NOTES ON FEMALE PIETY IN HERMITAGES OF THE OHRID AND PRESPA REGION: THE CASE OF MALI GRAD
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When we discuss women donors in Byzantium, we must take into consideration their economic power. Byzantine society privileged males; consequently women were economically subordinated either to their fathers or to their husbands, who had almost exclusive rights regarding the management of their property. Nevertheless, women were allowed to manage their dowries and, in some cases, almost all their possessions, which gave them certain economic autonomy. Religious piety and patronage practised by empresses, aristocratic women, nuns, etc. were women’s greatest vocation and a public manifestation of devotional zeal. Consequently, charitable work (help for the poor, prisoners, orphans, hospitals), the founding of monasteries, and financial support for the decoration or building of churches, testify to the economic power of women.


antique provinces, even after the fall of Constantinople. All ktitoral inscriptions still legible and all donor portraits still preserved in these monuments mention or depict monks, except for the hermitage of Mali Grad in what is today Albania. In this church we find proof of female patronage, which is the subject of this chapter, and which we hope will help us comprehend the status of female founders in the Byzantine province of Macedonia.

Situated on a small island on the Lake of Great Prespa, facing the village known today as Liqenasi but from medieval sources as Pustec, the hermitage (Fig. 1) is found in a natural cave on the south side of the island, where monks’ cells are still recognizable in the rock. The church that served as a kyriakon for the brothers is a single-aisled church covered with a barrel vault.

Two inscriptions found in the interior of the church give us information on the date and the name of the donors. The second, later inscription is of less interest for our topic, and informs us that the monument was decorated through the generous donation of the kaisar Novakos in 1368 / 69. The portraits of the

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6 The village Pustec is mentioned in 1568 in Turkish census books. That year the village had 77 households. V. Jovanovski, Naselbite vo Prespa, mestopoložba, istoriski razvoj i minato, Skopje 2005, pp. 492, 495.

7 It reads in English translation: This holy and very venerable church of our very holy Lady and Mother of God, was built from the foundations with the work and labour and was decorated by the master himself, the very happy kaisar Novakos, under the hegoumenos Iona, the monk. In the reign of the high kral Vukašin and the holy archbishopric Prima Justiniana, year 1368 / 69. Djurić, Mali Grad (cit. n. 4), p. 32 (n. 1 with bibliography).

8 On the question of the “portrait” in Byzantine art see G. Dagron, L’image de culte et le portrait, in: Guillou, Byzance et les images (cit. n. 5), pp. 121–150; Bernardini, Les donateurs (cit. n. 5), p. 121; Spaharakis, The Portrait (cit. n. 5), pp. 1–6 (with bibliography).
1: Mali Grad, church of the Virgin, west façade
On the hierarchy of donor portraits see Ktitors’ effigies occupy mostly the interior of the churches. In Cappadocia, for example, they are frequently found on the south and on the north walls of the nave, and sometimes funerary portraits are to be found in annexed chapels, Bernardini, Les donateurs (cit. n. 3), p. 119. Nevertheless, some examples from different periods testify to the practice of painting portraits on church exteriors: west façade of Kurbinovo (1391), C. Grozdanov, O. B. Ferjančić, Sevastokratari u srpskom carstvu, in: Zbornik Filozofskog Fakulteta, 11.1, 1970, p. 64; I. Djordjević, Zidno slikarstvo srpske vlastele u doba Nemnjića, Belgrade 1994, p. 24; Djurić, Mali Grad (cit. n. 4), p. 49; Velmans, Le portrait (cit. n. 5), p. 125. Ktitors’ effigies occupy mostly the interior of the churches. In Cappadocia, for example, they are frequently found on the south and on the north walls of the nave, and sometimes funerary portraits are to be found in annexed chapels, Bernardini, Les donateurs (cit. n. 3), p. 119. Nevertheless, some examples from different periods testify to the practice of painting portraits on church exteriors: west façade of Kurbinovo (1391), C. Grozdanov, O. B. Ferjančić, Sevastokratari u srpskom carstvu, in: Zbornik Filozofskog Fakulteta, 11.1, 1970, p. 64; I. Djordjević, Zidno slikarstvo srpske vlastele u doba Nemnjića, Belgrade 1994, p. 24; Djurić, Mali Grad (cit. n. 4), p. 49; Velmans, Le portrait (cit. n. 5), p. 125.

- On the diverse types of the Virgin in donor compositions see Tatić-Djurić, L’iconographie de la donation (cit. n. 5), pp. 311–315.
- The transfer of title from husband to wife was a common practice in Byzantium. See for example: protostrator Theodore Tzimiskes and his wife protostratorissa Maria at Kokkine Ekklesia, Bouglareli (1239–96), Kalopissi-Verti, Dedicatory Inscriptions (cit. n. 5), pp. 98–99, fig. 87; despotissa Maria, who was the wife of the despot Jovan Oliver in the Oliver parekklesion at Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid (1347–1500), Grozdanov, O. B. Ferjančić, Sevastokratari u srpskom carstvu, in: Zbornik Filozofskog Fakulteta, 11.1, 1970, p. 64; I. Djordjević, Zidno slikarstvo srpske vlastele u doba Nemnjića, Belgrade 1994, p. 24; Djurić, Mali Grad (cit. n. 4), p. 49; Velmans, Le portrait (cit. n. 5), p. 125. Ktitors’ effigies occupy mostly the interior of the churches. In Cappadocia, for example, they are frequently found on the south and on the north walls of the nave, and sometimes funerary portraits are to be found in annexed chapels, Bernardini, Les donateurs (cit. n. 3), p. 119. Nevertheless, some examples from different periods testify to the practice of painting portraits on church exteriors: west façade of Kurbinovo (1391), C. Grozdanov, O. B. Ferjančić, Sevastokratari u srpskom carstvu, in: Zbornik Filozofskog Fakulteta, 11.1, 1970, p. 64; I. Djordjević, Zidno slikarstvo srpske vlastele u doba Nemnjića, Belgrade 1994, p. 24; Djurić, Mali Grad (cit. n. 4), p. 49; Velmans, Le portrait (cit. n. 5), p. 125.

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only one to be represented with a nimbus. He is shown receiving a double benediction, once from Christ above, and a second time from the Infant Christ in the arms of the Virgin; he is the only member of the family to be cited in the dedicatory inscription inside the church. It is obvious that kaisar Novakos is the main donor, and that the other members of the family are of lesser rank. In this case, the husband is the principal financer of the church, and his wife is not mentioned as an individual ktitor but as his companion, a situation which was very common in Byzantine and Serbian society.

One comparable representation, among many others, is the very famous mosaic from Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (south gallery), representing John II Komnenos (1118–1143) and Irene on either side of the Virgin. Here, the Virgin is slightly larger than John and Irene. The emperor to the right of the Virgin is the only one of the pair to be blessed by the Infant Christ, shown in his mother’s arms, T. Whittemore, The Mosaics of Hagia Sophia at Istanbul, Third Preliminary Report, Work Done in 1935–38: The Imperial Portraits of the South Gallery, Boston 1942, pl. XX. In Hagia Sophia all participants are frontal, whereas in Mali Grad, Christ is turned toward kaisar Novakos in an attitude of benevolence. Couples or families flanking the Virgin are often found in donor compositions, see for example M. G. Parani, Reconstructing the Reality of Images: Byzantine Material Culture and Religious Iconography (11th–15th centuries), Leiden/Boston 2003, p. 326 no. 5, p. 327 no. 27, p. 330 no. 30, p. 335 no. 55, p. 337 no. 61. The same is noted in the church of the Ascension in Leskovec (1461/62), where the portraits of a man named Tode and his wife Vulka are painted inside the church, whereby the dedicatory inscription mentions only the men, G. Subotić, Ohridska slikarska škola od XV vek, Ohrid 1980, p. 95, figs. 74, 77, ills. 67–68.

For some representations in the monumental art of the capital see Whittemore, The Mosaics of Hagia Sophia (cit.
Of greater importance for this paper is the inscription found on the band under the apse conch (Fig. 4), which is a very common location for donor inscriptions. The inscription (Fig. 5) is written in a standard supplication form and reads: Δέησης του δουλου του Θ(εο)υ Μπώεικου και Ευδώκειας τῆς εὐγενὲστάτης καὶ τὸν τέκνὸν αὐτῆς. Αὐτωμαριθέν τὸ βίμα παρ ἀυτ(ῶν). Επ(οι)ς σωγ. – Prayer (supplication) of the servant of God Bojko and the most noble Eudokia and her child. The sanctuary was decorated by them in (6853) 1344/45. It is difficult to establish from this inscription the relationship between Bojko and Eudokia. In numerous inscriptions we find the...

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n. 15), pls. III, XX. For some Serbian examples see DJORDJEVIĆ, Zidno slikarstvo (cit. n. 9), ills. 4, 5, 7–10, 17, 19, 21–24, 19, 93. For Bulgarian examples: GRABAR, La peinture (cit. n. 12), pl. XXI, and for some fifteenth-century examples from Ohrid, SUBOTIĆ, Ohridska slikarska škola (cit. n. 16), figs. 66, 69, 77, 92. See also the example from Kokkine Ekklesia, Boulgareli (1259–96), KALOPISSI-VERTI, Dedicatory Inscriptions (cit. n. 5), fig. 87, etc.

18 For example, in the churches of Kalithea, the donor inscriptions are written above the apse in St Antony, Palaiochora (late fifteenth century), St George, Dourianika, (1275), St Polyeppos, Phoinikies (thirteenth century), M. CHATZIDAKIS/I. BITHA, Corpus of the Byzantine Wall-Paintings of Greece: The Island of Kythera, Athens 2003, fig. 4 p. 90; fig. 4 p. 136; fig. 4 p. 288. The same is noted in Karşı kilise, Cappadocia (1212), C. JOLIVET-LEVY, Images et espace cultuel à Byzance: L'exemple d'une église de Cappadoce (Karşı kilise, 1212), in: M. KAPLAN (ed.), Le sacré et son inscription dans l'espace à Byzance et en Occident: études comparées sous la direction de Michel Kaplan, Paris 2001, p. 167, pl. VI; in Platsa, D. MOURIKI, Les fresques de l'église de Saint-Nicolas à Platsa du Magne, Athens 1975, p. 17, etc.

19 On the diverse types of donor inscriptions see KALOPISSI-VERTI, Dedicatory Inscriptions (cit. n. 5), p. 25; BERNARDINI, Les donateurs (cit. n. 5), pp. 129, 132, 139.

20 Djurić, Mali Grad (cit. n. 4), p. 32, n. 2 with bibliography.
name of the man, for example “Dimitrios”, followed by “and his wife” (καὶ τῆς συμβίου αὐτοῦ), but sometimes without even mentioning the name of the woman.23


22 De Jerphanion, Les églises rupestres (cit. n. 21), p. 98. In the church of the Holy Trinity (1244/45), Kranidion in Peloponnese, we find the citation … Μανου(ῆλ) Μουρμουρᾶ καὶ Θεοδώ(ῆς) τῆς αὐτοῦ γαμετ(ῆς) …, Feissel/Philippidis-Braat, Inventaires (cit. n. 21), p. 311.

23 See for example the inscription from the Holy Apostles (1547) and the Virgin Eleousa (1551), both from Kastoria, E. Drakopoulou, Inscriptions de la ville de Kastoria (Macédoine) du XVIe au XVIIIe siècle: tradition et adaptation,
In our inscription, Eudokia follows the name of Bojko without any precision. Further information on their relationship is the fact that the child is not cited as being theirs, but as hers alone. Two hypotheses are possible: either Bojko and Eudokia were not spouses and they combined their donations to the Church, or they had a relationship which is difficult to determine based on the evidence of the inscription alone.

If we conjecture that Bojko and Eudokia were not husband and wife, we might suppose that Eudokia was a widow or a divorcee. In the majority of dedicatory inscriptions that mention only a woman and her children, it is thought that the husband was already deceased, divorce being less common than widowhood. Such is the case of Kale Meledone and her children in the church of the Transfiguration from Euboia (1296), or that of Kale Magalokonomisas and her children from the church St Andrew, Livadi, on the island of Kythera. We know from fourteenth-century Byzantine legal documents that...

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24 The same thing can be observed for the opposite sex. If the wife is dead, sometimes we find only the name of the father and his children. For example, the supplication of Nicholas Koronas and his children on the votive painting representing the Nativity of the Virgin in the church of St John, Sanidia, Kythera (first half of the seventeenth century), Chatzidakis/Bitha, Corpus (cit. n. 18), p. 201.

25 From 97 cases of dissolved marriages in thirteenth-century Epiros, 18 percent were due to divorce, and more than 40 percent were due to the death of the conjoint, A. E. Laiou, Contribution à l’étude de l’institution familiale en Epire au XIIe siècle, in: Laiou, Gender (cit. n. 3), ch. V, p. 319. Statistics for the region of Macedonia have not been compiled, but we presume that the situation was similar.


27 It is a post-Byzantine graffito probably from the seventeenth century on the painting of St Paraskeve in the church of St Andrew, Livadi: Δι(έσθι)ς τῆς δούλης τοῦ Θ(εοῦ) Καλῆς Μεγαλοκονόμασας καὶ τον τέκνον αὐτῆς ἀμήν, Chatzidakis/Bitha, Corpus (cit. n. 18), p. 72. See also the supplication of Anna and her children in the church of the Panagia at Naxos (1288/89), Kalopissi-Verti, Dedicatory Inscriptions (cit. n. 5), p. 89. In the dedicatory inscription...
in aristocratic circles women after the death of their husband, as long as they did not remarry, had close control over the family property, especially concerning the management of their dowries, which remained almost inalienable from them. We suppose that Eudokia found herself

from the church of the Virgin at Matka, near Skopje, end of the fifteenth century, the main donor of the church is Milica, represented together with her son Nicholas. At the end of the inscription she asks for remembrance for her husband Toshinko, who was already deceased at the time the church was finished, Subotic, Ohridska slikarska škola (cit. n. 16), p. 142, figs. 107, 115, ills. 104–105.

28 When widows remarried, their second husband assumed the role of head of household, Laiou-Thomadakis, Peasant Society (cit. n. 2), p. 94.

in this particular situation, which permitted her to make this donation personally. Data for certain villages in early fourteenth-century Macedonia indicate that around 20 percent of households were headed by widows.

The second hypothesis supposes that Bojko and Eudokia had ties of consanguinity (brother/sister, father/daughter), or that they lived in an illegal union, which although condemned by civil and canon law was nevertheless very common in the fourteenth century. In the second case, after the death of her husband or as a divorcée, she opted to live with Bojko without marrying in order to preserve the inheritance rights of her child. Legally, this permitted her to retain control over her estate. This phenomenon was very widespread in this period because of conjugal instability within marriage. The death of one of the spouses, divorce, and the social and economic movement of individuals were the conditions for this kind of conjugal situation, which although not considered a legal marriage was nevertheless more stable and was tolerated more easily than an adulterous union. Nevertheless, the institution of concubinage concerned primarily poorer women without sufficient dowries who consequently had few rights regarding the property of their male partners. We assume that this was not the case for Eudokia because of the epithet that qualifies the woman as most noble, which is not the case for the man.

The epithet εὐγενέστατος/εὐγενεστάτη is attested in civic honorary inscriptions dating from the third century CE in the Peloponnesos, and is always related to noble families or citizens. In later centuries the epithet noble was used by Byzantine aristocrats who could claim at least one imperial ancestor. In the Palaiologan period, dignitaries such as despotas, sebastokrators, and others were designated as most and all noble (πανευγενέστατος/πανευγενεστάτη), testifying to the late Byzantine taste for exaggeration. It seems to have been taxed in the same manner and with the same norms as households headed by men. This was not the case in the fifteenth century under Ottoman administration, when female heads of households were taxed at a lower scale than men, Laiou-Thomadakis, Peasant Society (cit. n. 2), pp. 90–91.

The same phenomenon is noticed for widows from aristocratic circles in Constantinople and in the Palaiologan period, Talbot, Building Activity (cit. n. 3), p. 341, table at p. 343. Unfortunately, we do not know the exact figures for remarriage in Macedonia, Laiou-Thomadakis, Peasant Society (cit. n. 2), 89, table III. 4 at p. 90; Talbot, Women (cit. n. 29), p. 129. In thirteenth-century Epirus, from 97 cases of dissolute marriage, 40 percent were due to the death of the husband. 75 percent of these widows remarried, Laiou, Contribution (cit. n. 23), pp. 280, 319.

Although a great majority of households consisted of nuclear families, for economic reasons, people from fragmented households (widowed sisters or orphaned nephews and nieces) rejoin the household of their relatives, Laiou, Women in the History of Byzantium (cit. n. 2), pp. 26–27. In rural Macedonia at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the census books enumerate a small number of single women – head of household. Angeliki Laiou thinks that unmarried women could not keep authority for very long, the phenomenon being transitory. The woman is in most cases orphaned and she is the head of the household until she marries, Laiou-Thomadakis, Peasant Society (cit. n. 2), chs. III and IV. The same phenomenon is found in Epirus, Laiou, Contribution (cit. n. 25), p. 299.

See for example the funerary inscription of the most noble Herakleia (mid third century CE) from Sparta etc. A. D. Rizakis/S. Zoumbaki/C. Lepenioti, Roman Peloponnes, II: Roman Personal Names in Their Social Context (Laconia and Messenia), Athens 2004, pp. 71, 98, 109, 116, 118, 142, 143, 148, 155, 167, 244.


The epithet πανεὐγενεστάτος is found in three dedicatory inscriptions from Kastoria. The first is from St George (Omorphokklisia) around 1300, and the other is from the church Panagia Koubelidiki dating from 1260–80, Kalo-
is significant that among the aristocracy it was a common occurrence for children to use only the name of their female parent, especially when their mother’s ancestry was more exalted than that of their father, or when the mother’s name conferred a particular dignity. Therefore, the noble Eudokia and her child did not specify the name of the child’s father, her own name being sufficient.

In the case of Bojko we presume that his origins were not as dignified as those of the woman, his name being mentioned without any title. Nevertheless, the epithet given to Eudokia does not automatically imply that her estate and her contribution to this donation were more important than those of Bojko. The name of the man is listed first, and if we follow the Byzantine tradition of digressively listing the names from most to least important donations, Bojko seems to be the main donor. In one late inscription from Kastoria (church of St Nicholas, 1663), we find the name of the very honourable archontissa Theologina and her husband Petzios. What is interesting in this case is the fact that the main donor of the church is obviously the woman, who has a higher social status than her husband and who is listed first.

In any case, inscribing a woman’s name or painting her portrait in the sanctuary was the only way for Orthodox women to enter the most sacred part of the church. Their physical presence in the sanctuary was strictly forbidden.

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Research on Macedonian peasant society (fourteenth and fifteenth century) shows that widows are mostly known by the name of their husbands, marriage ties being more usual than blood relations. Nevertheless, some examples show that sometimes women took the name of their husbands’ family, and not that of their husbands’, Laiou-Thomadakis, Peasant Society (cit. n. 2), pp. 96–97, 137, 140; Laiou, Observations (cit. n. 3), p. 65 n. 18.

In many cases, when a man has only his baptismal name without any reference to his family, it is because of his poor background, Laiou-Thomadakis, Peasant Society (cit. n. 2), pp. 96–97.

In the Canon 69 of the Sixth Council (Constantinople III) (680), access to the sanctuary by laymen is also forbidden. The only exceptions were in female monasteries where, in order to prevent frequented by men, nuns were authorised to clean and to decorate the sanctuary, J. Beaucamp, Les femmes dans la tradition canonique, in: Smythe, Strangers to Themselves (cit. n. 5), p. 90; J. Beaucamp, Les femmes et l’église: Droit canonique, idéologie et pratiques sociales à Byzance, in: Kanon, 16, 2000, p. 87. These women were called ekklesiarchisses, Talbot, Women (cit. n. 29), p. 139.
The inscription of the Andronikos aer from Ohrid says that the textile was donated by the emperor Andronikos II so that he would be remembered by the shepherd of the Bulgars in the liturgy, which means that the archbishop should pray for the salvation of the emperor, G. Millet, Broderies religieuses de style byzantin, Paris 1947, p. 89, pls. CLXXVIII, CXCI. In Cappadocia and Cyprus, there are few inscriptions that read: You who read, pray the Lord for them, Bernardini, Les donateurs (cit. n. 5), p. 129; Stylianou/Stylianou, Donors (cit. n. 5), pp. 108, 109–110, 111, 112, 114, 116–118. In Crete, inscriptions ask for explicit mention of painters’ name by priests. S. Kalopissi-Verti, Painters in Late Byzantine Society. The Evidence of Church Inscriptions, in: Cahiers Archéologiques, 42, 1994, pp. 144, 147. The same formula is written by the painter Onouphrios at the Holy Apostles (1554), and the Holy Anargyroi (1550), both from Kastoria, Drakopoulou, Inscriptions (cit. n. 23), pp. 22–23.

In the Turkish census books from the fifteenth century and from 1583, this name is mentioned many times, M. Sokoloski (red.), Turski dokumenti za istorijata na makedonskiot narod. Opisani popisni defteri od XV vek, II, Skopje 1973, pp. 25, 27, 28, 31, 36, 41, 43, 45, 50, 54, 56, 61, 75, 101, 107; A. Stojanovski (red.), Turski dokumenti za istorijata na makedonskiot narod. Opisani popisni defter na Ohridskiot Sancak od 1583, VIII.1, Skopje 2000, pp. 30, 37, 42, 43, 62–63, 65, 86, 91, 95, 103, 107, 128, 132, 136, 149, 152, 172. One parish was probably from the region of Deabolis (the region where the church of Mali Grad was built), named Constantine Bojanes, brother of one Eudokia, is cited in a letter to the patriarch of Constantinople in 1199, PG 119, col. 892; Angold, Church and Society (cit. n. 44) p. 415; J.-C. Cheynet, Aristocratie et héritage (XIe–XIIe siècle), in: Beaucamp/Dagron, La transmission du patrimoine (cit. n. 29), pp. 72–73.
The ethnic composition of the population living in Macedonia is, however, difficult to establish simply on the evidence of the names. We can be certain that both of them were wealthy locals who financed the painting of the church; however the inscription clarifies the fact that Eudokia had a noble origin and that she acted quite independently with her donation, proving once more the particular status of wealthy widows and their economic autonomy.

The role of women other than nuns and aristocrats in the religious life of Byzantine and post-Byzantine society is difficult to determine. We can be certain that female donations contributed to the material prosperity of the Church were particularly significant, since numerous inscriptions, donor portraits and diverse texts testify to this phenomenon. In the apse of the church of Mali Grad, the noble Eudokia is one of these women who materially contributed to the decoration of a church, stepping out in her own name and at her own expenditure, manifesting her independence and initiative in a largely male-dominated medieval society. She is significant in our study because she belonged to the small provincial nobility of which little is known from the sources. Texts often speak only about exceptional women as empresses, and as wives of aristocrats. The presence of Eudokia, together with that of Bojko, also suggests the popularity that the hermitage enjoyed among the local population, which is furthermore confirmed by the later donation of the kaisar Novakos.

Illustration credits: Figs. 1–6: S. Bogevska.