A round the year 890 the Byzantine emperor Leo VI inherited vast properties in the northern Peloponnese. The contents of the bequest, which were inventoried by an imperial official, included gold coins, silver and gold vessels, copper objects, textiles, flocks of sheep, landed properties, and more than three thousand slaves.¹ Economic historians have analyzed this bequest in order to discuss issues of land ownership, cloth production, and slavery in the middle Byzantine period, particularly in the Empire’s hinterlands.² But the inheritance – as a legal transaction – raises other questions that are of immediate concern for this volume, for the testator was a woman who had disinherited her own grandson in favor of the ruling emperor.³ The seemingly independent financial position of women such as the Peloponnesian Danelis is at odds with the cliché of the impoverished widow, best exemplified by the Gospel story of the widow’s mite,⁴ a tale that was picked up by Byzantine authors including John Moschos.⁵ Yet, as the story of Danelis illustrates, widows were in a legal position to control their own property and wealth, which in some cases was substantial. This aspect of the story, which has been ignored by scholars, is the focus of this contribution.

This paper examines the involvement of widows in the construction or renovation of churches and monasteries, either as primary benefactors or as more modest contributors to village foundations. Owing to the uneven preservation of sources, both written and material, our focus will necessarily fall on late Byzantium, evoking comparisons from the middle Byzantine period when available. The ability of widows to participate in church foundation, as we shall see, reflected the strong juridical rites of widows in Byzantium and their critical position within families where they served, on occasion, as heads of household.

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¹ Ed. I. Bekker, Theophanes Continuatus, Chronographia, Bonn 1838, pp. 320–321.
⁵ Tale 127 tells the story of a widow of about 80 years of age who distributes two lepta to each person entering the church of Sts Kosmas and Damianos, text in PG 88.3, see tr. J. Wortley, John Moschos, The Spiritual Meadow (Pratum Spirituale), Kalamazoo, MI 1992, pp. 104–105.
we shall suggest, the increased involvement of widows – even humble women of the Byzantine village – in the foundation of churches in the late Byzantine period, appears to benefit from changes in attitude toward the alienation of dowry properties in the last centuries of imperial rule.

Although scholars often note the marital status of female founders, the very agency provided by their widowhood has not received sufficient attention. Yet, an understanding of their legal and economic status is critical to any discussion of women and their ability to found churches. Laws regulating the distribution of property following the death of a spouse are included in the *Ecloga*, which were enacted by the Isaurian rulers in the year 726. 6 "The second chapter of the *Ecloga* states: *If the husband predeceases the wife and there are children of the marriage, the wife being their mother, she shall control her marriage portion and all her husband's property as becomes the head of the family and household.*" Critical to the code, therefore, and to the issue of female agency, is the widow's assumption of the position of head of the family and her legal control of her dowry properties and funds. These laws, which governed inheritance and the guardianship of children, remained largely unchanged through the last days of the empire, although specific cases were brought before local magistrates when questions of dowry or guardianship of minor children were under dispute. Novels issued in the late Byzantine period also offered minor refinements to the earlier law code. 8

Following a husband’s death, the restoration of the dowry superseded other financial obligations of the estate, including debts to the State or to creditors. 9 According to Byzantine law, the dowry had to be inventoried within three months of the death of the spouse. 10 Thus the dowry of Maria, the widow of Manuel Doblyzenos, was inventoried in August 1384 shortly after her husband’s death at the Battle of Choraites. 11 Although her marriage share had been assessed at 1585 hyperpyra, a portion had diminished in value. Manuel’s estate was duly required to provide supplemental funds (or gifts in kind) to make up the shortfall; these included seven icons (valued at 32 hyperpyra), jewelry (valued at 87 ½ hyperpyra), horses (valued at 20 hyperpyra), properties, etc. 12

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9 After examining the more than 80 cases concerning dowry or other family property that were brought before the patriarchal court between the 1315 and 1402, Ruth Macrides noted that "certainly one generalization is possible: the protection of the woman’s dowry is the most common outcome of the patriarchal decisions throughout the register". Macrides, *Dowry* (cit. n. 8), p. 94.


As Angeliki Laiou has noted, the highly protected nature and intended purpose of the dowry placed limitations upon its economic use. But, while the laws that safeguarded the dowry remained largely unaltered, its use and function changed, suggesting a relaxation in societal views about the administration of inherited properties, especially in times of economic hardship or political instability. In the middle Byzantine period, the alienation of dowry goods was restricted; by the later period, based on an analysis of property transactions, these assets could be used in more flexible ways. The increased number of sales or donations made by women to monasteries in the late Byzantine period may provide evidence for a changing approach to the alienation of dowry properties, which could be substantial when supplemented by other inherited or purchased properties.

The involvement of widows in church foundation is most easily documented in the lavish churches of Constantinople and in Byzantium’s smaller urban centers. Among these, a number were renovated or newly constructed by imperial and upper class widows as pious offerings but also, more practically, as nunneries that could support them through infirmities and in old age. Such foundations, furthermore, housed the tombs of deceased husbands, members of their extended family, and the women themselves. The dowager empress Theodora, widow of Michael VIII Palaiologos, for example, reconstructed and endowed the Lips monastery, the convent of the Holy Anargyroi, and, perhaps, the convent of the Theotokos ta Mikra Romaion. As is well known, the bodies of Theodora, her family, and her descendants were entombed within the south church and ambulatory of the Lips monastery; their eternal memories were recalled in services, as mandated by the institution’s foundation document. At the convent of the Holy Anargyroi, according to its charter, commemorations were to be made for Theodora’s ancestors and her descendants, in the same manner as at Lips, but simply, and not with such great expense, but such as would not be onerous for the convent. The vast properties given to support the Lips monastery, as Alice-Mary Talbot has shown, derived from Theodora’s own inheritance and from gifts from her son, importantly not from her late husband’s estate. Theodora is but one example of a large number of female founders—almost all of them widows—related by blood or marriage to the emperor Andronikos II.

Involvement in church foundation in Byzantium’s cities, however, was not limited to imperial women. Maria-Martha, widow of

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17 BMFD, III, p. 1292.
18 For an inventory of these properties see ibid., pp. 1279–1280.
Michael Glabas Tarchaneiotes, erected the funerary chapel of the Pammakaristos monastery in Constantinople shortly after 1310. The small church of the Resurrection of Christ in Berroia was completed in 1314/15 through the patronage of Euphrosyne, widow of Xenos Psalidas, who is named in an inscription on its west wall (Fig. 1). Urban women, including widows, also presented monasteries with manuscripts, liturgical vessels, icons, and textiles used for a variety of church services, suggesting patterns of donation at a more modest level.

Based on information published to date, one might presume that the ability of widows to found or support ecclesiastical institutions was restricted to members of the economic and social elite. Connected with standing monuments of historical import and churches that still preserve impressive mosaic or fresco cycles, these female founders are well known in the field of Byzantine studies. Yet, even below the ranks of these women and far from Byzantium’s urban centers, widows were involved in church foundation, suggesting a wider cultural pattern and, indeed, one that permeated all levels of Byzantine society.

The peasant widowhood in Byzantium has not yet been the subject of a comprehensive investigation. Studies of rural widows in the Middle Ages have been published by A. M. Konidares, H θέση της χήρας στη βυζαντινή κοινωνία, in: Βυζαντινά, 16, 1991, pp. 35–42. For information on widows in middle Byzantine hagiographical texts see K. Nikolaou, Η γυναίκα στη μέση βυζαντινή εποχή. Κοινωνικά πρότυπα και καθημερινές βίοι στα αγιολογικά κείμενα, Athens 2005, pp. 172–182. For dowry and inheritance in traditional (modern) villages in Greece and Cyprus see C. Piault (ed.), Familles et biens en Grèce et à Chypre, Paris 1985.
dieval West, however, are numerous, and these have much to offer, both in terms of methodol-
gen and comparative data. Demographic analy-
ses of the medieval population tell us that wid-
os formed a large part of the rural community, one that likely increased substantially in times of
war. Their presence in the village can be tracked in
tax registers, where they are listed as head of
household or, less frequently, as living in the
households of adult children. In the late me-
dieval West, the percentage of widow-headed house-
holds on manorial estates has been estimated at
10–14 percent. The number has been shown to
be even higher – 17–22 percent – in Byzantine
villages for the same period. On occasion, the
percentage could rise beyond these numbers. In
1262, for example, tax collectors assessed the land
holdings of the Iviron monastery in the village
of Ieressos in northern Greece. Of the 79 house-
holds listed in the praktikon, nineteen – roughly
one-quarter – were headed by widows. Listed
as χήρα at the beginning of each entry, widows
such as Irene, Zoe, Kale, Photeine, and Anna,
were responsible for raising their children or,
in some cases, grandchildren, maintaining the
household and livestock, and paying rent or taxes. The holdings of the female heads of house-
hold do not differ substantially from those of the
male villagers who supported wives and children.
The measured land, teams of oxen, mules, pigs,
etc., are roughly similar to those of other villag-
ers, as were the concomitant fiscal obligations. In
composition, however, the families of the wid-
os might be seen to present certain differences.
Nearly all of the widows listed as head of house-
hold also had at least one son or grandson living
at home. The demographics of such households,
of course, speak to the intense agricultural labor
that was necessary to maintain the land in order
to support family and community, labor that is
manifested in the skeletons of villagers, both
male and female. Widows who are not listed as

24 See, for example, J. M. Bennett, Widows in the Medieval English Countryside, in: L. Mirrer (ed.), Upon My
Husband’s Death. Widows in the Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe, Ann Arbor, MI 1992; J. M. Ben-
nett, Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Briggstock before the Plague, New
York 1987; L. A. Gates, Widows, Property, and Remarriage: Lessons from Glastonbury’s Deverill Manors, in: Albi-
25 A. E. Laiou-Thomadakis, Peasant Society in the Late Byzantine Empire. A Social and Demographic Study, Prince-
ton 1977, pp. 89–94.
26 For an analysis of the position of widows in tax registers in the medieval West see P. Franklin, Peasant Widows’ “Li-
27 Laiou-Thomadakis, Peasant Society (cit. n. 25); A. E. Laiou, Family Structure and the Transmission of Property,
28 For the Practicum Nicolai Campani and Demetrii Sparteni of 1262 see V. Kravari / J. Lefort / H. Métrévéli / N.
Oikonomides / D. Papachrysanthou (ed.), Actes d’Iviron, III, de 1204 à 1328 (Archives de l’Athos, 18), Paris
1994, pp. 97–99. An additional two widows in the village, Maria and Photeine, were not heads of household. The
number of widows in this village seems particularly high. See the population estimates in Laiou-Thomadakis,
(Réalités byzantines, 11), Paris 2006, p. 32. In looking at the eleventh-century Cadaster of Thebes, Charles
Brand found that 19.4 percent of the stoichoi recorded women as the heads of household. C. M. Brand, Some By-
TO ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟΝ: Studies in Honor of Speros Vryonis, Jr. I, Hellenic Antiquity and Byzantium, New Rochelle,
NY 1993, pp. 59–68. For the mention of women in the Cadaster of Thebes see also L. Neville, Taxing Sophronia’s
29 See S. E. J. Gerstel et al., A Late Medieval Settlement at Panaktos, in: Hesperia, 72, 2003, pp. 202–204, for a dis-
cussion of osteological traces of agricultural labor. For similar conclusions derived from analysis of a large group of
head of household found a home with other relatives, indicating, in all likelihood, their inability—financially or physically—to administer their own estates.

Given their substantial numbers, village widows must have constituted a visible minority within small communities. In her groundbreaking study of the late medieval village of Brigstock, England, Judith Bennett concluded that “widows, although certainly not liberated, were nevertheless the most publicly active of all women in the medieval countryside.” The evidence suggests that peasant widows in late Byzantium were equally active, both as heads of household and as church patrons. The evidence for this activity derives from written, archaeological and artistic sources—all documenting female involvement in church foundation at the village level.

The acts of Athos and monastic institutions in other parts of the Byzantine world record numerous land transactions between widows and churches or monasteries; these suggest widespread societal involvement of widows with, most often but not exclusively, local churches. The records of sale (as demanded by law) carefully trace the lines of ownership so that the transactions would not be disputed. The records often stipulate that the transaction was made of free will and without coercion. Control of their inheritance or their dowry—their γονικόν, their θεώρητρον, their υπόβολον, their πατρικόν, and their legal right to alienate inherited or dowry properties, placed widows in a powerful, but also vulnerable, position. In an act of sale of 1007, for example, the nun Maria, a widow and mother of three children, Kale, Niketas and Styliane, sold a small piece of property for six nomismata. The act specifies that the property was part of Maria’s inheritance from her father, the priest Niketas Sidirokouistes. In 1010, the widow Kalida, mother of Basili and Zoe, sold properties inherited from her grandfather and uncle, to the abbot of a neighboring monastery for the price of fifteen nomismata. A perusal of the acts contained in the Athos archives suggests that the number of widows involved in donating or selling property to the peninsula’s monasteries increased in the late Byzantine period. In ca. 1290, for example, Irene Panagiotou and her daughter, Maria, sold a field measuring three stremmata (γονικὸν ἡμῶν τριμοδιαίον χωράφιον) to the Lavra monastery for the price of a cow and its calf. Keladene and her son, Demetrios, are listed within a series of transactions that record the names of villagers who donated or sold property to the Xeropotamou monastery in the early fourteenth century. She is the only woman to appear without a husband and to sign a property transaction in her own right. Listed without the name of a husband and likely, therefore, a widow,
Keladene sold fields of six stremmata to the monastery in 1312 and donated additional fields for the salvation of her soul and the commemoration of her memory and that of her son.  

The reasons for the sale or donation of properties were both economic and spiritual. Some sales were surely generated by economic hardship. The stated motivation for many independent widows (those who kept their deceased husbands’ land holdings and did not remarry) to donate properties to the church stemmed from the desire to care and sustain themselves in old age through the sale of property to a monastery (the so-called adelphaton).  

A southern Italian document of 1189 records the intent of Basile, the widow of Nicholas Mantellos, to donate her property, including a large number of sheep and goats, to the convent of the Virgin of Messene, which she had entered as a nun. Upon her death, the transfer of all goods would be complete and she would be buried in a tomb within the convent. Yet many of the donations appear to reflect the simple desire to memorialize one’s self or one’s family members in perpetuity through a single charitable action – a contractual donation of a sacred type – the ψυχικόν or ψυχική δωρεά – that is paralleled in the language used in commemorative inscriptions painted on the walls of many small churches. Although earlier in date, an eleventh-century will of the South Italian widow Gemma (Γέμμα) makes the timing and motivation of the bequest manifest: I, Gemma, called by name the wife of Nikephoros of blessed memory… oppressed by grievous sickness, lying on my bed and having understood clearly as never before the power of death, make my will while my senses are clear and I am in my right mind. She gives to the church as a gift and a freehold a garden, the surrounding estate and grottoes, and asks that everyone who in the future offers the bloodless sacrifice shall remember me in the prayers that are made to God.  

In an act of 1482 from the Vazelon monastery, the nun Kataphyge Skoularopoulos donated her γονικόν and πατρικόν properties to the monastery on behalf of her spiritual salvation and the remission of her sins as well as those of her son and parents. In other cases, the women ask to have their names inscribed in the diptychs of the church, along with those of their husbands and parents.  

Ierakina, the daughter of John Migidotos, donated a vineyard and the grapes harvested from the vines to the Xenophon monastery in 1348 in exchange for the commemoration of the memories of her parents in liturgical services and the inscription of their names in the holy brebion.

The inscription of votive prayers in surviving chapels mirrors the spiritual transaction described...
in the texts. In a male hermitage located in the cliffs above the monastery of the Holy Forty Martyrs near Sparta, for example, is inscribed the name of the servants of God Kyriake and Kale. An inscription in a hermitage dedicated to St John near Zoupena ( Hagioi Anargyroi ), close to Geraiki, asks the Lord to remember the soul of your servant, the nun Euphrosyne Glyka, and to forgive her on the Day of Judgment. Although it is impossible to know whether or not these women were widows, the absence of the name of a husband is suggestive. Like the recording of properties donated to male monasteries in institutional acts, the inscription of the name recalled the involvement of women in donating properties, finances, fields or vineyards for the sustenance of the hermitage; the inscribed text, used as a prompt by the monk, signaled the counter-gift, the offered prayers on behalf of the named supplicant.

Aside from mentions in texts such as wills, acts, and property assessments, there are also material remains that witness the participation of village widows in the foundation or renovation of local churches. Archaeological evidence from village sites or churches and painted inscriptions within humble churches provide important evidence that allows us, for the first time, to connect widows directly to modest foundations in late Byzantine villages and to conjecture about their role in the construction, furnishing, and support of churches used for family worship and burial. Clearly, it is difficult to interpret the skeletal data. However, widows can be identified in multi-burial graves where the female skeleton is the second to be placed in the tomb together with the disarticulated bones of a male adult. In such cases, the bones of the first adult are gathered in a corner of the grave – most often adjacent to the head of the later body; on occasion, the long bones are placed over the body of the recently deceased. Many of the graves also include the bones of children, which are generally included with those of the parent. Such graves are common in Byzantium, although they have yet to be collected or studied. One site – Panakton – provides the kind of information that might be useful to considering familial relationships and church patronage through the location and analysis of skeletal remains. This gendered reading of the skeletal remains produces more meaning than the information included in a simple archaeological report. Excavations in 1991 and 1992 unearthed the remains of a small, hilltop village that subsisted in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, a period when the lands between Athens and Thebes saw political and military unrest. In the late fourteenth century, a narthex housing two tombs was added to the settlement’s central church. The tomb, located in the northeast corner of the narthex, housed three skeletons, including the remains of a woman who died at the approximate age of forty-five. Buried ca. 1400, hers was the last of three bodies to be placed in the tomb and covered by a marble slab. When she was buried, the skulls of two males who had preceded her in death were stacked in the corner of the tomb next to her head; their long bones were scattered over the lower portion of her body. Based on the shape of the skulls (the male crania were long and ovoid; that of the woman was a broad pentagonaloid), the skeletons with which she shared a tomb belonged to her husband and another male, perhaps an adult son (Fig. 2). Burial within the church narthex suggests that the woman and her

47 Gerstel et al., A Late Medieval Settlement (cit. n. 29), pp. 199–204.
husband were involved in the construction of this addition to the church or in charitable donations that would sustain the building. It is not impossible that the skeletons are the remains of the village priest and his family. As the last member of her immediate family to be buried within the tomb, it would have fallen to this widow to recall the memories of her husband and son, both financially, through donations to the church or the purchase of lamps to light over the tomb, and spiritually, through prayers offered over the grave. Indeed, the discovery of glass lamp fragments and ceramic bowls within the fill demonstrates that such commemorative practices did take place at this tomb.48 Further evidence for the burial of a widow and her deceased husband within or adjacent to a church can be seen at a small church near Psinthos on the island of Rhodes. A female skeleton was revealed within a cist grave built against the south exterior wall of the church. The bones of a second skeleton, perhaps the remains of her husband, were stacked next to her head. In all likelihood, the bones are the remains of the widowed founder of the church and of her husband.49

The most abundant artistic source for the study of the late Byzantine village is the painted church. Many of the programs of village churches have been studied and their inscriptions have been collected in corpora.50 In the absence of well-studied archaeological data, the inscriptions within painted churches form the most important source for the study of the peasant widow as founder. Collected from numerous churches in Greece and Cyprus, monumental inscriptions provide a large enough body of evidence to ena-
ble us to assess the role of widows as a sub-group of donors within the general population. The inscriptions, primarily dated to the late Byzantine period, list the names of those who contributed modest amounts to support the construction, renovation, or decoration of local churches located either in provinces belonging to Byzantium or in rural areas that were nominally under Venetian or Latin rule. In addition to serving the liturgical needs of the named families, many of the churches were surrounded by graves, indicating that they were also intended for commemorative rituals. The inscribing of names in the building, therefore, had a double function, i.e., to record the donation, but also to recall the donor. Supplementary information is derived from votive portraits or inscriptions that appear in a number of rural churches, many requesting the viewer to remember the person depicted or named.

According to the inscriptions women frequently participated in church foundation or renovation together with their husbands and children. The women, however, are most often listed as “wife” rather than by individual name. For example, in the late thirteenth-century church of the Savior in Alepochori, Megara, Leon Kokalakes, the priest, is listed as the patron, ἦμα συμβόλου καὶ οἱ τέκνα τῆς μετατροπῆς τοῦ Λέωνου Κοκαλάκη τῆς Μεγαρᾶς τῆς Αλεποχώρης

54. I. Christoforaki, Χρωματικές μαρτυρίες στους ναούς της μεσαιωνικής Ρόδου (1204–1322), in: Ρόδος 4.000 χρόνια, Athens 2000, pp. 460–461, pl. 181a; I. Bitha, Ενδοκατολογικές μαρτυρίες στις τοιχογραφίες της μεσαιωνικής Ρόδου
background decorated with the flowering plants of paradise, the widow Kataphyge is memorialized as a nun, who offers a model of her church to Christ (Fig. 3). As mentioned above, a cist grave built outside the church may have contained the bodies of the founder and her husband. It appears that Kataphyge, following the death of her spouse, built the church to house her grave and that of her husband. When her body was placed in the tomb, her husband’s bones were stacked in its northeast corner, as was the case at Panakton. Alternatively, the bones of the husband may have been translated from his initial tomb to be joined with those of his wife.

There is also evidence that village widows completed and embellished churches that had been begun by their husbands, like the widows who completed the Virgin Pammakaristos in Constantinople and the church of the Resurrection of Christ in Berroia. The foundation inscription painted over the entrance lintel of the church of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel at Blachiana Malevisiou in Crete states that the church was erected from the foundations and painted through the expenses of the late priest Michael Marmaras and his wife Stamatia in the year 1447.

3: Rhodes, Psinthos, Hagia Triada, portrait of the nun Kataphyge Alexena, 1407–1408

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55 Volanakes, Ναός Αγίας Τριάδας Ψίνθου (cit. n. 49), pp. 825–826; Archontopoulos/Papavasileiou, Ρόδος: Πληροφορίες για την ιστορία του τόπου (cit. n. 49), p. 209, no. 53.

56 Gékola, Monumenti, IV (cit. n. 59), pp. 504–505, no. 17: (δ’ εξόδου τοῦ ἐν μεμορφή τῇ) λήξει γενο(μένου παπά Μιχαήλ τοῦ Μαρμαρά καὶ τῆς ἐν συμβίου αὐτοῦ) Σταμάτης …… A modern cement floor prohibits the investigation of any medieval graves dug below it.
One of the most important changes in patterns of ecclesiastical foundation in the late Byzantine period is the increase in collective sponsorship of church construction and decoration in rural communities.\(^57\) In inscriptions recording collective sponsorship, widows are listed as heads of household together with men who represent families. Five churches on the island of Crete reveal the involvement of widows in collective sponsorship. The large number of families listed on the north, west and south walls of St George at Troula in Hagios Theodoros Selinou (thirteenth–fourteenth century), includes that of Irene Sarakenoudena, likely a widow of the Sarakenos family, who is registered together with her children.\(^58\) The inscription in the church of St George at Komotades in Sphakia (1313/14) includes two nuclear families, a single layman, two monks, other people whose name God knows (καὶ ἐτερῶν ἀνθρώπων ὁν Κύριος γνωστεῖ τὰ ἴδιμα αὐτῶν), and three widows with their children: kyra Kale Blastoudena, Anna Tzenaropole, and a third whose name has not been preserved.\(^59\) The donor inscription in the church of St George at Anydroi Selinou (1323) testifies to the initiative of a protopapas and a monk, who are mentioned first, and to the participation of twenty-two additional donors, mostly nuclear families, but also men with their children (probably widowers), single men (unmarried or widowers), a nun, and Irene he Anyphantou, evidently a widow, and her children (Fig. 4).\(^60\) Furthermore, the church of St George at Galata in Hagia Triada, Pyrgiotissa (1302) was founded or renovated and painted through the labor and expenses of a layman, a nun, and the nun Kataphyge, clearly a widow, along with her children.\(^61\) The inscription in the church of the Virgin at Kakodiki Selinou (1331/32) includes a widow, he Sgourogeanou, with her hetaireia and her children among a protopapas and a priest and notary (nomikos) who took the initiative for the renovation of the church. The priests are mentioned first, as usual, and are followed by twenty-seven other donors mostly from nuclear families as well as single laymen, men with their children (widowers?), and families with their hetaireia.\(^62\) The word hetaireia,


\(^{58}\) Gerola, Monumenti, IV (cit. n. 50), pp. 444–445, no. 14: Ο’ERVENH Հ ΣΑΡΑΚΗΝΟΥΔΕΝΑ ԿԵ ՈՒՆՏԵԿՈՆ. Graves inside the church have been excavated. We wish to thank the archaeologists of the 28th and the 13th Ephorates of Byzantine Antiquities in Crete, especially Nikoletta Pyrrou, for their information on unpublished material regarding burials within the churches mentioned in this paper.


\(^{61}\) Gerola, Monumenti, IV (cit. n. 50), pp. 536–537, no. 5: …καὶ Καταφήγης μοναχῆς κ ὑ το τέκνο …; Spatharakis, Dated Byzantine Wall Paintings (cit. n. 59), pp. 22–23. Two arcosolia, probably of later date, are attached on the north and south side of the exterior. See also Gerstel / Talbot, Nuns (cit. n. 54), p. 488. Similar in context is the dedicatory inscription of the church of St Onouphrios at Kampanou Selinou painted by George Probatooulos at the end of the fifteenth/beginning of the sixteenth century, in which a widow and her children are listed among four nuclear families headed by men, Gerola, Monumenti, IV (cit. n. 50), pp. 468–469, no. 49: …καὶ Σταμάτας τῆς Μαλσάρας …· αὐτῆς, probably to be completed (καὶ τῶν τέκνων αὐτῆς).

\(^{62}\) Gerola, Monumenti, IV (cit. n. 50), pp. 462–463, no. 41: …ἡ Συγγραφέας μὲ τὴν ἔτερη τῆς κ ὑ τὰ πεδήγα τη(ς); Sucrow, Die Wandmalereien des Johannes Pagomenos (cit. n. 60), pp. 28–30, 37; Spatharakis, Dated Byzantine Wall Paintings (cit. n. 59), pp. 82–84 (with bibliography); V. Tasmakda, Die Panagia-Kirche und die Erzengelkirche in Kakodiki, Vienna 2012, pp. 37–144. A cemetery of uncertain date surrounds the church, Sucrow, p. 28.
tioned four times in this inscription, is unknown in Greek sources and should probably be related to the *societas* (συντροφία) recorded in fourteenth-century Venetian notarial documents. The term seems to allude to a co-operative association aimed at the cultivation of agrarian products or at breeding animals. By sharing the costs and means of cultivation, such as land, working animals, seeds, personal labor etc., as well as the products, the partners could cultivate lands that were not exploitable on an individual basis. The term has also been related to the *fraterna societas* of the Venetian law according to which paternal property was inherited undivided mainly to the male descendants in order to secure an efficient cultivation of lands. What is important for this study is the mention of a widow as the head of an *betaireia*, essentially equal in status to men. In fact, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century notarial documents in Venetian Crete attest to the widows’ rights to associate with other partners, to invest money, to incur debts, and to establish transactions of purchase and sale.

In a number of churches in the late Byzantine period, short supplications are written alongside saints on behalf of members of the community. These short votive inscriptions, which are scattered among the wall paintings of a church, usually replace the long dedicatory inscriptions that record all of the donors in a single list. Two characteristic examples that testify to the participation of widows are found in churches on the island of Naxos. In Panagia stes Yiallous (1288), in the region of Hagiasos, one of the six votive inscrip-

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tions found in the building records the name of Anna Koutenou and her son, referring, evidently, to a widow (Fig. 5). The inscription is found between the portraits of the Virgin and St Kyriake. The discovery of burials adjacent to the church suggests that this isolated building served a commemorative function for those whose names were inscribed within. Another widow, Kale Philotitisa, and her children are mentioned in a short invocation along with two other votive inscriptions in the church of St John the Theologian in Apeiranthos, Naxos (1309). These short inscriptions are written next to a painted figure of the Virgin or a saint and they likely indicate that the named supplicant offered the expenses for the execution of a single painting.

These inscriptions demonstrate that widows in a rural milieu are regularly named in foundation inscriptions and in short invocations that record the active participation of a large number of inhabitants of an agrarian community in founding, renovating, or decorating a village church. Placed among the other members of the village community, widows are listed by name together with their children as equal to families headed by men. The evidence from the inscriptions reflects the Byzantine inheritance laws outlined above. Laws mandating the widow’s assumption of head of household following the death of her spouse were also common in Venetian Crete. According to thirteenth- and fourteenth-century notarial deeds on the island, once widowed, women took over the duties and privileges of their husband as head of the family and disposed freely of their property.

The consideration of church inscriptions that include widows as relatives – mainly moth-

66 Kalopissi-Verti, Dedicatory Inscriptions (cit. n. 45), pp. 89–90, no. 38; Metsane, Ἑχορήγια (cit. n. 53), p. 426, no. 37.
67 We thank C. Pennas for information on the burials found outside the church.
68 Metsane, Ἑχορήγια (cit. n. 53), p. 428, no. 42.
ers or sisters – of the primary sponsors substantially augments the number of widows that can be found in the village. In this case it is not always possible to determine whether these widows had a share in funding the construction or renovation of the church; it is probable that they were mentioned in the inscriptions in order to be recalled in commemorative services. The church of St George at Longanikos in Lakonia, dated 1374/75, was founded and painted through the collaboration and expenditure of two eminent members of the community: the tzaousios George Pelekases and his family, and the priest and notary (nomikos) Basil Kourteses, together with his mother, the nun Martha, his wife Anna, his children and his sister, the nun Magdalena (Fig. 6). The nun Martha, the mother of one of the co-founders, was certainly a widow who took monastic vows later in life or following the death of her husband. It is not clear, however, whether the nun sold or donated any property to support the church. Similarly, the church of St Marina at Mournes, Hagios Basileios in Crete (ca. 1300) in Crete was founded or renovated through the expenses and labor of two brothers with their families and their mother, Eudokia. Two additional inscriptions in Orthodox churches in Venetian-ruled Crete also present evidence of widows participating in family foundations. The church of St Pelagia at Plaka in Apano Biannos, Belvedere (1360) was renovated and painted through the labor of two brothers with their families and their mother, Eudokia. The church of the Virgin at Briomeni, Hierapetra (1401/02), was renovated through the expenses and labor of a monk and his mother, Paraskeve, and of his sister, the nun Sophrosyne.

Church inscriptions also note spiritual relationships between donors, some of these involving widows. The church of St George at Phatreliana in Koxares, Hagios Basileios in Crete (fourteenth/fifteenth century) was renovated and painted through the expenses and labor of a hieromonnkh Theodosios and his spiritual sister Anna with her children. In this case Anna is obviously a widow. The word used in the inscription to describe the relationship between the primary donor and the widow is συναδύψη. The same godparents probably baptized Theodosios and his spiritual sister Anna.

As the collected examples show, widows were deeply involved in founding or co-founding churches in Byzantium, both in urban and rural settings. Their ability to contribute financially to such enterprises reflects Byzantine inheritance laws, which guaranteed widows a certain degree

69 Gerstel/Talbot, Nuns (cit. n. 54), pp. 481–490.
72 Gerola, Monumenti, IV (cit. n. 50), pp. 574–575, no. 5: …καὶ τῆς μητρὸς αὐτῶν Εὐδώκιας.
73 Gerola, Monumenti, IV (cit. n. 50), p. 581, no. 6: …καὶ τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ Παρασκεβῆς. At least two graves have been located within the church. On the frescoes see S. Maderakes, Βυζαντινή ζωγραφική από την Κρήτη στα πρώτα χρόνια του 15ου αιώνα, in: Παπαργυρέα του ΣΤ’ Διεθνούς Κρητολογικού Συνεδρίου, II, Chania 1991, pp. 265–315, passim, pls. 93–98.
74 Gerola, Monumenti, IV (cit. n. 50), p. 490, no. 2: …διὰ συμβραχής ἔξοδου καὶ κόπου ύπομονῆς Θεοδοσίου τοῦ Σαγηρᾶ καὶ τῆς στηναις[λ.(ή)]ψης (αὐτοῦ Άνης καὶ τ(ά)υν η(τής)).
of financial independence following the death of their husbands. The relaxation of societal views on the alienation of dowry goods may have enabled many widows to participate more fully in church foundation in late Byzantium, a period that saw a dramatic increase in the construction of burial chapels. The same law codes frowned on re-marriage, thus keeping the dowry and inheritance intact and in the hands of the independent widow as guardian of her children. That Byzantine law protected the property rights of widows, whether laywomen with minor children, or widows whose children were grown, enabled these women – this relatively large percent of the population – to participate in founding churches, either with their families or with other members of the village. And, ironically, legal admonitions against re-marriage may have facilitated church foundation by keeping the primary estate intact and allowing women to alienate parts of the dowry which, in the case of re-marriage, would have been partially forfeited or assigned to support children from the first marriage. As caretakers of family resources and as the principal supplicants for the salvation of deceased parents, spouses, and children, it is easy to imagine why and how widows played such a large role in founding or contributing to religious institutions. It is not by chance that so many of the buildings founded by widows were also intended to house family tombs and to accommodate commemorative services.

Not every widow was a potential founder. A number of texts suggest that for many women, especially for those without children, widowhood meant financial and social hardship. And,

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75 On the role of female mourners see S. E. J. Gerstel, Painted Sources for Female Piety in Medieval Byzantium, in: Dumbarton Oaks Papers, 52, 1988, pp. 89–111.

indeed, as we have suggested, inscriptions mentioning widows form only a fraction of the overall number collected from village churches. The relatively small number of surviving inscriptions suggests that most widows were not in a financial position to found, co-found, or support even modest chapels. Yet even the small number of widow founders in the village opens a window into a part of the rural population that has remained, for the most part, invisible.

Illustration credits: Figs. 1, 4, 5: S. Gerstel. – Fig. 2: E. Barnes. – Fig. 6: S. Kalopissi-Verti. – Fig 3: Research Centre for the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art of the Academy of Athens, research program “Corpus of the Byzantine Wall-Paintings of Greece” (photographer: N. Kasseris, 2005).

1992, II. As many have noted, women – particularly unlettered women – were susceptible to fraud and clauses were inserted into contracts to protect those who were perceived to be most vulnerable. See H. Saradi-Mendelovici, A Contribution to the Study of the Byzantine Notarial Formulas: The Infirmitas Sexus of Women and the Sc. Velleianum, in: Byzantinische Zeitschrift, 83, 1990, pp. 72–90.