The rites associated with death, burial and commemoration represent a sphere of Byzantine Orthodox religion and culture where women played an exceptionally important role. Ample evidence for women establishing tombs for themselves and their family members, as well as the church buildings that housed them, survives in monastic typika, recorded epigrams, and inscriptions on extant works of art from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. Female tomb patrons are attested from across the late medieval world, in territories both under direct Byzantine political control and in regions where Byzantine Orthodox communities lived under foreign domination, as for example on the island of Rhodes, controlled by the Latin Hospitallers since ca. 1310, and in the western centre of Kastoria, under Ottoman control by the 1380s. Despite regional and temporal variations in their patterns of tomb patronage, these women of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries shared their Orthodox faith, spoke Greek, and were governed in their religious and cultural responses to death by a common religious heritage.

While literary sources frequently provide rich details about such female founders, boldly proclaiming the agency and varied motivations of these wives, widows, mothers and daughters, when we turn to their portrayal in surviving artistic compositions, women’s roles can often be difficult to pin down. A limited number of late Byzantine tombs survive where either the monument’s pictorial composition or its inscriptions securely identify a female subject represented in the artistic program as the tomb’s founder. This sphere of female patronage, the tomb and its architectural setting, has been little considered, a circumstance in Byzantine scholarship that the archaeological record has done much to encourage. Surviving tomb monuments from all pe-

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2 T. Gregory, Rhodes, in: ODB, III, pp. 1791–1792. The island of Rhodes was under the authority of the Byzantine emperor of Nicaea, John III Vatatzes, from 1232/3 to 1248, at which time control passed to the Genoese, who lost the island to the Hospitallers between 1306 and 1310. The Ottoman conquest was complete in 1522.

3 V. Kravari, Villes et villages de Macédoine occidentale, Paris 1989, pp. 49–56; T. Gregory/A. Wharton, Kastoria, in: ODB, II, pp. 1110–1111. Kastoria has a complex political history for the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. Between 1215 and 1252, the city was held by the Despotate of Epiros and intermittently by the independent Byzantine Empire of Thessalonike. In the period 1252/3–1334, Kastoria was controlled by the restored Byzantine Empire of the Palaiologoi. The King of Serbia held Kastoria from 1334 until its conquest by the Ottomans in the 1380s.
riods of Byzantine history are relatively scarce, as open-air cemeteries have been cleared away over the centuries, with tombstones and other grave markers removed for reuse in later building. For multimedia-tombs installed within churches, these monuments frequently have been reworked or removed to accommodate later Christian use of the space. In the case of Byzantine churches converted to serve as Ottoman mosques, tombs were also obscured or destroyed altogether in widespread efforts to remove figural decoration from the building’s interior.4

Despite the unevenness of the material record, several significant examples of tomb monuments established by female patrons survive from the late Byzantine centuries. The invaluable evidence provided by this visual material and what it reveals about the strategies employed by female patrons represents a little-known but vastly significant area of Byzantine artistic production. This paper will examine the patronage of tombs and the churches that housed them by women, especially elite laywomen, in the late Byzantine period. Tomb portraits will be a major focus of this discussion, for they provide important evidence for the donors who commissioned them. Several well-known tombs featuring female subjects who cannot be confirmed as tomb patrons, including those at the Chora monastery, will not be discussed in detail in this paper given the inconclusive evidence they provide.5 Specific questions will be considered in this essay: To what degree were women involved in the social and popular religious rites surrounding death, and how might this inform their patronage of tomb monuments? Which individuals appear in tomb portraits, and how is the patron identified? Is there evidence for groups of women establishing tombs in a single church? What artistic strategies were used to announce the special role of the female patron of a church building, founded specifically for family burial? Such acts of patronage reinforced the prominent roles played by laywomen in the daily lives of their families and larger communities as they related to death and commemoration. The tombs and churches they established exalted their status and extended women’s influence from the domestic sphere into the sacred space of the church.

Burial and commemoration have long been areas of research peripheral to the discipline of Byzantine studies,6 but more recently there has

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4 In Arta, Greece, the katholikon of the convent of St George once housed the complete tomb of Theodora (d. 1270), wife of the despot of Epiros, Michael II Doukas. The original monument was deconstructed at some point during centuries of the church’s Christian use. Currently, the front of Theodora’s sarcophagus, separated from its other sides and the larger tomb installation which it was once part of, has been re-employed in a later ciborium in the same church. In Constantinople, the two churches in the monastery of the Virgin Pammakaristos once housed tens of tombs from the Komnenian and Palaiologan periods, as recorded in the Trinity College Document of the sixteenth century (MS. o. 2. 36, Trinity College, Cambridge). At some time after 1586, when the monastery was taken over for use as an Ottoman mosque (Fethiye Camii), these numerous Byzantine tombs were cleared away from the buildings’ interiors, leaving few traces of their locations and decoration. For Arta: A. K. ORLANDOS, Ho taphos tes Hag. Theodoras, in: Archeion ton Byzantinon Mnemeion tes Hellados, 2, 1936, pp. 105–115; ALBANI, Female Burials (cit. n. 1), p. 114. For Constantinople: P. SCHREINER, Eine unbekannte Beschreibung der Pammakaristoskirche (Fethiye Camii) und weitere Texte zur Topographie Konstantinopels, in: Dumbarton Oaks Papers, 25, 1971, pp. 217–250; H. BELTING/C. MANGÖ/D. MOURIKI, The Mosaics and Frescoes of St. Mary Pammakaristos (Fethiye Camii) at Istanbul, Washington, DC 1978, cf. pp. 39–42.


been increasing interest in investigating the practices and rituals associated with death in Byzantine society. This recent scholarship has significantly increased our understanding of how death was regarded by the Byzantines, although we do not have a complete picture for all periods, or for all social levels. With it, we can now better situate women’s patronage of the artistic monuments under consideration here within the social, cultural and religious matrices in which they were created by women and regarded by their broader audiences.

**Women at Home and the Body’s Initial Preparation**

For the laity the first rites of death most often began in the family home, where preparations of the body for burial were initiated in the immediate hours, or in the day following death, if death occurred at home (or close to home) rather than at a great distance. Thus, in the customarily shared spaces of the Byzantine house, the traditional domain of women, family members and especially the women of the household would array the body in the reclining pose of sleep, with eyes and mouth closed and arms crossed over the chest. The disposition of the face and limbs was done as close to the time of death as possible, wherever it occurred, as this placed the body in a posture of rest before the effects of rigor mortis took hold. In popular religious belief, the closing of the deceased’s mouth prevented the soul from returning to the body, as well as the entrance of an evil spirit into the corpse through the mouth. After the proper arrangement of the limbs and head, the body was bathed in clean warm water. If a family’s means allowed it, the body could also be anointed with wine as well as fragrant oils and perfumes such as myrrh and aloe, a costly practice which also helped to mask the effects of decomposition.

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7 For female and male monastics, on the other hand, these activities were carried out in the monastery. The immediate preparation of the corpse of a layperson by individuals other than the family members, as in the burial societies once popular in Roman antiquity, is not widely attested for in the middle and late Byzantine centuries. Evidence for their existence survives in the charter for the confraternity of the icon of the Virgin of the convent of Naupaktos (Thebes), founded 1048, see J. Nesbitt / A. J. Witt, A Confraternity of the Comnenian Era, in: Byzantinische Zeitschrift, 68, 1975, pp. 360–384, and in the Book of the Eparch concerning the eleventh-century corporation of the tabulariai (notaries), see S. Vyronis, Byzantine and Eleventh Century Guilds, in: Dumbarton Oaks Papers, 17, 1963, pp. 287–314, cf. p. 298.


After the cleansing of the body, the corpse would be dressed in the newest and finest garments available, or alternatively, in the case of more modest burials, a long, winding sheet. The importance of selecting and preparing these burial garments and textiles, followed by the dressing or wrapping of the dead, situated these next activities centrally in the domain of women, the primary producers of cloth as well as garments for the family. White (to be understood most commonly as the color of undyed cloth), which symbolized the soul’s purity, was especially popular for burial garments or wrappings. For girls dying before marriage, as in their early adolescence (approximately twelve to fifteen years of age, the common age for girls to marry), their burial garments could include dresses in the traditional color of red for a bride; in death this signaled that the young girl was now married to Christ.

Thus, in the setting of the family home, these initial and intimate preparations of the corpse by the family launched women’s entry into the series of ritual actions leading to the final interment of the body. Only after burial would family members and friends return to the home for a common meal, ending the ritual once again in the private sphere.

LAMENTING THE DEAD: WOMEN IN PUBLIC PROCESSION

After the body’s preparations, the arrayed and dressed corpse was next carried in public procession through the village, town or city streets to the church for celebration of the funeral. The role of female mourners in the public ritual of the funeral procession has been addressed by Margaret Alexiou in her broad study of mourning from antiquity to the modern period, and more recently by Nicholas Constas, who focuses on Byzantine practices in particular. Their findings not only emphasize the important role played by women in these acts of mourning, but they also attest that mourning female family members, as well as professional female mourners (affordable only to households of significant means), were frequently reproached by church authorities for their undignified behavior in the public sphere. Critics maligned their excessive wailing, tearing of hair and clothing, and personal mutilation such as scratching and chest-beating, symbolizing

the shared grief of family and friends. Alexiou has connected these immodest acts by some Byzantine women with the long tradition of mourning rituals from the pagan past, recounted in ancient Greek drama, which was the cornerstone of Byzantine literature and education.¹⁵

Upon arriving at the church, the unregulated expression of mourning concluded and the official rite of the funeral began under the leadership of the male clergy. Through patronage of a church, women continued over time to play a critical role in the official sphere of Byzantine death. These acts of foundation could include a church’s initial foundation, endowments associated with the funeral and continued commemoration, or the commissioning of a tomb monument within the building, on its façade, or in the church’s open-air cemetery. This last area of patronage – the tomb – provided female donors with a unique opportunity to record visually as well as in written inscriptions their active participation in Byzantine religious and family life.

WHO’S WHO IN TOMB PORTRAITS

The most prestigious tombs were located inside the church building or on its façade and featured large-scale painted programs, including most often a portrait. Portraiture was the primary visual means for Byzantine founders, both men and women, to announce their role as sponsors of an artistic project or building. In general the artistic repertoire of Byzantine portraits was rather limited; we can deduce that this was preferred by Byzantine audiences sensitive to subtle differences in detail and gesture. Tomb portraits do not always make clear the roles played by each individual represented, including the tomb’s patron. Among the cast of characters to be found are the dedicatee(s) of the tomb, the person/s honoured by the tomb, with whose burial the tomb was associated. The dedicatee could be either living or deceased at the time of the construction. Also represented in tomb portraits were the patron(s), of special interest to us here, and in larger group portraits, additional family members.¹⁶ But not all of these individuals are represented in every tomb portrait, and the patron’s identity in particular often proves elusive.

THE SINGLE DEDICATEE WITH DIVINE FIGURES

Consistently represented is the dedicatee, who often may be the only non-saintly figure represented in the portrait. In cases where the dedicatee had died before a tomb was founded in her memory, she was then frequently portrayed in strict frontal view, standing with arms crossed over her chest, mirroring the pose of the arrayed corpse. This figure type was to be unequivocally identified as the deceased by the Byzantine viewer. A prime example is the fourteenth-century tomb fresco depicting Maria Synadene, located on the west façade of the Anastasis church in the monastery of Christ the Savior (Figs. 1, 2); the church’s exterior walls served as the location for at least three tombs of Synadene family members living in the provincial center of Berroia, Greece. Maria, who is shown standing frontally with crossed arms, is arrayed in a red dress with

¹⁶ For example, Tomb C and Tomb E in the south funerary chapel of the church of Christ in Chora, Constantinople, are decorated with frescoed portraits featuring large family groups, with four persons appearing in Tomb C and eight individuals in Tomb, Underwood, Kariye Djamii (cit. n. 3), pp. 272–276 (Tomb C) and pp. 280–288 (Tomb E).
white mantle, likely signaling that she died before marriage. She stands on the viewer’s right hand side and looks out from the arched composition. The brief painted inscription incorporated within this image, to the right and left of her face, records her name and death date of 1326. At the composition’s center, the Virgin stands in a three-quarter pose extending both arms towards the deceased in a gesture of presentation. At the same time the Virgin also turns her head backwards towards Christ, who stands on the composition’s left side. By doing so, the Virgin recommends the deceased to Christ, interceding on her behalf.

The action in this unfolding short story moves from right to left, from the passive to the active, with the two divine figures, Mary and Christ, discussing the fate of the deceased laywoman. The passivity of the female subject, who is identified as already having died by her posture, argues that Maria Synadene is not the patron of her own tomb. In this case, the founder is not represented in the portrait. Her or his anonymity today may not have been intended originally, and additional inscriptions or painted portraits once located elsewhere on the church exterior, which is now badly effaced, likely clarified who commissioned this laywoman’s tomb.

When the dedicatee is represented alone in a gesture of prayer, as if still alive, it is possible – if not likely – that the tomb’s construction predated her death. The tomb of a presently unidentified laywoman in the lower chapel of the Myrelaion church in Constantinople, a late Byzantine monastic foundation, offers a well-pre-

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17 *The servant of the Lord, Maria Synadene, fell asleep in the month of May, in the year 1326* (tr. by the author)
served example of this portrait type (Figs. 3, 4). The overall design of the tomb is a trompe l’oeil niche with rounded arch supported by delicate colonnettes, and a pseudo-sarcophagus below resting on the floor. Appearing within the frescoed arch at left is the kneeling dedicatee, who turns in three-quarter view towards the Virgin and Child, standing on the right. The female subject wears a richly-dyed red dress and white mantle with transparent veil, again suggestive of the burial garments symbolizing marriage to Christ in death. In such single-figure compositions as this, where there is only one human subject (joined by one or more divine figures), it is unclear if the female dedicatee is the patron of the frescoed tomb, or if a family member established the monument on her behalf.

19 C. Striker, Myrelaion (Bodrum Camii) in Istanbul, Princeton, NJ 1981, cf. pp. 3–5, 30–31. Although the identity of this laywoman in the frescoed tomb is unknown, the burial of the nun Eugenia, formerly Euphrosyne Doukaina Balcane, is attested at the Myrelaion or in its environs by a partial funerary inscription decorating a marble slab found in excavations at the site. The partial inscription has been dated to the fourteenth century, based on its epigraphy. W. H. Buckler, Appendix. Three Inscriptions, in: D. Talbot Rice, Excavations at the Bodrum Camii, 1930, in: Byzantion, 8, 1933, pp. 151–176, cf. pp. 175–176, fig. 12 (2).

20 In the late Byzantine period, monolithic stone sarcophagi with closure lids were rarely employed, as had been the prevailing practice for elite burials in the Roman and late antique periods. In Palaiologan niche burials, the tendency instead was to form a symbolic casket from multiple stone panels, a pseudo-sarcophagus; such a pseudo-sarcophagus could also incorporate a section of the church wall to form its back panel. The result was a casket that could not contain the decomposing corpse, as its component parts were not sealed. Thus the pseudo-sarcophagus was a purely decorative form designed to highlight the funerary function of the tomb monument. The body of the deceased was laid to rest elsewhere, for example, beneath the church floor within or before the tomb niche. T. Pazaras, Anaglyphes sarkophagoi kai epitaphies plakes tes meses kai hysteres byzantines periodou sten Hellada, Athens 1988, cf. pp. 58–81, 168–171.
Despite this ambiguity in the iconography of some tombs, there is significant evidence that Byzantine women commonly established tombs for themselves, and that setting up one’s own tomb before death was a regular practice in Byzantium in all periods. A ready example is offered by the patron Maria Palaiologina, a nun who is thought to have been a member of Theodora Palaiologina’s convent of the Lips in Constantinople. The epigram commissioned by the nun Maria for her own tomb was inscribed on a sculpted relief panel, now in fragmentary condition in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum (Fig. 5). The funerary poem is written in the first person, in the voice of the patron Maria,21 and confirms that she established her own decorated tomb before death.

The elegant, crisp letters of the poem appear at the panel’s center. At left is a partial figure who turns in a three-quarter pose towards the inscribed text. This individual, based on details of her monastic dress, has been convincingly identified by Titos Papamastorakis as the nun Maria, the patron of the epigram and the tomb. Maria strikes an active pose— one of address and engagement— rather than appearing with arms crossed over her chest, in a frontal view. On the panel’s right side, now lost, was most likely a figure of the Virgin, to whom Maria addresses her inscribed prayer. The inclusion of an intercessory prayer on one’s own behalf or for a deceased family member is common in late Byzantine tombs. These written assertions of patronage go hand in hand with visual manifestation of patronage: the three-quarter pose and intercessory gestures that frequently characterize donor figures in these tomb portraits. In monuments (now) lacking a patron’s inscription, such as the Myrelaion tomb, the three-quarter posture with gesturing hands can suggest that a female dedicatee is also the patron of her own tomb.

**Tomb Groups**

Most Byzantine tombs were not set up as isolated monuments, but instead were part of a larger constellation of tombs fitted together vertically into existing wall spaces within a vibrantly painted church interior, or situated horizontally in outdoor cemeteries encircling

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as the spiritual bridal chamber. Clothe us in the garment of divine marriage, and place us in the ranks of your <fellow> banqueters. I, the nun Maria, faithful sebaste and daughter of a Palaiologos, write these words. (tr. by A.-M. Talbot)
the church building. The former was the case at the Myrelaion (Figs. 3, 4). The church’s middle Byzantine foundations were converted in the Palaiologan period into a functioning lower chapel whose walls were lined with tombs similar in form and decoration to the laywoman’s tomb discussed above. Regrettably the painted decoration of most of these monuments was lost by the time of the church’s excavation, with the example of the laywoman’s tomb being a remarkable survival. Therefore the context for this young woman’s burial was as one in a larger group of family or related tombs; an additional portrait or inscription naming the donor of the laywoman’s tomb may have been placed in close proximity to it. Yet another example of this trend towards constellations of related tombs are the Synadene family burials on the façade of Berroia’s Anastasis church (Figs. 1, 2). In both of these cases the much greater burial ensemble has now been lost, thereby depriving us of the many details about female patronage.

**Tomb Groups and the Female Donor:**

**Kastoria’s Church of the Taxiarches**

One of the most extensive tomb groups from late Byzantium survives in Kastoria’s church of the Taxiarches, a foundation that may have served a local parish or a small urban monastery. The ensemble of six tombs on the building’s south façade features three monuments made either by or for women, including both girls and adult laywomen (Fig. 6). In one of the six tombs a female donor can be conclusively identified: the laywoman Anna, who founded a niche tomb in honor of her deceased daughter (her name is now lost) (Figs. 7, 8). This monument, a recessed niche tomb, is the third tomb from the east (labelled “C” on the elevation drawing) (Fig. 6). Tombs dedicated in the memory of two additional laywomen also decorate the south façade: the tomb for Euphrosyne who died in 1436, according to the inscription of her portrait (labelled “F”), and the tomb of another laywoman whose identity is now lost (labelled “D”) (Fig. 6).

Before examining these painted compositions in detail, let us survey the fascinating process by which this exterior space was taken over by burial monuments. It is instructive of how patrons, including female patrons, negotiated with the church authority – whether the church’s clergy or a 

**ktetor** (subsequent restorer) or the descendants of the 

**ktetor** – in order to make room for family tombs in a setting with little available real estate. The co-opting of the exterior wall for family monuments was not part of the building’s original ninth- or tenth-century design when a simple blind arcade extended across the nave’s south wall; the south wall of the adjacent narthex was left undecorated. By the late 1430s, the full south façade

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23. Of the three remaining tombs, one was destroyed by the cutting through of a later door into the nave (Tomb C, Phase I). The last two monuments of the six commemorate boys: the adolescent boy, Manuel Moustaki, son of Michael, who died in 1439 (details recorded in the accompanying inscription) (Tomb E, Phase II); and a now unidentified boy whose tomb was commissioned by the adult male represented in his portrait, possibly his father (Tomb A, Phase I), A. Orlandos, Ta byzantina mnemeia tes Kastorias, in: Archeion ton Byzantinon Mnemeion tes Hellados, 4, 1938, pp. 61–106; S. Kalopissi-Verti, Dedicatory Inscriptions and Donor Portraits in the Thirteenth-Century Churches of Greece (ÖAW, Denkschriften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, 226), Vienna 1992, pp. 94–96, no. B1; N. K. Moutsopoulos, Ekklesies tes Kastorias 9ος–11ος αιώνας, Thessaloniki 1992, pp. 113–201.
including the nave and narthex was converted for tomb display. This can be deduced from the layering of fresco additions, with the three eastern tombs added first (Phase I, eastern end, terminus ante quem: 1436), followed next by the three western tombs, two of which are dated 1436 and 1439 (Phase II, western end, ca. 1436–1439).

Belonging to Phase I, the tomb Anna established for her young daughter is a rare example of the portrait type which clearly identifies the tomb patron (Figs. 6–8). In this composition, a deceased figure in frontal view with crossed arms (the child) is paired with the donor (the mother) who raises her arms to present the deceased to a divine figure. This same portrait type was employed by fathers as well as mothers, as in a layman’s tomb for his son (Tomb A), also on the Taxiarches south façade (Fig. 6).

Prior to the redesign of the south exterior to accommodate fifteenth-century tombs, the church underwent a series of additions and restorations during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. On the exterior, in the thirteenth century a fresco program was added to the western narthex façade, and this included the portrait of Michael Asen II, king of Bulgaria (r. 1246–1256/7), with his mother Irene, daughter of the despot of Epiros, Theodore Angelos Komnenos, and the wife of Ivan Asen II (r. 1218–1241). The two figures of Michael and Irene flank a monumental image of the archangel Michael with raised sword. Kalopissi-Verti suggests that this decoration served as a thank-offering for the 1255 Bulgarian conquest of territories in Thrace and Macedonia; these territories perhaps included Kastoria, formerly under the control of the despot of Epiros. In the church interior, an inscription in the nave over the central door records that the nave’s frescoes were restored in 1359/60 on the occasion of the death of the hieromonachos, Daniel. This second campaign of nave decoration is recorded during the reign of the Serbian king (1356–1371) and ruler of Kastoria (1356–1359), Symeon Palaiologos Uroš, with his son John Doukas Palaiologos Uroš. Thus many donors over the centuries contributed to the decoration and support of this single church, Kalopissi-Verti, Dedicatory Inscriptions (cit. n. 23), pp. 94–96 (no. B1); Orlandos, Ta byzantina mnemeia tes Kastorias (cit. n. 23), pp. 97–99.
In Anna’s monument for her daughter, the painted composition takes the form of a tall, narrow niche, formed from the original ninth- or tenth-century blind arcade. Painted columns with Corinthian capitals support a rounded arch above filled with scrolling vines (Figs. 7, 8). Within the niche on the back wall, the laywoman Anna stands at right facing forward. Her arms are raised in a gesture of presentation towards her daughter at left. The accompanying inscription reads: *O Lord, remember me your servant Anna by the side of <my> young girl.* Christ, addressed by the mother’s prayer, is pictured above in the arch tympanum, where he is surrounded by a highly illusionistic blue and white mandorla. Christ reaches down with both hands to bless the mother Anna and her daughter, the dedicatee of the tomb. The child is clearly represented as deceased with arms crossed over her chest and facing frontally. The inscription above the child’s head records a second prayer: *O Lord, remember the daughter of your servant Anna.*

It is noteworthy that the mother and tomb patron does not make mention of her child’s name, but instead refers to her as *the daughter of Anna,* emphasizing the mother’s role in determining the child’s identity. Anna also does not refer to her spouse, or to the child’s father. Rather her painted prayers would recollect ongoing prayers to be spoken in memory of her daughter, an act of private devotion encouraged in the Byzantine popular religious practice. The very prominent display of this image on the façade of the Taxiarches church publicly announced Anna’s pious acts and maternal care. For viewers of the tomb, this painted portrait presented Anna as a paradigm of familial piety, and a model for other mothers in the community.

The outdoor location, while exposing the tomb frescoes to damage from the elements (as well as from modern vandals), gave the young girl’s tomb a prominence of place in the public sphere and an ongoing accessibility that tombs inside the church could not match. The topography of medieval Kastoria and the church’s situation in a fourteenth-century network of streets is difficult to reconstruct, but certainly the exterior location of this tomb and the five others on the south façade would have been highly visible to passers-by. This audience would have included participants in contemporary as well as future funeral processions that conveyed the dead from home to the church, as on the day of the daughter’s funeral.

The other two Kastoria tombs memorializing women represent the single dedicatee praying before a figure of Christ (Tomb E) or the Virgin and Christ child (Tomb F) (Fig. 6). The gestures of these two women do not explicitly identify them as patrons, but this possibility certainly exists (as discussed above).

The fact that half the tombs on this church façade feature female dedicatees, as well as a female patron, gives women a prominence of place that is not usually evidenced in the surviving artistic programs of late Byzantine church buildings. It cannot be confirmed if all the individuals represented here were members of the same family, but it is indeed possible that they were related to one another. To judge from the evidence provided by monastic *typika,* the burial and commemoration of multiple family members in the same foundation could be beneficial (it is unconfirmed if the Taxiarches served an urban monastery). With greater involvement and therefore oversight, a family could ensure the regular and required performance of commemorative rites for its members as well as the upkeep of relatives’ tombs. In churches where women were the major founders of tomb monuments and endowments for commemoration, such portraits as those seen on the Taxiarches façade would have asserted the authority of female patrons, serving as a reminder of the community’s responsibility to honor them.

While only rarely do tomb portraits explicitly identify a patron, as in the case of Anna’s tomb for her deceased daughter in Kastoria, dedicatory portraits recording a church’s foundation or its renovation by a later sponsor (a ktetor) commonly identify the donor by visual cues, as well as in written inscriptions. In these widespread examples, the donor holds before her/him or offers forward an architectural model of the sponsored building, an artistic convention popular in Greco-Roman antiquity. This portrait type has a long pedigree in Byzantine tradition, with early examples going back to the fourth century, and its popularity extending far both in the medieval East and West. This composition, which makes clear in visual terms the founder who was to be credited with the church’s construction (or renovation), provides a generalized image of the building’s architectural features and decoration.

A superb example in this tradition is the fifteenth-century dedication image representing a laywoman (her name is now lost) with her husband Nicholas Bardoane, who is described as pansebastos and who holds the title logothetes (Fig. 9). The couple’s portrait commemorates the founding of the church of Hagios Nicholas, located in the interior of the island of Rhodes, Greece, at the settlement of Phountoukli (now Dimyila). It is unknown if Hagios Nicholas served as a parish church, as a private family chapel on Bardoane lands, or whether it was part of a rural monastery.27

The dedication portrait is painted in fresco on the walls of the church’s west exedra, beside the western door into the nave. A framed dedicatory inscription flanking the couple’s portrait, while fragmentary, makes clear that Hagios Nicholas was established on the occasion of a family member’s death.28 As the church’s original wall decoration includes a tomb commemorating the couple’s three deceased offspring, Maria, George and a second son (whose name is now lost), it can be assumed that the church was founded after the death of one or all of the couple’s offspring (Fig. 10). The children’s tomb portrait, in which all three figures are shown frontally with arms crossed over their chests, faces their parent’s dedication image in the west exedra,


28 The all-holy and divine naos …of God …was built …after the death of …<by> the pansebastos Nikolaos and <by his> wife … (tr. by the author). Christophoraki, Choregikes martyries stous naous tes mesaionikes Rodou (cit. n. 27), p. 463 no. 107.

29 See for example: the dedication portrait of Michael Katzouroubes with his wife (1317) in the church of St Demetrianus, Dali, Cyprus; the portrait of Nikephoros Magistros with his wife (fourteenth century) in the church of the
thus forming a pendant image to it. As has been seen in the majority of compositions discussed thus far, illusionistic painted architecture is employed in both portrait compositions to suggest elaborate architectonic frames.

In the parents’ dedicatory image, the couple together holds an architectural model of the elegant tetraconch church with single dome, and offers it symbolically to the bust figure of Christ above them. In Byzantine portraits recording a church foundation, when laywomen appear with their husbands they are rarely represented holding such architectural models.³⁹ Remarkably at least two other examples of women holding a church model, paired with their husbands, survive in the Byzantine churches on Rhodes, albeit from more modest foundations.³⁰ Thus, in this local community the unusual portrait type seems to have been popular.

The more common practice, whereby the husband alone holds the church model, reflected a wife’s economic and legal inequality in relationship to her husband. As compared with the circumstances of laywomen, widows who founded churches operated under a very different set of economic and legal circumstances. As a result, a widow acted with relative independence and economic autonomy.”³¹ This privileged status of the widow in Byzantium is given visual form in Theodora Synadene’s dedication portrait, with her daughter, decorating the Lincoln College Typikon (Fig. 11). In the manuscript painting, the widow and nun Theodora carries a model of her family’s burial church, which she founded anew in the fourteenth century, and she approaches the Virgin on the composition’s left side to offer the church to her.³² The female founder of the church of Hagios Nicholas falls somewhere in between these two poles, for she

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91 Rhodes, church of Hagios Nicholas, dedicatory portrait of a laywoman and her husband Nicholas Bardoane

³⁰ See the portrait of Irene and Constantine holding the church model (1372/3) in the church of the Sts Theodore at Archangelou, Rhodes; and the portrait of Irene and George holding a church model, with their son (ca. 1428) in the church of St John the Baptist at Archangelou, Rhodes, I. Bitha, Endymatologikes martyries stis toichographies tes mesaiionikes Rodou, in: Rodos. 2. 400 chronia (cit. n. 27), pp. 429–448, fig. 1.6 (St John the Baptist, Archangelou), fig. 2.12 (Sts Theodores, Archangelou).


is neither the subservient wife nor the independent widow.

In the dedication portrait at Hagios Nicholas, besides the wife’s presentation of the church model with her husband, what is also remarkable is the fact that the laywoman alone receives a blessing from Christ above. Christ places his left hand on the female patron’s head and his right hand on the church model. In middle and late Byzantine church dedications, it is uncommon for divine figures to intimately touch a supplicant, such as the church donor. In this portrait, Christ’s blessing hand on the laywoman’s head is the visual means by which this female patron takes precedence over her husband and highlights her status as the donor favored by Christ.

To date, we have no further evidence concerning the identity of this laywoman or her family members, other than that recorded in the decoration and inscriptions of their church, making it difficult to consider this unusual case of a lay female founder in the fuller social and economic contexts of late medieval Rhodes. By comparison, for late Byzantine Constantinople there are several wealthy aristocratic female patrons, all widows, whose church foundations are well documented, both archaeologically and in written sources. These monasteries, as one of their central functions, were first established in the Palaiologan period, or they were refurbished then, to serve as the location of family burials. The most famous examples include the tenth-century Lips monastery, restored by Theodora-Eugenia Palaiologina ca. 1281–1303, the widow of emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos; the now-destroyed convent of the Virgin of Certain Hope, established by Theodora Synadene ca. 1300 and documented in the foundress’s surviving typikon; and the late eleventh- or early twelfth-century monastery of the Virgin Pammakaristos, expanded by Maria-Martha Glabas Tarchaneiotes after 1304. The wealth and status of these women and the prestige of their foundations, located in the imperial capital, provides a picture of the wealthiest female patrons, all of whom are widows and monastics.

By comparison, the female donor of Hagios Nicholas on Rhodes and its tomb for the patron’s three children attests to privileged female founders who are married laywomen and whose spouses were alive at the time of benefaction. She is represented in the dedication image

33 A paradigmatic example is the dedication portrait of the restorer Theodore Metochites, presenting a church model to the enthroned Christ in the church of Christ in Chora, Constantinople, ca. 1316–1321, Underwood, Kariye Djamii (cit. n. 5), pp. 42–43.
standing with her spouse and taking equal hold of the church model. The wife’s privileged position over her husband in this act of donation is signaled by the gesture of a third party, Christ. At the church of the Taxiarches in Kastoria, the patron Anna, also a laywoman, founds a tomb for her daughter. She is represented alone in this act of dedication, without the figure of her husband (the father of her child) or any mention of him in the portrait’s surviving inscriptions, and thus it cannot be known with certainty that he is surviving. These female donors each had the economic means to commission a tomb monument, and were not part of a community of nuns removed from the life of the secular community and domestic life. Rather, their benefactions of tombs and churches for burial reinforced the very prominent role women played in the daily life of the family. This included the raising of children in the family home until marriage in adolescence, spinning and weaving to produce family clothing, and the burial of a child after an untimely death. For the laity, the strong connections between the family home and proper burial allowed women to take on pivotal roles in this sphere of religious life. In turn, female donors with means could establish lasting monuments to the dead that exalted their social roles and extended their influence from the domestic sphere into the sacred space of the church.

Illustration credits: Figs. 1, 2, 5–10: S. Brooks. – Figs. 3, 4: after Striker, Myrelaion (cit. n. 19), Figs. 62, 32. – Fig. 11: Lincoln College, Oxford.