
NIKOLAS BAKIRTZIS, *Architecture and Sacred Landscape in Byzantium: Making Prodromos Monastery on Mount Menoikeion* (BAR International Series 3250). Oxford: British Archaeological Reports 2025. 166 pp., 131 ill. – ISBN 978-1-4073-6219-9

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In the Orthodox East, monasticism – undoubtedly one of the most characteristic phenomena of the medieval Christian world – retained its significance through much of the Early Modern period and even into the present day. Its role in the spiritual, as well as the political, economic, and cultural life of the centuries both before and after the fall of Constantinople was so profound that neither the Byzantine nor the post-Byzantine world can be understood without taking monastic communities into account. The historical significance of monastic architecture is correspondingly great. Despite the considerable progress made in its study over the past few decades, research has a long way to go before it can be regarded as sufficiently comprehensive and commensurate with the importance of its subject. These deficiencies are due, on the one hand, to the difficulties posed to the study of the material, which often survives only in fragmentary form, having been altered by older and more recent (even very recent) natural disasters as well as by ill-conceived human interventions. On the other hand, they stem from the lack of a sufficient number of detailed studies devoted to individual monuments and monumental complexes, the careful examination of which could significantly illuminate many issues. NIKOLAS BAKIRTZIS' new book partly fills this gap in scholarship through its examination of a particularly important case study: the Monastery of St. John the Forerunner (Prodromos) near Serres, one of the most significant monastic foundations in northern Greece.

Of the book's 131 illustrations, 73 were taken by the author and 29 are drawn from the monastery's archive. The sources of the remaining ones are identified in the List of Figures (pp. xv–xx). Unfortunately, the captions do not indicate the dates on which the photographs were taken. Had this information been included, it would have greatly assisted readers in appreciating the changes that have occurred at the site over recent years.

Particularly noteworthy are the two maps prepared by ANDRIANI PAPA-GEORGIOU, the two topographical plans of the monastery's surroundings prepared by OLGA BAKIRTZI and ANDRIANA NIKOLAIDOU, and the twenty-two original architectural survey drawings of the monastic complex and its individual buildings prepared by the architect PANTELIS XYDAS.

Following the Acknowledgements (pp. xi–xii), in which the author expresses his gratitude to the institutions and individuals who assisted his research, BAKIRTZIS outlines the history of the project, which originated as his Ph.D. dissertation at Princeton University, completed under the supervision of the distinguished Byzantinist SLOBODAN ĆURČIĆ. In a brief Note to the Reader (p. xxi), the author defines the aims and scope of the study and addresses practical matters, such as issues of terminology.

The main body of the book consists of an Introduction and five chapters. The Introduction (pp. 1–10) provides a general overview of the monastery and offers a preliminary assessment of its historical and architectural significance. It also presents the structure, aims, and methodology of the research, which, as the author explains, is based on fieldwork, the examination of written sources, and a critical review of the bibliography. The introduction concludes with a detailed historiographical survey of earlier references to the monastery, ranging from the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, including accounts by travellers as well as studies by local scholars and antiquarians.

The first chapter of the book (pp. 11–25) presents a historical overview of the principal events and circumstances that shaped the monastery's development over time. As might be expected, particular emphasis is placed on the historical context of its establishment during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries by its first founders, Ioannikios and Joacheim, both of whom were prominent figures active in the strategically important region of Serres. In examining the monastery's early history, the author explores its relationships with the Byzantine imperial court, local state officials, and, by the mid-fourteenth century, members of the Serbian royal court. The chapter then turns to the monastery's history under Ottoman rule (1383–1912), which, despite intermittent difficulties, was generally a period of prosperity for the holy institution. It also discusses the period of heightened national rivalries in the Balkans, from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, whose political upheavals had serious repercussions for the monastery and at times even threatened its very survival. The chapter concludes with an account of the monastery's conversion into a nunnery in 1986, an event

that marked the beginning of a new and particularly significant phase in its history.

The second chapter (pp. 27–52) examines the monastery’s location on the slopes of Mount Menoikeion and explores the organization of its productive area, as well as the formation of a sacred topography – or ‘hierotopy’, to use the term introduced by ALEXEI LIDOV – within both the natural environment and the surrounding agricultural landscape. The monastery’s hagiographical tradition, shaped over the centuries, associates surviving material remains and elements of the natural environment with holy figures connected to the foundation and subsequent history of the monastic institution. With regard to these traditions relating to the monastery’s past, the author aptly observes: ‘Beyond the fact that texts like the monastery’s *typikon* (monastic charter) or the more recent *proskynetarion* (a form of pilgrims’ guidebook) are filled with literary topoi, their narratives are of crucial importance to understand the ways traditions were embedded in the rural landscape. The topography of the slopes surrounding Prodromos monastery embraced the community providing a complete economy of buildings and people that supported and framed the daily habits of monastic life’ (pp. 1–2).

The third chapter (pp. 53–84) addresses the organization and architectural development of the monastic complex of the Monastery of Prodromos. It does so through a presentation of the various monastic buildings, accompanied by a concise discussion of their construction history and architectural characteristics. Particular attention is devoted to the chapel of the Nativity of St. John the Forerunner, known as the Prodromoudi, which stands a short distance to the east of the *katholikon*. As is commonly the case with long-lived monastic institutions, the succession of building phases forms an architectural palimpsest reflecting the events and transformations of the monastery’s long history. As in other major monasteries that continued to flourish into the Modern Era – including those of Mount Athos – the overwhelming majority of the monastic buildings that survive today belong to construction phases dating from periods considerably later than the monastery’s original foundation. The architectural history of the complex is presented through relatively detailed descriptions accompanied by photographs and measured drawings. Nevertheless, both the discussion itself and the absence of any differentiation of the various building phases on the single general plan of the monastery – undoubtedly inadequate for representing such a complex, multi-storeyed architectural ensemble – as well as the lack of reconstructive drawings, make it clear that the analysis does not reach the level of detail necessary for a comprehensive reconstruction of

the site's building history. Such an undertaking would only have been possible had the extensive restoration works carried out in recent years been accompanied by systematic archaeological investigation, something that evidently did not take place.

The fourth chapter (pp. 85–119) offers a detailed and systematic examination of the architecture and construction history of the *katholikon* (main church) complex. The highly complex building history of this important work of Byzantine and post-Byzantine architecture is presented through extensive descriptions accompanied by a ground plan distinguishing the various construction phases. Of particular interest is the author's argument that the core of the complex – a church belonging to the 'atrophied Greek-cross' type – should not be dated either to the period around 1270, when the monastery was founded by Ioannikios, or to the abbacy of his nephew and successor Joacheim / Ioannis in the early fourteenth century, as has variously been proposed by previous scholars of the monument's architecture. Instead, BAKIRTZIS assigns the church to the twelfth century. He supports this conclusion by combining a revised dating of the monastery's earliest documentary evidence, which suggests that the monastic institution was already in existence at the beginning of the thirteenth century, with a typological analysis of the church, which he associates with a group of comparable monuments that, on the basis of historical evidence or persuasive comparative arguments, have been dated to the twelfth century¹ (pp. 105–108). Nevertheless, since there appears to be no archaeological evidence for a major rebuilding – indeed, for any extensive reconstruction – of the church, and since typological similarities with twelfth-century churches cannot by themselves provide a secure basis for dating, especially as several churches of the same architectural type now seem to belong to the thirteenth century (for example, Church C at Nicaea and, according to recent research, the Church of the Archangels at Syge/Kumyaka in Bithynia),² it is more reasonable to suppose that, in order to meet the immediate needs of his small monastic community, Ioannikios simply repaired, with limited means, the probably modest church of an old and relatively insignificant

1. MARINA MIHALJEVIĆ, *Change in Byzantine Architecture*. In: MARK J. JOHNSON – ROBERT OUSTERHOUT – AMY PAPALEXANDROU (eds.), *Approaches to Byzantine Architecture and its Decoration: Studies in Honor of Slobodan Ćurčić*. Farnham – Burlington 2012, pp. 99–119, with previous bibliography.

2. STAVROS MAMALOUKOS, *Middle and Late Byzantine Church Architecture in the Periphery of Constantinople*. In: MANOLIS KORRES et al. (eds.), *Ἡρώς Κτίστης: Μνήμη Χαράλαμπου Μπούρα*. Athens 2018, vol. 2, pp. 97–124, at p. 117.

abandoned monastery that he found in a ruinous state. The present *katholikon*, by contrast, with its far more ambitious architectural conception, is more likely to have been built from the ground up during the period of the monastery's expansion under Joacheim / Ioannis, as he himself states in the monastery's typikon. This sequence of development closely parallels what recent research suggests occurred at the monasteries of Vatopedi and Iviron on Mount Athos, where the original tenth-century *katholika* were replaced in the third decade of the eleventh century by new, monumental churches better suited to the needs and aspirations of their flourishing monastic communities.

The fifth chapter (pp. 121–133) is devoted to the monastery's tower, an impressive structure with a complex architectural history. The building belongs to the common Byzantine type of monastic tower externally reinforced with projecting buttresses (pilaster-like supports). Its construction dates to the period of the monastery's prosperity under the abbacy of its second founder, Joacheim / Ioannis. Throughout its long history, the tower served a variety of functions reflecting the changing needs of the monastic community. Its last documented use dates to 1876, when it was converted into the monastery's library.

In a final chapter titled Conclusions (pp. 135–139), the author briefly presents his views concerning the history and architecture of the Prodromos Monastery building complex. He also reiterates his intention to pursue a holistic approach to the monastery and its centuries-old tradition, employing methodological approaches that, in his view, contribute to a deeper understanding of the monastic experience within this particular sacred institution, while transcending the limitations of more traditional approaches to the architectural history of Byzantine monasteries. The volume ends with an extensive bibliography (pp. 143–162), reflecting the breadth of the author's research, and a highly useful Index of Persons, Buildings, and Objects (pp. 163–166).

In attempting to assess the overall contribution of the book within the field of Byzantine and post-Byzantine monastic architecture, one cannot but welcome its publication and congratulate its author, whose research undoubtedly makes a significant contribution to scholarship. Methodically written and richly documented with photographs and original architectural drawings, this volume will undoubtedly remain a valuable reference work.

This will be the case even if future research should demonstrate that some of its specific conclusions are unfounded, or if the study of this important monumental complex is eventually expanded and revised on the basis of new evidence.

Keywords

Byzantine Macedonia; monastic architecture