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*The Economic History of Byzantium:
From the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century*

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Writing Materials, Documents, and Books

Nicolas Oikonomides

Three kinds of writing materials were used in Byzantium: papyrus, parchment, and paper. For rough work, slates (πινακίδια) were used and were often covered with wax. Papyrus (ξύλοχαρτιον), mainly from Egypt, was still being imported into Constantinople by the shipload in the tenth century and was regarded as the choicest of materials, by way of contrast with other (locally made?) products. Books and documents were written on it, even by the imperial secretariat (the famous Saint Denis papyrus is an imperial epistle of the 9th century). The last chrysobull known to have been written on papyrus is the *Typikon* of Gregory Pakourianos of 1083. In the late twelfth century, Eustathios of Thessalonike complained of the “recent” disappearance of papyrus.

Parchment was the most expensive writing material. The skin of a large lamb would produce two, or at the most three, rectangular leaves of parchment, which when folded in two would make the four (or six) leaves of a manuscript. In the tenth century, each skin of this kind, which would sometimes need to be used in full just to record a contract, cost approximately one silver miliaresion ($\frac{1}{12}$ of a nomisma).

The parchment was often prepared under the supervision of the future user. The monastery of Stoudios, which had a famous scriptorium in the ninth century, had its own *membranarion*, where monk-parchment makers worked. The occupation of parchment maker is not mentioned in the *Book of the Eparch*, possibly because of the limited economic importance of parchment compared to the other uses of animal skins. Michael Choniates refers to large-scale exports of parchment to the West in the late twelfth century. In the thirteenth century, scholars who used parchment were obliged to import it themselves from the provinces; since parchment was a seasonal product, it was not always possible to find the desired quality. There were frequent shortages in Constantinople, especially in the winter months, while supplies were easier to obtain after Easter. After the fourteenth century, however, the pieces of parchment become more regular in shape, indicating that the product had to some extent become standardized and thus commercialized.

Paper, a Chinese invention, came to the attention of the Arabs in 751, and its use

became compulsory in the secretariat of the caliphate around 800. The earliest surviving Greek manuscript on paper, Codex Vaticanus 2200, also seems to have been written around 800, in the Arab-dominated East. Paper manuscripts survive from the eleventh century on. The earliest surviving Greek document on paper dates possibly from 1016 and certainly from 1052 (*Actes de Lavra*, no. 20, 31). The use of paper was thus introduced into Byzantium certainly in the tenth century, and possibly in the ninth, when there is a reference to a tax charge called *chartiatika* (χαρτιάτικα). There are also references to “paper makers” *chartopoiioi* (χαρτοποιοί). In the first quarter of the ninth century, there were paper makers (not to be confused with parchment makers) in the monastery of Stoudios, which had a large scriptorium, and in the tenth century paper makers holding honorary titles are found in the Peloponnese; it would seem that they were suppliers to the court. We also possess the seal of a “*komes* of paper makers,” who must surely have been a state official. I think it possible that these were manufacturers of paper for Byzantium, but this view has been questioned.

The first paper we find in Byzantium is of the Oriental type (called *bombykinon* or *bambakeron*) and cotton based in two different qualities and without a watermark. Paper of this type continued to be used in the Byzantine world until the fifteenth century, in parallel with western-type paper, with a watermark, imports of which into the East from Italy began in the thirteenth century, flooding the Byzantine market in the fourteenth century thanks to its mass production.

Paper was always cheaper than parchment, perhaps half the price, or even less; and in the fourteenth century it became still less expensive. On the other hand, it was not so strong. To judge from the surviving documents, paper seems to have been used almost exclusively in the eleventh and twelfth centuries by the imperial secretariat and by private individuals almost throughout the empire, with the exception of Macedonia, where parchment always prevailed. In 1204, however, things changed, and parchment was the rule everywhere (including the imperial secretariat) for three-quarters of a century. By the middle of the fourteenth century, paper once more dominated everywhere. A study of manuscripts reveals the same fluctuations in the use of paper. In 1200, 20% of the manuscripts of Patmos were on paper, but the constant wear that they suffered meant that by 1307 only 8.3% of the manuscripts in the same library were on paper.

The material on which it was written was an element of decisive importance in the value of the manuscript. We sometimes find leaves of parchment and paper together in the same manuscript, in an attempt to combine the strength of the former with the low cost of the latter. As a result of the relative scarcity of writing materials, people tended to use the blank leaves at the beginning and end of the manuscripts to make notes and write out contracts. When the shortages were even greater, many people ignored the prohibitions of the synods and erased the writing on earlier parchment manuscripts, replacing them with fresh texts. These manuscripts are called palimpsests, and they become more common during the thirteenth century.

The greatest single item of expense connected with manuscripts was, of course, the



1. St. John the Evangelist as a scribe. National Library, Athens, cod. 57, fol. 265v (11th century)
(after A. Marava-Chatziniolaou and C. Toufexi-Paschou, *Κατάλογος μικρογραφιών βυζαντινών χειρογράφων τῆς Ἐθνικῆς Βιβλιοθήκης τῆς Ἑλλάδος* [Athens, 1978], 1: pl. 219)

fee of the copyist, who would have to devote several months of work to his task. In the tenth century, we can calculate that the cost of the parchment represented between 23% and 38% of the total value of a book, depending on how densely written it was. That total value fluctuated around 21–26 gold pieces. We know of professional copyists who earned considerable sums of money from their work: Athanasios Thaumaturgos earned 900 gold nomismata in twenty-eight years (32 nomismata per annum). There is a reference to a copyist who, by contract, undertook to copy a manuscript for a fee of 150 gold nomismata. Often enough, though, the copyist would also have another occupation, being a monk, a priest, a professional contract writer, or a civil servant. In other cases, the scholars themselves copied the manuscripts they needed for their personal libraries.

References are found elsewhere to prices of this order, and to much lower fees: as little as one gold coin. These variations are accounted for, among other things, by the dimensions of the manuscript, its ornamentation with gold lettering or miniatures, whether or not there was musical notation (which might account for up to one-third of the total value of the book), and whether or not it was to be given a deluxe binding (we know that in the 11th century an ordinary binding cost $\frac{1}{3}$ of a gold coin). Unrealistic prices are also quoted in special circumstances, such as when the manuscript was used as security for a debt. Extremely low prices were the rule when the manuscripts were plunder of war and were being sold by illiterate soldiers.

Under normal conditions, however, the purchase of a book was a major item of expenditure, as can be seen if we compare the price of a book in the tenth century (21–26 gold nomismata) with that of a cow, a warhorse, and a mule at the same period (3, 12, and 15 gold nomismata, respectively), or with the annual salary (*πόγα*) of a *protospatharios* (an official whose post automatically gave him membership in the senate), which was 72 gold pieces.

Books seem to have been written to order, commissioned by individuals or groups of individuals who wished to contribute to the common good (e.g., by purchasing a book for the church). There is no evidence of there having been a free market in new books or of the existence of bookshops—understandably enough, if one remembers the level of the investment represented by a book and the limited number of prospective purchasers. On the other hand, sales and purchases of secondhand books were common, as were other transactions such as pawning. The existence of some series of identical manuscripts with the same content and the same pagination (e.g., copies of the *Synopsis Basilicorum*) allows us to conclude that “editions” were available of certain books addressed to a specific readership, in this case jurists. However, we do not know how the marketing of these books took place.

There are references to large private libraries, including those of Eustathios Boilas (78 books, 1059), Michael Attaleiates (54 books, 1079), Theodore Skaranos (14 books, 1274), and to still larger monastic libraries with many hundreds of books, such as those of the Patmos monastery and of the Great Lavra on Mount Athos. Some of these libraries lent books out to meet the needs of entire geographical areas.

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