Women (Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia, 9), Uppsala 2005.


31 See MARAVAL, Vie de Sainte Macrine (cit. n. 4), p. 67. The scholarship on Gregory of Nyssa is immense. For a recent approach to Gregory’s work and theology see M. Ludlow, Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)modern, Oxford 2007.

32 In comparison to the other holy women examined here, Macrina is not a typical foundress, since the transformation of her family house into a religious abode does not necessarily constitute the foundation of a monastery. However, Macrina’s case is also discussed because she, like the other foundresses, was the religious leader of a number of women, see P. Rousseau, The Pious Household and the Virgin Chorus. Reflections on Gregory of Nyssa’s Life of Macrina, in: Journal of Early Christian Studies, 13.2, 2005, pp. 165–186.
The identity of Olympias’s hagiographer is not known. He wrote her *Life* [*BHG* 1374] at some point in the second half of the fifth century, a few decades after the holy woman’s death, by using as one of his sources a text composed while Olympias was still alive, Palladios’s *Dialogue on the Life of John Chrysostom* (date: 408). Olympias, an aristocratic woman from Constantinople, lost her parents at a young age and inherited an immense fortune. She was married to a prefect who died before the marriage was consummated. Wishing to lead a religious life, she rejected all new marriage proposals, and she built beside the principal church of Constantinople a convent to which she withdrew. As a result of her ecclesiastical politics she was forced at some point to leave Constantinople. She died in exile some years later.

Gerontius, a disciple of Melania, is the author of her *Life* [*BHG* 1241] composed towards the end of the fifth century, some nine years after her death. Like Olympias, the Roman Melania came from an extremely rich and aristocratic family. Her parents married her off, ignoring her desire to lead a religious life. After the death of their two children, Melania convinced her husband Pinian to lead together with her a chaste life, and to give away their vast fortune. Followed by Pinian, she went to Africa where she founded a nunnery and a male monastery. She also visited the Holy Land, and the monks and hermits of Palestine and Egypt. Afterwards she spent more than a decade in a cell near the Mount of Olives, and a year after her mother’s death she got involved in a new series of monastic foundations. She founded a nunnery on the Mount of Olives, and later when her husband died she built a monastery for men, then a chapel, and later a church. Melania travelled also to Constantinople, where she helped in the conversion of her pagan uncle, Volusian, and in the conflict with Nestorianism. She died three years later in her convent in Jerusalem.

Neither the authorship nor date of the Lives of Domnica [*BHG* 562] and Euseibia-Xene [*BHG* 653] are established. These texts must have been written between the fifth and the seventh centuries. According to her *Life*, Domnika was a noble Roman woman who left her home to avoid marriage. She went to Alexandria where she met four pagan virgins, whom she converted to Christianity. The five women sailed to Constantinople where the patriarch Nektarios (381–397) baptized the three virgins, and helped Domnika to found a monastery. Soon Domnika became famous for her holy life as a result of which many people went to see her. Wishing to have more peace and isolation, Domnika relocated her monastery in a remote place of the city with both the patriarch’s and the emperor Theodosius’s (379–395) help, and she stayed there until her death.

Eusebia, another rich and noble woman from Rome, cross-dressed and left her home accompanied by two of her female servants while her parents were arranging her wedding. The three women travelled to Alexandria, and from there they went to the island of Kos where they

---

33 See the edition of A.-M. Malin GREY, Jean Chrysostome, Lettres à Olympias, Vie anonyme d’Olympias (Sources Chrétiennes, 13), Paris 1968, pp. 406–448.


35 See the edition: D. Gorce, Vie de Sainte Mélanie (Sources Chrétiennes, 90), Paris 1962, pp. 124–270. The editor discusses the text’s date in pp. 54–62.

got rid of their male disguise and rented a house. Eusebia, who in the meantime had changed her name into Xene in order to hide her identity, met the monk Paul and later bishop of Mylasa who took the three women with him to Mylasa where Xene founded a nunnery. Paul remained the spiritual guide of both Xene and her community until his death.

The Life of Matrona [BHG 1221] was written around the middle of the sixth century probably by a monk of the monastery of Bassianos, who does not give his name. Matrona was a noble married woman from Perge who had a daughter. At some point she moved with her family to Constantinople where she suffered at her husband’s hands. She then abandoned her family, cross-dressed, called herself Babylas, and entered the monastery of Bassianos where she led the life of a monk. At some point her female identity was discovered. Matrona left the monastery, and went to a convent in Emesa, in Syria, in which she did not stay long. She had to leave in order to escape from her husband who was after her. She went to Jerusalem and then to Sinai. In the end, she found refuge in a pagan temple near Beirut. After spending some time as a solitary monastic, Matrona created a community of nuns in the area, but she did not want to stay there. She returned to Constantinople to be near her former abbot and spiritual father, the aforementioned Bassianos. With Bassianos’s assistance she eventually founded a nunnery in Constantinople where she spent the rest of her life.

The Life of Sopatra and her spiritual mother Eustolia [BHG 2141] has come down to us in a fragmentary form. Sopatra, the daughter of the Emperor Maurice (582–602), was inclined towards monasticism. After meeting Eustolia, a pious Roman woman, Sopatra decided to renounce the world. She transformed the palace building that her father had given her into a monastery known for its strict monastic rule.

The Life of Athanasia of Aegina [BHG 180] was written between the second half of the ninth and the first decade of the tenth century, some years after her death. The anonymous male author claims that he was an eyewitness to the holy woman’s posthumous miracles (Life of Athanasia of Aegina, §19). At an early age Athanasia, a noble woman from the Greek island Aegina, had a spiritual experience, which led her to the decision to take monastic vows. She was, however, forced to marry. The marriage did not last, as her husband was killed in a battle. Against her will, Athanasia was forced to remarry. She eventually persuaded her second husband to become a monk, and with a holy man’s help she founded a convent in a remote area of the island. Four years later Athanasia withdrew with her nuns to an even more remote place. At some point she built three churches, and then she went to a convent in Constantinople where she spent six or seven years. A few days after her return to Aegina she fell seriously ill and died.

A monk named Job wrote the Life of Theodora of Arta [BHG 1736] in the thirteenth century. Theodora was the wife of Michael II Kom-
nenos Doukas, the despot of Epiros (ca. 1231–ca. 1267/68), with whom she had six children. Like Matrona, Theodora was a pious woman who was abused by her husband. He sent her into exile, but five years later he allowed her to return home. From then and until Michael’s death the couple lived in love and piety. Michael founded two monasteries while his wife established a nunnery where she withdrew after she became a widow, and led an exemplary monastic life until her death. In contrast to the other hagiographers discussed here, Job devotes a very short narrative space to Theodora’s life as a nun.

One of the very few early discussions of the foundress-abbess’s authority and power can be found in an article by Clark that refers to female monasticism of the fourth century. Clark remarks that both the Church Fathers associated with wealthy aristocratic foundresses such as Melania the Elder and Olympias and these women’s hagiographers emphasize their humility while “their leadership in founding and directing monasteries receives practically no mention”. Clark’s argument is that the exaltation of aristocratic foundresses’ humility is an authorial strategy aimed at hiding the real sources of their authority and power, which were their wealth and high social status. It should be noted, however, that the same silence concerning the foundresses’ supervision of their monastic communities is detected also in the Lives whose protagonists are of less aristocratic origins, and do not possess the mythical riches of either Olympias or the two Melanias. In these Lives too (such examples are those of Matrona and Domnika, whose convents are built and sustained from gifts) the emphasis is placed on the foundress-abbess’s religiosity, virtues and teachings. In fact, the same phenomenon can be found also in the Lives of male saints who undertake the founder’s role without however possessing money or social status.

In general, hagiographers do not deem it necessary to discuss how their protagonists ad-

---

43 For an examination of the Life of Theodora of Arta see S. CONSTANTINOU, Generic Hybrids, the “Life” of Synkletike and the “Life” of Theodora of Arta, in: Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik, 56, 2006, pp. 113–133.
45 CLARK, Authority and Humility (cit. n. 44), p. 18.
minister their male or female monasteries; the presentation of the saints’ conducts, virtues, teachings and miracles appear as more important. This is not surprising if one considers that the main purpose of hagiographical literature was to provide its audiences with models of Christian life. Such a purpose would not have been served through a presentation of a monastery’s administration, and of a discussion of practical matters concerning its daily life. These issues were the subjects of other types of texts, such as the typika.

Even though hagiographers do not mention much about the convents’ organisation and management, they do reveal the sources of their heroines’ power and authority as monastic foundresses and leaders. The holy women’s actions and teachings often disclose some of their unwritten rules determining life in their communities. When Melania, for instance, wakes up after two hours of sleep and raises also her nuns to teach them how they should spend the first fruits of the night for God’s glory, and that they ought to keep awake and pray at every hour (Life of Melania the Younger, § 23),47 she sets her rules concerning the nuns’ sleep and their activities during the night, which should be devoted to liturgy and prayer.

There is no doubt that an important part of the power and authority of most of the holy women examined here derives from their social and financial position (such examples include Macrina, Olympias, Melania, Eusebia-Xene, Sopatra and Theodora of Arta); but there are also other factors that determine their authority and power as monastic leaders, such as their character, their way of life and their teachings. In fact, in the case of the wealthy aristocrats, the authority and power they exercise outside their convents as patrons, almsgivers and ecclesiastical policy-makers is mostly based on their status, both social and financial, while their power and authority inside their communities are mostly drawn from their teachings and asceticism.

Here asceticism is understood as a set of practices, exercises and performances including, among others, strict fasts, vigils, continuous prayers, bodily suffering and humility. Such bodily and spiritual operations termed “technologies of the self” by Michel Foucault permit individuals to “transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality”.48 According to Foucault, the “technologies of the self” bestow power. Through asceticism an individual is transformed into a subject: he/she becomes an object for him/herself. In Foucault’s words, a “subject is led to observe himself, analyse himself, interpret himself, [and] recognizes himself as a domain of possible knowledge”.49 The ascetic thus is an active subject of creation, a dominant and powerful individual,50 who governs him/herself and in so doing he/she moves towards a conception of power that strengthens and activates him/herself.

The ascetic’s power over him/herself allows him/her to exercise power over others too, according to Foucault’s definition of power: “[Power] is a set of actions on possible actions;
it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives, makes more probable or less; in the extreme, it constraints or forbids absolutely, but it is always a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions. 51

For Foucault, power is associated with action and the possibility of acting. It is a structure of actions influencing the actions of others. The foundress-abbess, for example, who through her paradigmatic asceticism that will be shortly presented is transformed into a powerful authority of ascetic discipline, is involved in a power relation with her nuns. As both an exemplary ascetic and religious guide, she establishes a set of rules and norms, and she creates a space in which certain actions take place whose form and limits she determines.

But before going on to discuss the power and authority of the examined holy women, as monastic founders and agents of religious and ascetic life, I should first present the lives they led before their decision to found monasteries. The discussion of this first phase of their earthly lives is necessary not only because the hagiographers devote a considerable narrative space to it, and in so doing they show the importance they attach to it, but also because it functions as a time of preparation without which the heroines’ lives as foundress-abbesses cannot be imagined. It is this very first phase that allows the heroines to acquire what they need in order to be able to enter the second and most important phase of their lives during which, liberated from male control, and distinguished by their social status and their strong and influential characters, they obtain the power to control both their properties, and their own lives, as well as those of others.

In the first phase of their lives, the heroines acquire gradually all the qualities that should characterise a monastic founder and leader, either male or female: they become independent and socially active, they administer their properties, and through their social position and conduct they attract, on the one hand, the first nuns who populate the nunneries they later found, and on the other, authoritative men who become their spiritual fathers and their supporters in their religious projects. All in all they show initiatives, and undertake actions suggesting that they can become successful leaders.

The heroines’ first actions are made towards the acquisition of social independence, which they achieve by either avoiding marriage or by getting rid of an already existing husband. Eusebia and Domnika flee their houses just before their weddings are about to take place. Matrona escapes from her abusive husband. Macrina’s, Olympia’s, Athanasia’s and Theodora’s husbands die, and apart from Athanasia these women perform a heroic deed: they manage to avoid a second marriage that male authorities try to impose upon them. In so doing, they prove their ability to make decisions about matters that concern them, and they manage to convince their families about their right to act so. Of course, these are further qualities that a leader should possess.

As for Melania and for Athanasia in her second marriage, even though they are forced to live with a husband, they find an intelligent way out by transforming their marriage into a spiritual relationship. Both women become their husbands’ Christian guides, and through their teachings and strong characters they manage to persuade the two men to adopt religious lives. 52 As a result Melania and Athanasia are liberated from their

52 Lynda Coon describes Melania’s relationship with Pinian as one in which the husband is “reduced to a passive subordinate who follows his wife’s lead” (L. L. COON, Sacred Fictions. Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity, Philadelphia 1997, p. 114; see also GLOKE, This Female Man of God [cit. n. 44], pp. 114–121).
obligations as wives, and become free to lead the life that pleases them.

The fact that these women undertake initiatives and decide to found monasteries as soon as they become widows is not a literary motif, but it reflects a social reality of their times supported also by the lives of the aforementioned Palaiologan foundresses. The empress Theodora Palaiologina, for instance, undertakes to restore two older monasteries (Lips and Anargyroi) and to construct further buildings for the needs of the nuns after the death of her husband, emperor Michael VIII (1259–1282). Interestingly, Theodora’s career, like that of the holy women examined here, can be divided into two phases: her life as a married obedient wife and responsible mother, and her life as a widow devoted mainly to religious activities. After the sudden death of her husband, the prince John, son of Andronikos II (1282–1328) and his second wife Irene-Yolanda of Montferrat, Irene-Eulogia Choumnaina Palaiologina, to mention a second example, restores the convent of Philanthropos Soter in Constantinople, whose abbess she becomes with the monastic name of Eulogia.

As is obvious from both the female authors of our typika and the Lives discussed here, foundresses are in their large majority married elderly women or widows. They are namely women with more experience of social and religious life. With the only exception of Theodora of Thessalonike (ca. 812–892), the other monastic female saints, on the contrary, are virgins taking monastic vows at a young age. The fact that holy foundresses are in general more experienced women does not seem to be a coincidence or a literary topos. It must have been more socially acceptable and much easier for mature women, as it was for widows, to found monasteries and to become leaders of other women who were less experienced. As pointed out by Angeliki Laiou, a monastic patroness and leader “was expected to be not only a pious and wise woman, but one of great worldly experience.”

In addition to maturity and leadership qualities, an individual planning to establish and administer a monastic community has to possess the necessary financial means. Both the authors of the female typika and the large majority of the protagonists of our Lives are therefore rich aristocrats whose wealth allows the construction of monastic complexes and the sustenance of life therein. A central issue in the first phase of the lives of the holy women examined here is the administration of their fortunes, which are sometimes vast. After becoming socially independent, they undertake actions towards their financial independence without which they cannot realise their monastic projects.

Their acquisition of economic autonomy is in some cases more difficult than their achievement of social independence. The emperor or their male kin is not willing to allow them to dismantle their properties on philanthropic and...

53 As Alice-Mary Talbot has shown, widowhood in Byzantium was a “stage of life in which many women achieved the greatest esteem and power” (A.-M. Talbot, Women, in: G. Cavallo [ed.], The Byzantines, tr. T. Dunlap et al. Chicago/London 1997, pp. 117–143, here pp. 128–129, repr. in: Talbot, Women [cit. n. 28], I).
55 The buildings she constructs and the properties she donates to her two convents are listed in her typikon of the Lips convent.
58 See Constantinou, Female Corporeal Performances (cit. n. 29).
59 Laiou, Observations (cit. n. 24), p. 86.
other religious activities. Olympias, for instance, is for some time prevented by the emperor Theodosios I from using her own property (Life of Olympias, § IV). Melania’s brother-in-law encourages her slaves to revolt when she and Pinian decide to sell their lands and to offer the slaves their freedom. Eventually they solve the problem by asking for the intervention of Serena (Life of Melania, § 10–12), the sister of emperor Honorius (393–395). Later and just before Melania and Pinian are about to leave Rome, the Senate decides to confiscate their property (Life of Melania, § 19). This, according to the hagiographer, is avoided through God’s providence. In their attempts to achieve fiscal freedom and retention of dower, the holy foundresses reveal a further qualification they possess, that of a strong and competent negotiator.

As soon as they get hold of their own properties, the holy women start attracting ecclesiastical and monastic functionaries who desperately need their financial support in order to pursue their ecclesiastical politics. The wealthy women’s appeal among the members of contemporary ecclesiastic and monastic circles is extremely strong. As Peter Brown characteristically puts it, “like the crash of avalanches heard from the upper slopes of great mountains, women such as Melania and Olympias caused the clergy and ascetics of the late fourth century to look up with awe.”

Ignoring Theodosian law, the Constantinopolitan bishop Nektarios ordains Olympias as a deaconess of his church at the very young age of thirty, while the legal age was sixty (Codex Theodosianus 16. 2. 27–28). With this ordination, through which Olympias acquires authority in the church of Constantinople and gets involved in its politics, Nektarios expects Olympias to use her wealth for the support of the church and of his own personal ambitions. This is the reason he allows himself to be persuaded to a great degree by her even in ecclesiastical issues (Life of Olympias, § XIV. 11–13). Olympias’s church politics associated with the use of her property create a tension between political and ecclesiastical authorities. Following the emperor’s orders, the prefect attempts unsuccessfully to prevent Olympias from having contacts with bishops and clergymen (Life of Olympias, § IV. 7–11). Through such a tension Olympias’s position becomes even stronger. Her high social status and her appealing wealth, which she herself fully controls, allow her to interfere in both social and ecclesiastical matters.

All bishops of the cities visited by Melania and Pinian during their travels welcome them very warmly because they are interested in their wealth which they would like to see invested in their own churches. Augustine of Hippo (396–430) in particular tries without success to convince Pinian to be ordained in his church so that he could have claim on the disposition of his wealth. Even though Augustine and his fellow African bishops Alypius and Aurelius do not manage to acquire any control over the administration of Melania’s and Pinian’s property, they do make the couple follow their advice concerning the use of their property: to give both a house and an income to each monastery instead of giving to monasteries money that will be used up in a short time (Life of Melanie the Younger, § 20).

Melania’s and Pinian’s acceptance of the African bishops’ suggestion is a diplomatic move enabling them to preserve their friendships with the bishops and, of course, the bishops’ subsequent support for their own projects.

Through their social position and wealth, both Olympias and Melania dominate bishops and interfere in ecclesiastical and social matters

---

60 Brown, Body and Society (cit. n. 3), p. 279.
61 Ibid., p. 283.
62 Cloke, This Female Man of God (cit. n. 44), pp. 145–148.
63 Tr. in: Clark, The Life of Melania the Younger (cit. n. 20), p. 43.
while at the same time they manage to resist being directed by either political or ecclesiastical authorities. Of course, their friendly relationships with authoritative men provide them with further authority and power. These very relationships will prove extremely instrumental in their later careers as foundress-abbesses: they will allow them to promote their own interests and those of their closest friends. Olympias, for example, became a powerful abbess through her friendship with John Chrysostom when he was the bishop of Constantinople (398–404), at whose disposal she also placed large amounts of money, while her connections with other influential people proved very useful when she was assisting her beloved John during the time of his exile.

Important contemporary bishops are interested in the rich aristocratic foundresses of the Palaiologan period too. A case in point is Irene Choumnaina Palaiologina and her spiritual father Theoleptos (ca. 1250–1326), the influential metropolitan of Philadelphia. Theoleptos, who is a friend of Irene's father, convinces her as soon as she loses her husband to take monastic vows and to devote her large fortune to religious purposes despite her father’s objections. Irene is important to Theoleptos both for her wealth and her kinship to the emperor. Of course, Theoleptos’s relationship with Irene proved useful for both parts. Inexperienced in monastic matters – she was only sixteen years old when she became a widow – Irene needed the assistance and religious authority of a man such as Theoleptos to found and direct a double monastery.

The independence of holy women acquired during the first phase of their lives is also expressed in their travelling activities. Apart from a very few exceptions, these women either alone or with others travel before establishing their monastic communities; and they often continue their travels afterwards. Travelling is an element found only in foundress-abbesses’ Lives. Other female monastic saints usually do not travel, and if they have to, they do so disguised as men. Travelling, on the contrary, characterises the lives of most monastic male saints. The fact that only foundress-abbesses travel without having to hide their female identity shows that they are more active, more authoritative, and consequently manlier than other holy women.

In their travels, the holy women meet other people, especially women over whom they exercise spiritual power through their asceticism and teachings. Most of these women are inspired to

---


68 These are the following women: Macrina, Olympias and Athanasia of Aegina. Except for Macrina, who never leaves her convent, the other two women travel during their lives as foundress-abbesses.

adopt the monastic life, and they thus become the first nuns of the heroines’ convents. Matrona, for instance, creates her first monastic circle with the women who visit her while she is staying in a pagan temple in Beirut, and these women decide to stay with her. These same women follow her later to Constantinople where her convent is constructed. Domnika meets four pagan maidens during her stay in Alexandria whom she not only converts to Christianity, but also includes in her monastic community. In fact, the large majority of the holy women discussed here become the spiritual leaders and teachers of others long before establishing their monastic communities.

As the preceding discussion has indicated, the chief qualifications for becoming a foundress-abbess in late antiquity and Byzantium are the following: high social and financial status, widowhood, connections, leadership qualities, piety and experience obtained through social activity and travelling. The combination of all these characteristics results in the acquisition of authority and power providing on the one hand the foundress-abbess with the licence to interfere with both secular and ecclesiastical affairs, and enabling her to lead a monastic community on the other. Undoubtedly, the foundress-abbess is the most authoritative and powerful female saint outside the virgin martyr. It is to the performance of her authority and power as enacted within the walls of her monastic community that I now turn.

As already suggested, the holy foundress-abbesses exercise their power and authority inside their convents through their asceticism and their roles as spiritual leaders, teachers and protectors of their nuns’ souls. Concerning their “self-technologies”, these do not reach the extremities of those of male ascetics. In contrast to their male counterparts, foundress-abbesses neither ascend tall pillars, nor do they immobilise their bodies in chains; yet, as mentioned earlier, they are established as ascetic authorities, since their “self-technologies” appear so strict and exemplary that no one else from their environment can perform them:

_She [Athenasia] spent three days [in Matrona’s convent], then, […] she marked how the sisters gathered together at the hour of the office, how they knelt down, how they rose up; […] how from the evening until the morning office the blessed Matrona did not recline her body in relaxation, but sitting on a small wooden chair fulfilled her need for sleep, and how after the office and the great toil of standing she returned to the same position; and moreover, how, as the <other> nuns slept, she would stretch out her hands in tearful prayer._ (Life of Matrona, §41)

In the eyes of Athanasia, a laywoman visiting Matrona’s convent, Matrona, who performs more difficult and painful ascetic practices than the other nuns, functions as a powerful exemplar of asceticism leading her to renounce the world and to adopt the monastic life followed in Matrona’s nunnery. Here we have a graphic example of the operation of power as defined by Foucault: Matrona’s actions, through which she is first transformed into a self-dominant subject

70 Macrina and Melania instruct members of their respective families. For Macrina see S. Constantinou, Women Teachers in Early Byzantine Hagiography, in: F.J. Ruys (ed.), What Nature Does Not Teach. Didactic Literature in the Medieval and Early-Modern Periods (Disputatio, 15), Turnhout 2008, pp. 189–204. Eusebia-Xene becomes the spiritual guide of her two servants, and Athanasia of Aegina leads to monastic life her second husband and pious women from Aegina who later enter her convent.

71 An example of a founder performing such ascetic practices is Lazaros of Mt Galesios (eleventh century; edition in _AASS, Nov. III_, 1910, pp. 508–606).

and later into an authority of asceticism, direct the actions of another woman not belonging to monastic circles. Athanasia is not the only laywoman influenced by Matrona’s actions. As noted previously, Matrona’s practices exercise power also on the pagan women whom she meets in her travels during the first phase of her life.

That an abbess should surpass her nuns in ascetic practices so that she may function as their model and guide is also noted in the female typika. For example, in her advisory words addressed to the future superiors of her convent, Theodora Synadene says:

**Expond that which is necessary and leads to salvation […] through your actions and deeds. Surpass the others in virtue, thereby giving sure pledges and guarantees to your followers, that the achievement of virtue and the good is by no means impossible** (Typikon of Bebaia Elpis, §27).

In general, for the holy foundress-abbess, the ascetic life consists of daily exercises and practices through which she attempts to transform herself into a bodiless existence in order to both edify her disciples and achieve the status of holiness. All holy women under examination wear rough, hairy vestments leaving their flesh consumed. They eat and drink sparingly. Eusebia-Xene, for example, remains without food for a week, and when she eats she takes some bread combined with ashes taken from the censer (Life of Eusebia-Xene, §11.22–28). Through their strict fasts, the holy women acquire new bodies, with skin that sticks to bones. They go without sleep, as demonstrated by the example of Matrona mentioned above; and when they do sleep, they use the ground, a board or a stone for a bed. They refuse to sleep on a more comfortable bed even when they are seriously ill. Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, is surprised to find his sister Macrina lying on a board on the ground while suffering from a deathly illness (Life of Macrina, §13–19). For some time, Melania sleeps in a wooden box whose size prevents her from stretching out and turning over (Life of Melania, §40), while the haircloth garment she lies on is full of lice (Life of Melania, §52). Apart from violating their bodily needs, the foundress-abbesses transform their daily lives into living liturgies: they continuously pray in tears, and they sing hymns.⁷⁴

The ascetic virtue that distinguishes holy foundress-abbesses is humility. Humility is a further empowering technology, since it allows the individual to acquire self-knowledge through self-renunciation, the very condition of salvation (Mt. 16.25, Mk. 8.34–35, Lk. 14.25–26). As formulated by Foucault, there is “no truth about the self without a sacrifice of the self”.⁷⁵ The foundress-abbesses’ humility, which becomes a recurrent theme in their Lives, is presented by one of the hagiographers in the following way:

**So what account could explain, what tongue could present the loftiness of her great humility? For she would never allow <herself> to be served by anyone of them nor <allow> water to be poured over her hands <by anyone> during her entire lifetime […] . Considering herself unworthy to be with them, let alone be served by them (even though she was mother superior) […] . Although enduring many tribulations, inasmuch as she was the leader of her sisters and was concerned about them, she never upbraided any of them because of the great humility she had attained.**⁷⁶ (Life of Athanasia of Aegina, §4, §5)

---

⁷⁴ For an investigation of liturgical piety and practice in Macrina’s Life, for example, see Krueger, Writing and Liturgy of Memory (cit. n. 6).
⁷⁶ Tr. in: Sherry, Life of St. Athanasia of Aegina, (cit. n. 39), pp. 145–146.
As the passage above suggests, humility is central in the case of the foundress-abbess because it is strongly related to her role as spiritual guide. Being an individual of high social and economic background, it is essential that she cultivate humility. In fact, humility is one of the very qualities constituting a powerful sign of her transformation from a rich aristocrat into a servant of God, as suggested by the following extract from Melania's Life:

She [the empress Serena] was greatly moved when she saw the blessed woman in that humble garment. [...] Serena called together all the servants [...] and began to speak to them in this manner: “Come, see the woman who four years ago was beheld vigorous in all her worldly rank, who has now grown old in heavenly wisdom. Behold, she has trod underfoot the softness of her upbringing, the massiveness of her wealth, the pride of her worth.”

(Life of Melania, §12)

It is mainly through her own humility that the foundress-abbess may encourage the acquisition of virtues on the part of her nuns: if she, who had been delicately raised as a member of such an important family (Life of Melania, §31) acts in such humble ways, then they her disciples, most of whom used to be socially and financially inferior during their lives in the world, cannot behave differently.

In the case of the foundress-abbess in particular, humility does not just function as a strong indication of the renunciation of a former self. It is also a practice allowing her to govern her present self both as an ascetic authority and as the “owner” and manager of a whole monastic community. On the one hand, humility enables the foundress-abbess to escape the danger of becoming proud of her spiritual achievements: Although she possessed such great and numerous virtues, she never became proud about her own righteous deeds, but always made herself lovely, called herself a useless servant (Life of Melania, §32). On the other hand, through humility the foundress-abbess fulfils her role as a guide leading other women to salvation, and she secures their obedience and devotion:

Melania busied herself greatly to take care of the nuns’ physical needs. [...] Secretly she took them the things they needed. [...] The sisters, however, knew from the manner in which it was done that the saint was the one who had provided these things, and they were eager to cleave to her to a remarkable degree, to obey her in all things, for they knew her boundless compassion. (Life of Melania, §41)

It is mainly for its value both as an empowering virtue and as a means of monastic discipline that humility is stressed also in the female typika. The reference to humility in these documents takes two forms: it is either a self-presentation of the patroness as a humble servant and sinful individual, or an exhortation addressed to nuns and especially future abbesses of the convent in the following manner:

The dignity of authority is great and lofty is the honor of leadership. But let not this dignity puff you up, or the honor exalt you. For this puffing up and exaltation prepares the one who has thus puffed up and raised herself to fall from the blessing of humility, and makes her to fall

77 Clark, The Life of Melania the Younger (cit. n. 20), p. 35.
78 Ibid., p. 48.
79 Ibid., p. 49.
80 Ibid., p. 55.
81 Theodora Synadene, for example, calls herself the humble servant of her convent’s nuns (Typikon of Behaia Elpis, §117). She also writes that she established a convent for the abolition of her unspeakable sins (Typikon of Behaia Elpis, §11). In a similar fashion talk about themselves Irene Doukaina Kammene (Typikon of Kecharitomene, §78) and Theodora Palaiologina (Typikon of Lips, §52).
into the sin and trap of the devil because of her arrogance and pride. Therefore in the disposition of your heart and the secret [recesses] of your soul you should consider yourself a worthless maidservant and lowly slave granted by God for this purpose to the servants and daughters and brides of Christ himself, but by your external appearance you should show the distinction of the total authority and power which you have over them all. [...] Well-honoured humility may be taught by your praiseworthy condition. Furthermore, in the conviction that authority over the majority and concern for them makes you rather their slave and servant, and that you will have to give a greater accounting to God on behalf of the majority, do not make this cause for pride or fill your heart with much anguish and fear and unspeakable terror. Do not be arrogant because of your authority, but be humble because of the great concern and thought about the defence [you will have to make]. Thus you will set yourself forth as a fine example for your subordinates [...] of humility.\(^{82}\) (Typikon of Bebaia Elpis, § 34, § 35)

Through their repeated ascetic practices, the foundress-abbesses establish a set of norms as to how their nuns should operate. The evaluation of the nuns’ asceticism is based upon the rules set by the superior’s self-technologies. They are expected to imitate their leader to the best of their ability. The holy women are successful in creating communities whose all female members perform the expected monastic behaviour, the one leading to salvation, which is also witnessed by the visitors of their convents. Gregory of Nyssa describes the life of the nuns in his sister’s convent with the following words:

Such was the order of their life, so lofty their philosophy and the dignity of their way of life as they lived it day and night [...] For just as souls freed by death from their bodies are freed at the same time from the cares of this life, so too their life was far removed from these things, divorced from all earthly vanities and attuned to the imitation of the angelic life. For no high temper, or jealousy, or hostility, or arrogance, or any such thing was to be seen among them, since they had cast off all vain desires for honour and glory, and self-importance, and pre-eminence and the like. Their luxury was in self-control and their glory in being unknown. Their wealth was in dispossession and in shaking off all material superfluity as so much dust from their bodies. They were not occupied with the pursuits of this life, or rather, not preoccupied, but solely with meditation on divine things, unceasing prayer and uninterrupted hymnody, which was extended evenly over the whole time, throughout the night and day, so that it became for them both work and respite from work.\(^{83}\) (Life of Macrina, § 11.13–33)

The foundress-abbesses are expected to guide their disciples not only through exemplary “self-technologies”, but also through corresponding teachings, as indicated by the advice that Bassianos gives to Matrona before the latter is about to found a monastic community in Constantinople:

Go, my child, settle yourself and save the souls that the Lord shall send you. Preserve yourself and present your way of life as a model to those who are being saved, that those who are taught by you may see the things you teach through words being fulfilled in you through deeds.\(^{84}\) (Life of Matrona, § 29)

In general, the holy women teach their disciples to undergo painful ascetic practices, to fight against temptation armed with prayer and faith, to acquire virtues such as chastity, voluntary poverty and humility, and to renounce human pas-


\(^{83}\) Tr. in: Silvas, Macrina the Younger (cit. n. 18), pp. 121–122.

\(^{84}\) Tr. J. Featherstone, in: Featherstone/Mango, Life of St. Matrona (cit. n. 72), p. 46.
Similar teachings are also to be found in the female typika. Obviously, the teachings of the holy foundress-abbesses lie in full accord-
ance with their own way of life presented earlier. The appearance of their ascetic bodies and their whole behaviour constitute striking manifesta-
tions of the life they ask their disciples to lead.

The power and authority gained by the foundress-abbesses through their teaching projects involving both their edifying deeds and words are in some cases perceived and described by their disciples through the metaphor of light. Upon Macrina’s death, her nuns, for example, exclaim:

_The lamp of our eyes is extinguished! The light that guided our souls is taken away! The surety of our life is dissolved! The seal of incorruptibility is removed! The bond of our harmony is broken! The firmness of the vacillating is trampled asunder! The cure of the infirm is withdrawn! With you the night became for us as the day, for we were illuminated by your pure life. But now even our day shall be changed to deep gloom._ (Life of Macrina, § 26.23–29)

According to her nuns, Macrina was the light allowing them to see, the light illuminating their lives and the light showing them which path to follow. Through her way of life and teachings, Macrina transformed the darkness of her nuns’ primary ignorance into the light of Christian knowledge. Macrina’s loss has now brought a deep darkness in her nuns’ lives. They have lost their leader, the person who guided their lives providing them with meaning and purpose. As one may assume from the nuns’ words, the idea that Macrina was their light is very central in their understanding of her essential role in their lives. Now the teacher as person has gone forever; the disciples will not see Macrina, and will never hear her voice again. However, Macrina’s personality and teachings, as well as those of all foundress-abbesses, remain alive in the memories of the disciples who despite their leaders’ death will continue their monastic lives according to the rules set by them. Just before their deaths the holy foundress-abbesses name their successors and exhort their disciples to keep their monastic rules unchanged. In a similar fashion the authors of the typika stress the importance of the rules set by them in their documents, and express their strong wish that they remain unaltered.

The foundress-abbess’s career does not end with her death, as Irene Doukaina reminds the nuns of her convent, _but even if we are absent in the body, you should think that we are present with you in spirit (Typikon of Kecharitomene, § 78)._ The foundress-abbess’s post-mortem gifts, patronage, authority and power are expressed in visionary appearances and miracles. For her disciples and admirers, she does not cease to be the patroness of her nunnery even after her death. Through miracles of protection and vengeance, which cannot be presented here, she defends her convent from trespass, plunder, attack and subversion.

This analysis has attempted to show that even if she often seems to disappear in literary conventions and male fantasies, desires and ide-
ologies the ancient lady does exist, and has to be studied. Her presence in both ecclesiastical and

---

85 For the teaching projects of Byzantine foundress-abbesses see CONSTANTINOU, Female Corporeal Performances (cit. n. 29), pp. 136–152, and idem, Women Teachers (cit. n. 70).

86 Tr. in: SILVAS, Macrina the Younger (cit. n. 18), pp. 136–137.


88 See also CONSTANTINOU, Women Teachers (cit. n. 70), pp. 202–203.


90 See, for example, Life of Domnika, § 18–19 and Life of Athanasia of Aegina, § 14–18.
monastic contexts is extremely prominent especially when, having the necessary means, she undertakes the roles of patroness and leader. There is no doubt that such women as the ones Theodora Synadene orders the nuns of her convent to choose as their future superiors existed:

Such should be the woman who leads the others; such a woman you must all seek and choose from among yourselves, one who is able […] by speech and action to instruct her disciples in the fixed word of truth and the holy lessons of piety, and to instil zeal for the truly good, and to kindle your souls with fine love for this, and thus in no way whatever fail to attain the goal. She should provide herself as an example to you and model of the good, and whether speaking or silent present herself to you as an exhortation.\(^\text{91}\) (Typikon of Bebaia Elpis, § 25)

Even if such pious and gifted women were not always present, Theodora’s words reveal what kind of character, abilities and behaviour an abbess was expected to have. As the investigation undertaken here has manifested, in order for a late antique or Byzantine woman to become the successful abbess suggested by Theodora, that is an authoritative woman able to lead others, and gain their submission and devotion, she had to be an exceptional, courageous and influential actor in various settings: social, ecclesiastical and monastic.