

CHAPTER 1
INSTITUTIONAL SETTINGS: THE COURT,
SCHOOLS, CHURCH, AND MONASTERIES

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Intellectual debate and the transmission of knowledge did not take place in sequestered academic institutions in Byzantium. Scholars were usually politicians, clergymen, or monks and often they were active participants in the major events of their day. Their intellectual activities were therefore usually undertaken in the context of the imperial court or the Church and often, although not always, reflected contemporary concerns.

As regards the court, Byzantium was distinguished from western Europe during the earlier Middle Ages by maintaining a secular administrative elite. In the west, where education had become the preserve of the Church and the royal household provided a rudimentary center of administration, officials tended to be clergymen before the late twelfth century. It was very different in the Great Palace in Constantinople, a complex of buildings next to the Hippodrome and facing the cathedral of Hagia Sophia in the heart of the city, and in the palace of Blachernai, close to the Land Walls. Here the corridors were thronged by secular officials and secretaries, some of them eunuchs. A considerable proportion of them bore purely honorary titles but there was a large body of officials whose tasks were to advise the emperor, draft his correspondence, create consensus around his policies, and fulfill whatever other functions that their ruler chose to entrust to them. Foremost among them was the *parakoimomenos* (chamberlain), the closest thing to a chief minister. The *logothetai* oversaw various departments such as the treasury while other functionaries with titles such as *kouropalates*, *protospatharios*, and *protovestiaris* had less closely defined duties.¹

These office holders influenced the development of imperial policy but some of them were also philosophers and historians in their leisure moments. That dual role of politician and scholar stemmed from the nature of Byzantine higher education. Since the year 360, holders of the highest posts in the imperial secretariat had been required by law to have completed a course of higher education, and promotions were promised to those who attained distinction in the liberal arts.² There was what might be

¹ Tougher 2008: 54–60; Harris 2017: 59–65.

² *Theodosian Code* 14.1.1 (tr. 405); Wilson 1996: 2, 49–50.

termed a university in Constantinople from at least 425 (when it was reformed with thirty-one chairs) although it is perhaps misleading to use that word to describe it. It was by no means an independent academy dedicated to the pursuit of learning for its own sake. Its main aim was the production of able administrators. It also lacked a corporate identity or name, as it consisted of ad hoc appointments of teachers supported by the emperors.³

Inevitably there were times when the university flourished and others when it was probably in abeyance. It is impossible to document its continuous existence after c. 600: what we have instead are periodic “refoundations.” There is no evidence for its existence during the eighth century but it was revived during the reign of Michael III (842–867). The emperor’s uncle, the *kaisar* Bardas, who largely ran the empire, reestablished the university in the palace of the Magnaura, part of the Great Palace complex. There were to be teachers of philosophy, grammar (i.e. literature), astronomy, and geometry and they were to be paid from the treasury rather than be reliant on fees (or bribes) from students. The philosophy teacher was Leo the Mathematician, the most prominent Byzantine scholar of the time.⁴ In 1045, the university was again revived and reformed: faculties of Philosophy and Law were created, with Constantine (later Michael) Psellos taking charge of Philosophy with the title “Consul of the Philosophers,” and John Xiphilinos of Law as *nomophylax* (“Guardian of the Laws”).⁵ These two men were also close imperial advisors and played a direct role in making and implementing policy.

The capture and sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in 1204 brought about another hiatus, although there is evidence that traditional higher education did continue on a smaller scale at the court in exile at Nicaea.⁶ After the recapture of Constantinople in 1261, Michael VIII Palaiologos (1259–1282) refounded the university once more and entrusted its governance to George Akropolites, one of his high ministers. Higher education remained available in Constantinople until the city fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, although toward the end it was probably not funded from the treasury but by private fees. In these last years of the empire, teaching often took place in *xenones*, institutions that functioned primarily as hospitals.⁷ In the early empire, major cities had funded municipal chairs of rhetoric, grammar, and sometimes philosophy, but there is no evidence for this institution after the reign of Justinian. In all periods there was private instruction, which may have been responsible for

³ *Theodosian Code* 14.9.3 (tr. 414–415) = *Justinianic Code* 11.19.1; see Lemerle 1971: 63–64.

⁴ Genesios, *On the Reigns of the Emperors* 4.17; Skylitzes, *Synopsis* 101; Lemerle 1971: 158–160; Wilson 1996: 79–84.

⁵ Hussey 1937: 51–72; Wolska-Conus 1976b. ⁶ Constantinides 1982: 5–27.

⁷ Constantinides 1982: 31–49; Miller 1997: 159–161.

most of the teaching taking place at any time. These teachers survived by charging fees from their students and securing the support of patrons, including members of the imperial family, for whom they often composed literary or scholarly works. Two such teachers were Theodore Prodromos and John Tzetzes, in the early to mid-twelfth century. In their letters they developed the persona of the “struggling scholar”; both lodged in monasteries for parts of their careers and sought the patronage of the court.

By the mid-fourteenth century, Constantinople had lost its monopoly on higher education. That was largely the result of the decentralization of power. As Byzantine territory shrank and parts of the empire were cut off from Constantinople by land, regional centers tended to be ruled almost autonomously by a junior member of the imperial family. Between 1349 and 1380, the Byzantine holdings in the Peloponnese were administered by Manuel Kantakouzenos who resided in the town of Mistra and bore the title of despot. Thessalonike too had a series of autonomous rulers, starting with empress Anna, the mother of John V Palaiologos (1341–1391). The courts of these provincial despots employed educated administrators and so generated the higher schooling that produced them. The classical scholar Demetrios Triklinios ran a school in Thessalonike and the Platonist philosopher George Gemistos Plethon drew students to study under him at Mistra.⁸

The higher education curriculum, which began around the age of fourteen, was traditional and highly formalized. Students were taught the *trivium* of poetry, rhetoric, and philosophy, and the *quadrivium* of geometry, mathematics, astronomy, and music, a division that can be traced back to at least 100 BCE. These divisions were rather loose, and in practice higher education in Byzantium involved the study of the literature and philosophy of ancient Greece and especially that of classical Athens. Authors who were studied for the *trivium* included the poets Homer and Hesiod, the orators Demosthenes, Isocrates, and Lysias, the philosophers Plato and Aristotle, and the satirist Lucian. For the *quadrivium*, Euclid, Ptolemy, and Nikomachos were the main authors. Law and medicine were also studied, the latter largely through the writings of Galen and Dioskourides.⁹ It might seem incongruous that the Christian Byzantines should base their education on works written by pagans. Part of the reason for their retention was undoubtedly the scientific insights provided by the authors of the *quadrivium*, but as far as Byzantine intellectuals were concerned those of the *trivium* were far more important because they embodied what were regarded as the most perfect examples of Greek poetry and prose. Hence Byzantine university students were not expected merely to read these texts but to learn to write in the same way. Their most

⁸ Nicol 1982: 121–131; Masai 1956: 48–65. ⁹ Buckler 1929: 178–187; Wilson 1996: 18–27.

common exercise was to write rhetorical exercises in the style of the ancient orators. In doing so, they had to set aside the everyday Greek that they had learned at their mothers' knees and cultivate instead a literary language that had ceased to be spoken many centuries before.

Intellectual life at the Byzantine court was molded by the common educational background of those who held office there, since they were all steeped in the ancient literature that they had pored over and imitated as students. To take one example, prominent courtiers were expected to give speeches on important occasions such as the anniversary of the emperor's accession or at his funeral. Their main theme was a eulogy of their subject but they were hardly for widespread dissemination since they were delivered in ancient rather than contemporary Greek and hence incomprehensible to the mass of the population. The content likewise reflected the classical education of the speaker. In a speech given in 1193, George Tornikes assured emperor Isaac II Angelos (1185–1195) that he was the very philosopher king for whom Plato had searched in vain. In his eulogy at the funeral of John III Batatzes (1221–1254), George Akropolites compared Homer's Agamemnon unfavorably to the late emperor. These speeches were no mere antiquarian exercise, however. Behind the façade of archaic language, they could be used to make political points. They were often a form of propaganda, presenting the emperor's policies and successes in the best possible light to influential elite.¹⁰ They could also be used as an acceptable way to voice opposition or to advise a change of policy. In 1190, Niketas Choniates used a speech ostensibly in praise of Isaac II to mount a subtle critique of that emperor's policy towards the German emperor Frederick Barbarossa (1152–1190). It was in speeches and policy memos delivered to Manuel II Palaiologos (1391–1425) and the emperor's brother Theodore, despot at Mistra, that Plethon outlined his views on the reform of the Peloponnese, a program strongly influenced by Plato's *Republic*.¹¹

The strong link between classical education and politics did not preclude the pursuit of purely scholarly activity at court, especially when the emperor was himself interested. During the reigns of Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (945–959), Constantine IX Monomachos (1042–1055), Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282–1328), and Manuel II Palaiologos (1391–1425) in particular, literary circles formed at the Byzantine court. Under Constantine IX, Psellos found time to pursue his interests in philosophy and teach while still advising the emperor and drafting his correspondence. His associates Constantine Leichoudes, John Xiphilinos,

¹⁰ Angelov 2007: 29–77.

¹¹ Partial translations in Barker 1957: 160, 198–212; Kazhdan and Epstein 1985: 250; Woodhouse 1986: 79–118; Angelov 2006: 49–68.

and John Mauropous had similar interests.¹² At the court of Andronikos II, the most notable intellectual was Theodore Metochites, the emperor's chief minister who was also a philosopher, essayist, and patron of learning and the arts. Maximos Planoudes, who led an embassy to Venice in 1296, studied classical texts on poetry, astronomy, and mathematics in his spare time. Unusually for a Byzantine scholar, Planoudes also had a good command of Latin, perhaps perfected during his stay in Venice, which enabled him to produce a translation of St. Augustine's *De trinitate* and other works. At the end of the reign, Nikephoros Gregoras, a polymath who wrote on everything from eclipses to musicology, emerged as one of the most prominent intellectuals of the next generation.¹³ The members of these literary circles maintained their cohesion by exchanging letters, the main object being to write in a suitably classical and ornate style rather than to convey news or information.¹⁴ The intellectual activity of the Byzantine court sometimes extended into areas which fell outside the parameters of classical literature and Christian theology, although it did depend on who was emperor at the time. Psellos investigated "forbidden" areas of knowledge such as the Chaldaean Oracles during the later eleventh century, and had to defend himself against accusations of irreligion.¹⁵ Under Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118), on the other hand, such activity was firmly discouraged and Psellos' student Italos was tried for philosophical heresies. Under Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180), astrology was greatly in vogue, although earlier emperors had also consulted soothsayers.¹⁶ In general, though, the nature of Byzantine education ensured that debate had its basis in the writings of the ancient Greeks, in Scripture, or in the Greek Fathers of the Church.¹⁷

The court did not have a monopoly on learning and knowledge. Private individuals maintained their own libraries, although they would have been small: fewer than thirty volumes to judge by surviving inventories.¹⁸ Similarly, not all those educated in the university spent the rest of their careers in the imperial administration, for many were to be found in the ranks of the clergy. The obvious example is Photios, patriarch of Constantinople (858–867, 878–886), who may have studied under Leo the Mathematician, although there is no specific evidence that he did so, and who went directly from the ranks of the imperial secretariat to being patriarch. Other highly educated men were appointed to provincial sees, such as Arethas, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, who commissioned and annotated manuscripts of Plato and Euclid. Similar scholar-bishops were John Mauropous, Psellos' teacher, who became bishop of Euchaita,

¹² Kaldellis 2006: 4–5. ¹³ Wilson 1996: 229–241, 256–269. ¹⁴ Mullett 1981: 75–93.

¹⁵ Kaldellis 2006: 102–104. ¹⁶ Magdalino 2003b: 15–31. ¹⁷ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 5.8.

¹⁸ Wilson 1975: 7.

and Michael Choniates, the brother of Niketas Choniates, appointed archbishop of Athens in the late twelfth century. Both Mauropous and Choniates wrote numerous letters to their friends back in Constantinople in impeccable ancient Greek, lamenting the hardships of their provincial life.¹⁹ In the twelfth century in particular, many learned graduates of the schools of Constantinople were placed as bishops in the provinces.

The Church, moreover, provided an alternative to the university in the form of the patriarchal school or academy which probably existed in Constantinople from the fifth century. Like the university, it was periodically revived and its history cannot be traced continuously. The historian Theophylaktos Simokattes may be referring to such a revival when he credits patriarch Sergios I (610–638) with restoring philosophy to the capital.²⁰ Another reorganization took place under patriarch Photios during the 860s, not long after the *kaisar* Bardas' revival of the palace university. Teaching took place in or around various churches throughout Constantinople, including Hagia Sophia and the Holy Apostles, but the curriculum was by no means strictly theological. Classical authors were read for their style in the same way as in the secular schools, although perhaps more as an introduction to the study of the Church Fathers. Ancient medical and mathematical texts were also taught.²¹ The patriarchal school seems to have been at its most influential during the twelfth century, after the reforms of Alexios I.²² Its more prominent role might have been a reaction to the tendency of some intellectuals of the previous two generations, such as Psellos and Italos, to mix too much of Plato and the Neoplatonists into their exposition of Christianity. The school was inactive during the period of Latin rule from 1204 to 1261 but reopened in 1265 under the direction of Manuel Holobolos. Among those who taught there was George Pachymeres, a deacon and author of a history covering the years 1255 to about 1308. This revived school was not as successful as it had been in the past, much of the energy of the teachers being directed toward the theological disputes over the Arsenite schism and the Union of Lyons of 1274.²³

Monasteries were another center of intellectual activity, although on one level this arose not from their original function but from a role that they came to play in political life. Those who had lost in the endless round of power struggles at the court often ended up in monastic institutions which acted both as sanctuaries and as prisons. When emperor Leontios was overthrown by Tiberios III Apsimar in 698, he suffered the indignity of

¹⁹ E.g. Mauropous, *Letters*; Michael Choniates, *Letters*.

²⁰ Theophylaktos Simokattes, *History* pr.: *Dialogue* 3–8.

²¹ Mesarites, *Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles* 894–896; Dvornik 1950: 120–124; Browning 1962–1963: 170–180.

²² Magdalino 1993a: 327–328; Katsaros 1988: 163–209. ²³ Constantinides 1982: 50–65.

having his nose cut off before being immured in the Dalmatou monastery.²⁴ Some spent these last years of political exile and seclusion in writing and research. The emperor John VI Kantakouzenos (1347–1354) retired to the monastery of Charsianites in Constantinople after he had abdicated in the face of a coup-d'état by his son-in-law, John V. He took monastic vows under the name Ioasaph and lived on for nearly thirty years. During this period he wrote a history of his times in which he sought to exonerate himself from the charge that his usurpation of the throne had brought ruin on the empire. He also penned a number of theological tracts in defense of Gregory Palamas and Hesychasm.²⁵ Theodora Raoulaina (d. 1300), the niece of Michael VIII Palaiologos, fell out with her uncle over the issue of the Union of Lyons and became a nun after the death of her husband in 1274. In her convent of St. Andrew in Krisei in Constantinople, she not only wrote hagiography but copied out manuscripts of classical texts, such as the orations of Aelius Aristides. She kept up an active correspondence with other intellectuals such as Maximos Planoudes.²⁶ The most active scholar among these political has-beens was Anna Komnene, daughter of the emperor Alexios I Komnenos. After her father's death she had plotted to remove her brother, John II Komnenos (1118–1143), from the succession and replace him with her husband, Nikephoros Bryennios. The bid for the throne was unsuccessful, and although John II treated his sister with great leniency her political career was over. Anna spent much of the rest of her life in the convent of the Virgin Full of Grace (Kecharitomene) which had been founded by her mother, the empress Eirene, although she did not become a nun until the very last days of her life. It was probably there that Anna wrote her biography of her father, the famous *Alexiad* which, like Kantakouzenos' history, was a defense of her own political stance. Not all of her literary activity had a political aim. It is not clear exactly how sequestered she was in the Kecharitomene after 1118, but Komnene still managed to be the center of a circle of scholars who were studying the works of Aristotle, including George Tornikes, metropolitan of Ephesos, Eustratios, metropolitan of Nicaea, and a certain Michael of Ephesos. Under her patronage several commentaries were produced, notably on the *Ethics*, *Rhetoric*, and *Politics*.²⁷

The role of monasteries as intellectual centers was not dependent solely on their sometimes reluctant guests. Like monasteries in the west, they were active in book production. In the days when the only way to reproduce a book was to copy it out laboriously by hand, monastic scribes were responsible for a large proportion of the Greek manuscripts made

²⁴ Theophanes, *Chronographia* 371. ²⁵ Nicol 1996: 134–160. ²⁶ Nicol 1994: 33–47.

²⁷ Browning 1962: 1–12.

during the Byzantine period. These were mainly the Bible, the Church Fathers, and theological texts, but monks copied classical works too. During the tenth century, a monk called Ephraim produced copies of the Acts of the Apostles, Aristotle's *Organon*, and Polybios' *Histories*. Monasteries also provided a safe setting where books and knowledge could be stored. In the early fourteenth century, the scholar and courtier Theodore Metochites housed his library in the monastery of St. Savior in Chora and it remained one of the best libraries in Constantinople even after his fall from power and his death in 1332. Nikephoros Choumnos (d. 1327) bequeathed his library to the convent of Christ Philanthropos where his daughter was abbess.²⁸

As well as reproducing and storing texts, monasteries were centers of thought and writing in the spheres of theology, ecclesiastical order, and mysticism. For much of the Byzantine period, the most active monastic intellectual center in Constantinople was St. John Stoudios. Founded in the fifth century, it was refounded in 799 when the empress Eirene (797–802) asked the monks of Sakkoudion in Bithynia to migrate to the capital and repopulate the largely abandoned monastery. Under its new abbot, Theodore the Stoudite (759–826), it became a center for monastic reform. After Theodore's death, the *Hypotyposis*, based on his teachings, was compiled by his followers and became the basis for the foundation charters of a large number of monasteries, especially in southern Italy, the Balkans, and Russia.²⁹

Monasteries often acted as hotbeds of opposition to imperial policies. In 767, the emperor Constantine V (741–775) converted the Dalmatou monastery into a barracks, doubtless as a punishment for opposition to his Iconoclast policy.³⁰ Platon, abbot of Sakkoudion, broke off communion with the patriarch of Constantinople, Tarasios, in protest at the latter's tacit approval of the second marriage of Constantine VI (780–797). The emperor subsequently arrested the entire community and sent them into exile. The monks of Stoudios in particular gained a reputation for fearless opposition. They were prominent in standing up to the second wave of Iconoclasm from 815 to 843 and in defending the orthodoxy of icon veneration. Theodore the Stoudite wrote three refutations of the Iconoclasts, building on the arguments of St. John of Damascus.³¹ After the defeat of Iconoclasm in 843, the monks of Stoudios remained as outspoken as ever. They denounced the leniency of patriarch Methodios I (843–847) toward dismissed Iconoclast bishops and were consequently

²⁸ Wilson 1996: 138, 256; Ševčenko 1975; Hatlie 2007: 412–419, 419–424; Nicol 1994: 66.

²⁹ Morris 1995: 17–18, 45–46; Hatlie 2007: 323–324, 337–351.

³⁰ Theophanes, *Chronographia* 443, 470–471; Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 650–654.

³¹ Roth 1981: 8–16.

excommunicated. When papal legates visited Constantinople in 1054, a monk of Stoudios called Niketas Stethatos wrote a pamphlet denouncing the beliefs and practices of the western Church. The emperor Constantine IX, hoping to make an alliance with the pope against the Normans, was furious. He ordered Stethatos to revoke his views publicly and had the offending pamphlet burnt.³²

While Stoudios remained influential over several generations, other Constantinopolitan monasteries enjoyed briefer periods as intellectual centers. St. Mamas flourished under its abbot, St. Symeon the New Theologian, between 980 and 1022. It was there that Symeon wrote his huge collection of homilies and other spiritual writings. The Orphanotropheion, a monastery with a complex of buildings dedicated to the care of the elderly, sick, and disabled, was refounded by Alexios I Komnenos in the 1090s. It also had an educational purpose, for both basic literacy and classical texts were taught there.³³

After 1204, provincial monasteries became more prominent as intellectual centers, following the general decentralization of intellectual life that took place. The monastery of Sosandra, close to Magnesia ad Sipylum in Asia Minor, was founded by John III Batatzes to celebrate his victories over the Turks and to provide a burial place for himself and his family. After Batatzes' death, it played an important role in the development of his cult as a saint.³⁴ In Thessalonike, the Nea Moni, which was founded in the late fourteenth century, produced two literary figures, Makarios Choumnos (fl. c. 1360–1382) and Gabriel, metropolitan of Thessalonike (d. 1416/17).³⁵ The most prominent monastic intellectual center outside Constantinople was Mount Athos. The Holy Mountain forms the easternmost of the three rocky promontories of Chalkidiki and was entirely given over to monks and hermits. The hermits had been there for centuries but in 963 the first monastery, the Great Lavra, was established on the mountain by St. Athanasios the Athonite. By about 1400 there were some fifty monastic houses of all sizes on Athos. The thought and writings that came from the Holy Mountain were very different from those of St. John Stoudios. Athos was far from Constantinople, so while the monks may well have disagreed with imperial policies such as the Union of Lyons, their opposition was much less obvious. Athos was, moreover, not a single monastery but a collection of them, along with a large community of hermits who spent most of their time in solitude. Many of the monasteries were really lavras where the monks lived alone but came together on Sundays to worship. Thus there was little interest in developing monastic rules or forming

³² Humbert of Silva-Candida, *Brevis et succincta commemoratio*, col. 1001.

³³ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 15.7; Morris 1995: 95, 282. ³⁴ Mitsiou 2011: 665–666.

³⁵ Russell 2009: 32–33.

unified political pressure-groups (the other type of monastery in Byzantium was the "coenobitic," where the monks actually lived together).

It was in the area of prayer and spirituality that Athos became so influential. Mystics such as Nikephoros the Monk (d. c. 1300) and Gregory of Sinai (d. 1346), who both lived solitary lives of meditation and asceticism, wrote treatises on the spiritual life. They laid emphasis on the superiority of divine revelation over human reason and the possibility of direct experience of God through continuous prayer. When, during the 1330s, the teachings of these so called Hesychasts came under attack from intellectuals in Constantinople, Athos became the center for its defense, with the monk Gregory Palamas being the most strident voice.³⁶

In the last years before the fall of Constantinople, it was the monastery of Christ Pantokrator that played a central role in the most urgent debate of the day: whether union with the Catholic Church was a price worth paying for western help against the Ottoman Turks. The Pantokrator had been founded in 1136 by the emperor John II Komnenos and had a hospital attached to give free treatment to all who needed it.³⁷ Its church served as the place of burial for emperors of the Komnenos and Palaiologos dynasties. In 1450, the courtier and intellectual George Scholarios took monastic vows under the name Gennadios and joined the community at the Pantokrator from where he led the opposition to the Union of Florence of 1439. His tracts against Union were nailed to the door of his cell where crowds of people came to read them. The debate came to an abrupt end in the early hours of 29 May 1453 when Gennadios fled the monastery on news that the Ottoman Turks had broken through the Land Walls and were taking over Constantinople.³⁸ Gennadios was subsequently appointed patriarch of Constantinople by sultan Mehmed II (1451–1481), who thus ensured that one institution survived the end of the empire even if the court and the monasteries did not.

³⁶ Speake 2002: 39–93.

³⁷ Miller 1997: 12–21.

³⁸ Doukas, *History* 36.3.