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Pilgrimage in the Byzantine Empire: 7th–15th Centuries

Introduction

The millennial year of 2000, viewed as a milestone in the history of Christianity, prompted a number of conferences on the topic of pilgrimage and visitation of relics. In Athens the Christian Archaeological Society organized a conference in May on the “Influence of Pilgrimage on Art,” and the same month in Moscow the Centre for Eastern Christian Culture scheduled a symposium on “Relics in the Art and Culture of the Eastern Christian World.”

The Dumbarton Oaks symposium of 5–7 May 2000 was the first in this series of conferences. Its special focus was the examination of pilgrimage within the Byzantine Empire during the period following the Arab conquest of the Holy Land, that is, from the seventh to the fifteenth century. Up to now those Byzantinists interested in pilgrimage have primarily examined the phenomenon in the Holy Land, including Egypt, and have stressed the early centuries, the fourth to sixth, for which evidence is relatively abundant, both in the form of texts and artifacts. Much important work has been done in this area in recent decades, so that we are all now familiar with the indefatigable traveler Egeria, rituals at the Holy Sepulcher, Monza and Bobbio flasks, and St. Symeon tokens.

Much less attention has been paid, however, to the phenomenon of pilgrimage in Byzantine territory during the middle and late Byzantine centuries, with the exception of Krijnie Ciggaar’s and George Majeska’s useful books and articles on Western and Russian travelers to Constantinople.¹ One reason may be the paucity of Greek pilgrims’ accounts in these centuries in comparison with those by their Western and Russian counterparts. Our information, for the most part, has to be painstakingly gleaned from scattered passages in hagiographical narratives and from the rarer archaeological evidence. The symposium speakers attempted to fill this lacuna by looking at developments in devotional travel within the empire after its loss of the Holy Land.

There is no question that Byzantines continued to go on pilgrimage to Syria and Palestine even after these lands fell under Arab domination; numerous hagiographical accounts include the journey of a holy man to see the holy places and the monasteries of the Levant.² At the same time it is clear that such journeys were difficult, even perilous, and

¹ K. N. Ciggaar, “Une description de Constantinople dans le *Tarragonensis* 55,” *REB* 53 (1995): 117–40; eadem, “Une description anonyme de Constantinople du XIe siècle,” *REB* 31 (1973): 335–54; eadem, “Une description de Constantinople traduite par un pèlerin anglais,” *REB* 34 (1976): 245–63; eadem, *Western Travellers to Constantinople. The West and Byzantium 962–1204: Cultural and Political Relations* (Leiden, 1996); G. Majeska, *Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (Washington, D.C., 1984).

² On this see A. Külzer, *Peregrinatio graeca in Terram Sanctam: Studien zu Pilgerführern und Reisebeschreibungen über Syrien, Palästina und den Sinai aus byzantinischer und metabyzantinischer Zeit* (Frankfurt, 1994), and A.-M.

on occasion forbidden by the Muslim authorities. And for some reason, not yet fully understood, women ceased to embark on long-distance pilgrimage to Palestine after the seventh century. It is not surprising, then, that Byzantine men and women sought alternate forms of pilgrimage within their own territories: they could visit Constantinople with its accumulation of Passion relics and objects associated with the Virgin, a city termed the “New Jerusalem” or a “Second Jerusalem” at least as early as the fifth century;³ they might go to a local shrine to venerate an especially holy icon or to seek healing from the relics of a saint; they might visit places hallowed by association with the apostles, such as Patmos and Ephesos; or they might journey to the hut, cave, or column of a famed living holy man to seek spiritual counsel, forgiveness, or a blessing.

The definition of pilgrimage adopted for the purposes of this symposium was a rather broad one: it includes not only long-distance journeys to Jerusalem, Rome, and Constantinople, but shorter trips as well, to a saint’s tomb within one’s own village or neighborhood, or to a shrine in the nearest town. This wide spectrum of devotional activities has been included in the phenomenon we have called pilgrimage because these activities all entailed spiritual travel, whether it be visitation of living holy persons, the relics of sacred personages, or sites sanctified by association with sacred events. They were devotional journeys that fell outside the normal attendance at church services, and hence deserve our special attention as providing insight into the spiritual yearnings and practices of the Byzantines.

One of the most vivid descriptions of the excitement of the pilgrimage experience and the many different ways in which it appealed to participants can be found in a text from the late antique period, the *Miracles* of St. Thekla at her shrine at Seleukeia in Anatolia. The anonymous author brilliantly evokes the scene on the saint’s principal feast day that attracted large numbers of pilgrims. After the conclusion of the services, some of the visitors were eating and sharing their impressions of the ceremonies. “As is natural, each was saying what had struck him during the ceremony. One <remarked upon> its brilliance and splendor, another the huge crowd of people, another the vast assemblage of bishops, another the eloquence of the preachers, another the noble ardor in the singing of psalms, another the perseverance in the nocturnal vigil, another the harmonious order of the ceremonies, another the intense fervor of the people who were praying, another the terrible press of the crowd, another the suffocating heat, another the pushing and shoving during the celebration of the sacred mysteries, with some new arrivals, others departing, . . . some shouting, others arguing, others coming to blows because each wanted to be the first to take part in the eucharist.” Finally, one of the pilgrims admitted that he had been completely distracted by the spectacular beauty of a noblewoman, so that his eyes remained glued upon her throughout the service and he could think of nothing else!⁴ Such were the multiple experiences of pilgrimage to a popular shrine.

One of the problems of defining pilgrimage in the Byzantine period is that, as Cyril Mango pointed out, the Greeks, who had a word for everything, did not have a single term

Talbot, “Byzantine Pilgrimage to the Holy Land from the Eighth to the Fifteenth Century,” in *The Sabaite Heritage in the Orthodox Church from the Fifth Century to the Present*, ed. J. Patrich (Leuven, 2001), 97–110.

³ *Vita* of Daniel the Stylite, ed. H. Delehay, *Les saints stylites* (Brussels, 1923), 12, chap. 10.

⁴ G. Dagron, *Vie et Miracles de Sainte Thècle* (Brussels, 1978), miracle 33.

that encompassed the meaning of our English term *pilgrimage*.⁵ Some of the papers that follow allude to this problem. The English word suggests both the long and arduous journey and the attainment of the spiritual goal. The Greek texts, on the other hand, use a number of verbs and nouns that focus on the culmination of one's journey, usually the visitation of a holy site or the veneration of relics. The most common term by far is προσκύνησις ("veneration") or the related verb, but one also frequently encounters such verbs as κατασπάζω ("kiss"), περιπτύσσομαι ("embrace"), and προσψάω ("touch") to describe the pilgrim's physical contact with the tomb or relics. Sometimes only the element of prayer (προσευχή) is mentioned; on other occasions when the pilgrim remains at a shrine for a long time, as in the ritual of incubation, verbs such as προσμείνω, προσκαρτερέω, προσεδρεύω ("to remain") are used. Special words for the journey itself are less common: often a pilgrim just "goes" to a shrine, or he may "seek refuge" (καταφεύγω) or run (προστρέχω) there. If a pilgrim is making the rounds of a number of churches, as in Jerusalem, Rome, or Constantinople, the verbs περινοστέω or περιπολέω ("to travel around," "wander around," "visit") may be used. Finally, there is limited use of a vocabulary derived from the root ξένος ("guest" or "stranger"), with its implications of travel to a foreign land. Such words are ἐπιξενούμενοι, meaning "pilgrims taken in as guests at a hostel," and ξενιτεία, which normally has the more abstract connotation of a soul's spiritual journey toward God, often manifested in the unfocused wanderings of a monk seeking to separate himself from ties to the physical world, but very occasionally the term seems to refer to an actual pilgrimage.

The group of selected symposium papers published here begins with an introductory overview by Pierre Maraval of the earliest phase of Christian pilgrimage in the fourth to sixth century. Annemarie Weyl Carr then examines one aspect of Constantinople's transformation into the New Jerusalem: the development of the cult of the Theotokos, especially her icons. George Majeska's study provides the perspective of Russian pilgrims to Constantinople, focusing on their response to the attractions of this new holy city.

Most of the remaining studies focus on pilgrimage in the provinces, at shrines both old and new. There are case studies, as for St. Demetrios in Thessalonike (Charalambos Bakirtzis) and St. Eugenios in Trebizond (Jan Olof Rosenqvist), and broader overviews of patterns of pilgrimage in Anatolia (Clive Foss), on pilgrimage by saints (Michel Kaplan), on the lure of healing shrines (Alice-Mary Talbot), and the visitation of living holy men (Richard Greenfield). Several of the studies conclude that short-distance pilgrimage to local shrines seems to have been the norm for pious Byzantines, although longer journeys to Rome, Constantinople, and the Holy Land continued to be made.

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⁵ Cf. C. Mango, "The Pilgrim's Motivation," in *Akten des XII. Internationalen Kongresses für christlichen Archäologie*, *JbAC* suppl. 20 (Münster, 1995), 2–3.