

NICHOLAS MELVANI, *Politics, Conflict and the Monastic Topography of 15th-Century Constantinople* (Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Studies). Abingdon: Routledge 2026. xvi+291 pp., 69 ill., 8 maps. – ISBN 978-0-367-51486-0

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Those who visited Constantinople between ca. 1400 and ca. 1450 found it an unusual sight. Miles-long defences were maintained for the benefit of less than 50,000 inhabitants.¹ ‘Though the circuit of the walls is... very great and the area spacious, the city is not... very densely populated. There are within its compass many hills and valleys where cornfields and orchards are found, and among the orchard-lands there are hamlets and suburbs which are all included within the city limits... Everywhere throughout the city there are many great palaces, churches, and monasteries, but most of them are now in ruin. It is however plain that in former times, when Constantinople was in its pristine state, it was one of the noblest capitals of the world. They say even now that it holds within its circuit 3,000 churches, great and small.’²

‘Monasteries were scattered across virtually every district of Byzantine Constantinople’ (p. 198); ‘it was here that relics, icons, liturgical action, and constant prayer converged to create nuclei that functioned as vital organs during the dying decades of the Byzantine capital; political, economic, and scholarly activity enhanced this role on several levels’ (p. 219). NICHOLAS MELVANI has studied the written record and material remains which those ‘vital organs’ left in the fifty years prior to 1453. His book is the first of its kind: the subject seems to have been neglected because Mount Athos (which submitted to the Ottomans in 1423/4), not Constantinople, was the foremost centre of fifteenth-century Greek monasticism. As far as texts are concerned, source material is relatively abundant. There are five extensive accounts by foreign travellers: one Russian, one German, one Italian, two Spanish. There is the lengthy testament which Patriarch

1. KONSTANTINOS MOUSTAKAS, *Η αναφορά του Ιωσήφ Βρυέννιου για τον πληθυσμό της Κωνσταντινούπολης του 15ου αιώνα*. Αριάδνη 28 (2021–2022) pp. 101–108.

2. CLAVIJO, *Embassy to Tamerlane 1403–1406*, tr. Guy Le Strange. London 1928, pp. 87–88. See also ANTONIO PEDRO BRAVO GARCÍA, *La Constantinopla que vieron R. González de Clavijo y P. Tafur: los monasterios*. Erytheia 3 (1983) pp. 39–47.

Matthew I wrote in 1407 in favour of a Constantinopolitan convent.³ There is the *vita* (BHG 1001) of Macarius Macres, who in 1422 became abbot of the Pantocrator Monastery. There is Sylvester Syropoulos' report about the Church council of 1438–1439. There are further narratives, documents, and pieces of occasional poetry. Physical remains, on the other hand, are more than sparse: thus, not a stone is left of the belfry which Macarius built at the Pantokrator.⁴

MELVANI deftly weaves different types of research into a well-structured whole. Successive chapters examine the involvement of Constantinopolitan monks in church and state affairs (pp. 19–49), the economic basis of monastic life in the capital (pp. 50–86), the various social networks of which monks and nuns formed part (pp. 87–118), Constantinopolitan monasteries as centres of learning and book production (pp. 119–151), icons and other works of art associated with fifteenth-century Constantinople (pp. 152–187), and the place of monastery buildings in the city's actual and symbolic topography (pp. 188–234).

Combining political, ecclesiastic, economic and social history with the history of art and architecture is a major methodological strength of this monograph. Two small points of criticism can by no means detract from its great merit.

The first point is that MELVANI does not always make full use of the primary source material at his disposal. His statement that 'Manuel II was responsible for the renovations' of the Pantocrator Monastery (p. 91, cf. p. 26) has no basis in fact:⁵ it was Stefan Lazarević (PLP 26763) who sent large sums of money to that convent on three separate occasions (Serbia was a wealthy country at the time), while the Greek-born Metropolitan of Rus' Photius (PLP 30322) was proclaimed (behind the emperor's back!) its new *ktetor* on account of his immense generosity.⁶ Surely this tells us

3. JOHN THOMAS – ANGELA CONSTANTINIDES HERO (eds.), *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents: A Complete Translation of the Surviving Founders' Typika and Testaments*. Washington DC 2000, pp. 1625–1666.

4. ASTÉRIOS ARGYRIOU (ed.), *Macaire Makrès et la polémique contre l'Islam : édition princeps de l'Éloge de Macaire Makrès et de ses deux oeuvres anti-islamiques, précédée d'une étude critique*. Rome 1986, p. 208 (§ 63). Perhaps the building resembled another late-Byzantine belfry which still survives: cf. DIMITRIOS LIAKOS, *The Byzantine Bell-Tower in Vatopedi Monastery on Mount Athos (1427)*. *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 65 (2015) pp. 153–168.

5. The epigram (Rome, Biblioteca Vallicelliana, E 55, f. 130v) that Macarius Macres wrote for a portrait of that emperor mentions no such thing.

6. ARGYRIOU (ed.), *Macaire Makrès*, p. 208 (§§ 61–62).

something about the financial state of Constantinopolitan monasteries – just like the circumstance that in 1437 the abbot of τοῦ Καλέως went to Mount Athos to fetch books unobtainable in the capital (βιβλία ὅσα ἐζητοῦντο)⁷ tells us something about the state of their libraries. Among scribes, MELVANI could have mentioned the hieromonk Matthew (PLP 17352) who calls himself (DBBE 21561) a ‘disciple’ of Patriarch Joseph II. The miniatures that decorate a Gospel (Diktyon 4635) which he copied in 1418 contrast with the Gothicising style (discussed in some detail on pp. 155–157) of two fifteenth-century murals at the Kariye Camii.

A second point is that it is sometimes hard (for me, at any rate) to verify the book’s sources. Prodromos Petra is described as ‘a vast multipurpose complex accommodating a variety of functions’ (p. 134) and one is repeatedly told (see the index on p. 288) of a καθολικὸν μουσεῖον which Emperor John VIII supposedly ‘founded... within the monastery’ as ‘a higher education institution that became one of the leading centers of learning’ (p. 33). In the entire corpus of Byzantine texts, the expression καθολικὸν μουσεῖον occurs just once, as part of a title (TLG 9009.008) which MELVANI, who in this case only cites secondary literature, does not reference directly: Μιχαὴλ Ἀποστόλη τοῦ Βυζαντίου (PLP 1201) Προσφώνημα εἰς τὸν αὐτοῦ διδάσκαλον Ἰωάννην τὸν Ἀργυρόπουλον (PLP 1267) ὅτε ἤρξατο διδάσκων προτροπῇ βασιλέως ἐν τῷ τοῦ Ξενώνος Καθολικῷ Μουσειῷ. A miniature (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Barocci 87, f. 33v) reproduced on p. 194 is captioned with ‘John Argyropoulos teaching in the Katholikon Mou-seion’, but the adjacent text in the manuscript itself only says ἐν τῷ τοῦ Κράλη ξενῶνι. This miniature’s anonymous artist portrayed Argyropoulos as a layman. There is no evidence that monks were in any way involved with the Serbian King’s Hospital (ὁ τοῦ κράλη ξενῶν) in Constantinople, or that ‘intense educational and scientific activity in the Petra monastery... rendered it an effective hub for humanist studies, with a far-reaching impact of an international scale’ (pp. 134–136). Likewise, I could find no primary source confirming that ‘the future patriarch Kallistos II (1397) and his brother Ignatius... had been disciples of Gregory of Sinai’ (p. 121) or that Macarius Macres ‘increased the number of monks at the Pantokrator monastery from six to twelve’ (ibid.).

It would be very unfair to focus on isolated inaccuracies, since they do not

7. VITALIEN LAURENT (ed.), *Les « Mémoires » du Grand Ecclésiarque de l’Église de Constantinople Sylvestre Syropoulos sur le concile de Florence (1438–1439)*. Rome 1971, p. 170.

affect the substance of MELVANI's work. His subtle and detailed analysis reveals the complexity of monastic life in fifteenth-century Constantinople, e.g.: 'Mangana under the influence of Mark Eugenikos and his successors was consistently opposed to the official efforts to enforce the Union, whereas Stoudios and Pantokrator were less stable and occasionally joined the opposition' (p. 42). The book sets a fine example of interdisciplinary historical study which other Byzantinists will hopefully follow.

Keywords

Byzantine monasticism; Constantinople; monastic architecture; late Byzantine art