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Tracing the School Education on Mount Athos in the Byzantine Period

Further evidence

ABSTRACT: This article provides further evidence concerning the traces of school education on Mount Athos during the Byzantine period. Taking all relevant evidence derived from previous research into account, I add information to this matter by commenting on two references relevant to school education on Mount Athos found in the *Lives A and B of St Athanasius the Athonite* and on another reference being connected to Prochorus Cydones' stay at Megisti Lavra monastery.

KEYWORDS: School education, Mount Athos, Literacy, Libraries, Athanasius the Athonite, Prochorus Cydones

In Byzantium school education was strongly connected with the Church. The monasteries especially constituted significant cultural centres that were constantly promoting education and were actively engaged in the circulation of culture and literature,¹ since many monks, such as St Athanasius the Athonite, were as laypeople teachers, scribes or writers and had decided to continue their cultural activities during their monastic life.

School education on Mount Athos in the Byzantine period was a matter partially unknown to previous research. There are basically two written sources that provide useful information regarding the

¹ Larsen, Rubenson 2018: 1. Cf. Easterling 2003: 322.

existence of Athonite monastic schools during the Byzantine period: the *Lives* of St Athanasius the Athonite and St Macarius Macres. The anonymous so-called *Life B of St Athanasius* states that in the time of Athanasius' stay at Mount Athos, Megisti Lavra monastery was running a school focused exclusively on the study of the *Bible*:²

since some of the brothers were illiterate, their inability to understand the Bible was a hindrance to them toward the path to virtue. Therefore, [St Athanasius] settled [this problem] by constructing cells for them, and [he] named them cemeteries and schools; [he] appointed [some of the monks] as teachers of these [illiterate brothers] and after the evening service they [= the monks-teachers] were reading and explaining wholesome for the soul passages of the books for them and stimulated them into respecting God and cultivating virtue (*Vita B s. Athan. Athon.* 179-180.45, 1-11).³

The *Life of St Macarius Macres* gives further proof of the existence of monastic schools on Mount Athos in the Palaeologan era. Macarius lived in the first decade of the 15th c. at Vatopedi monastery; there he had the chance not only to become a monk but also to receive a well-rounded secular education:

rhetoric and philosophy, which they call logic, ... geometry and maths, and astronomy' (*Vita s. Makar. Makr.* 194.23, 11-17).⁴

Except from these witnesses, accounts written by western travellers add useful information to our knowledge of manuscripts that were found in Athonite libraries in the Byzantine period and their contents

² Chrysochoidis 2014: 20.

³ 'τινῶν γὰρ ἀδελφῶν ἀγραμμάτων ὄντων... ἐμπόδιον ἦν αὐτοῖς πρὸς τὸν δρόμον τῆς ἀρετῆς τὸ μὴ νοεῖν τὰς γραφάς. Διατοῦτο καὶ κελλῖα οἰκοδομηθῆναι αὐτοῖς ᾠκονόμησε, κοιμητήρια καὶ παιδευτήρια ὀνομάσας αὐτά· ἐπέστησε δὲ τούτοις καὶ διδασκάλους, οἱ καὶ μετὰ τὴν ἀποπλήρωσιν τῶν ἀποδείπνων τὰς βίβλους κατέχοντες ὑπανεγίνωσκον αὐτοῖς τὰ ψυχωφελέστερα λόγια καὶ ταῦτα ἡρμήνευον τούτοις καὶ εἰς φόβον θεῖον καὶ ἀρετῆς ἐπιμέλειαν διήγειρον' (Noret 1982: 179-180.45, 1-11.). See also Gousgouriotis 2023: 4-5.

⁴ Argyriou 1986: 194.23, 11-17.

could maybe indicate school use of these codices there. Cyriacus of Ancona, an antiquity enthusiast, visited the monastery of Vatopediou on the 19th of November 1444 and in the period between the 22nd and the 29th of the same month he stayed at the monastery of Philotheou. He notes that at the library of Vatopediou he saw a codex transmitting *Iliad*,⁵ and at the library of Philotheou he had the chance to see a manuscript containing Eustathius of Thessaloniki's commentary on the Homeric epics.⁶ In any case, it is proven that the Homeric epics constitute by far the most frequently used texts in the Byzantine school curriculum;⁷ consequently, such manuscripts could be useful textbooks in an Athonite classroom.

All these above-mentioned facts could be, more or less safely, regarded as traces of the Athonite school education during the Byzantine period. This paper aims to offer further evidence concerning the same matter by highlighting two relevant references cited in *Lives A and B of St Athanasius the Athonite*⁸ and concerning Prochorus Cydones' cultural activities during his stay at Megisti Lavra monastery.

St Athanasius the Athonite is perhaps the most eminent figure of Athonite monasticism. When he was still a layperson under the name Abraamius, he met St Michael Maleinus at Kymina monastery in Bithynia of Asia Minor; he also had the chance to meet for the first time Nicephorus Phocas, who after some years became the Byzantine emperor. Abraamius became a monk and from then took the monastic name Athanasius. St Michael Maleinus ordained the new monk as Nicephorus Phocas' spiritual father. This spiritual relationship soon rendered Athanasius' reputation widespread, but this change was by any means totally unwanted by him. Therefore, he decided to relocate to Mount Athos (specifically, to Zygyou monastery)⁹ and present there

⁵ Lamberz 1996: 570.

⁶ Allison 1996: 136.

⁷ For a general overview of Homer's reception in Byzantium, with emphasis on the school use of his epics, see mainly Browning 1975 and Browning 1992.

⁸ I would like to thank Fr. Symeon of the Chrysopodaritissa monastery in Nezera, Patras, for informing me about this passage of the two *Lives of St Athanasius the Athonite*.

⁹ The monastery of Zygyou was founded in the 10th c. The extant studies on this monastery are considerably few: Papangelos 2003–2004, Papangelos 2005 and Maladakis 2013: 145–146.

under the fake name Barnabas, in order to find the seclusion highly desirable to him. He firstly met there an elderly monk and after discussing with him for a while, Athanasios (“Barnabas”) decided to stay with this anonymous elder and become his ὑποτακτικός. Athanasios stayed by his side for a considerable amount of time and, since he as a monk always wanted to cultivate his own ταπείνωσις, for being one of the most eminent goals of the monastic life; although Athanasios (former Abraamius) was a teacher during his secular life, he pretended to the elder that he was totally illiterate and therefore

[Athanasios] asked to be taught by him the sacred texts; the elder accepted the proposal and started quickly to write the letters for him on the boards (*Vita A s. Athan. Athon.* 21.41, 19–22)¹⁰

After he insisted on staying with the elder for a long time, he said to him: ‘Father, help me start learning the letters, so that I could be able to read the Psalms; when I was a layman, I learnt nothing more than working with the tools.’ The elder listened to him and after he had grabbed a board, he started to write some letters on it (*Vita B s. Athan. Athon.* 140–141.15, 9–14).¹¹

These “sacred texts” (*Vita A*) were probably Biblical texts, such as the *Psalms*¹² or the *Octateuch*, and belonged to the first stage of Byzantine school education.¹³

The second and last reference relevant to the Athonite school education is related to Prochorus Cydones. Prochorus Cydones, one of the brothers of the famous scholar Demetrius Cydones, was a native of

¹⁰ καὶ τὰ ἱερὰ παρ’ αὐτοῦ γράμματα ἐξαιτεῖ διδασθῆναι· δέχεται τὴν ὑπόμνησιν ὁ γέρον, εἵκει τῇ παρακλήσει καὶ χαράττει τούτῳ τάχιστα τὰ στοιχεῖα ἐν πίναξιν’ (Noret 1982: 21.41, 19–22).

¹¹ ἐπιμείνας γὰρ χρόνον τινὰ τῇ διακονίᾳ τοῦ γέροντος, προσῆλθεν αὐτῷ λέγων· ‘Ποίησόν μοι ἀρχὴν γραμμάτων, ἀββᾶ μου, ὅπως μάθω ἀναγινώσκειν τὸ ψαλτήριον· ἐν γὰρ τῷ κόσμῳ ὢν, ἐκτὸς τῆς κόπης οὐδὲν πλέον μεμάθηκα.’ Ἦκουσεν ὁ γέρον, καὶ λαβὼν πινακίδιον, χαράττει αὐτῷ τὰ στοιχεῖα’ (Noret 1982: 140–141.15, 9–14).

¹² On the *Psalms* as a permanent text of Byzantine education, see Antonopoulos, Chrysos 2021: mainly 45–47.

¹³ On the texts of the Byzantine school curriculum, see Markopoulos 2008: 5–6.

Thessaloniki, an erudite hieromonk of the Late Byzantine period and one of the main opponents of Palamite doctrine during the last phase of Hesychasm. In the period from 1338/1339 to 1345 Prochorus attended the first stage of school curriculum, in which writing, reading and some study on texts of secular and ecclesiastical literature were usually included. Probably around 1346–1347 Nilus Cabasilas taught Prochorus some courses. In 1347 Prochorus relocated to Megisti Lavra monastery on Mount Athos, in order to become a monk and continue there the second stage of his ‘sacred ... education’ (Phil. Cocc., Tom. 35).¹⁴

Taking both references into account, we cannot conclude if these passages do reflect the existence of two organized monastic schools at Zygyou and Megisti Lavra monasteries; they prove though that some more or less erudite Athonites were willing to offer their brothers lessons focused on the study of the *Bible*. In any case, as R. Browning once stated, ‘a school is a very simple institution. All it requires is a teacher, a room, and a book. And it can probably dispense with the last’.¹⁵

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¹⁴ Prigkipakis 2019: 370–371. See also Rigo 2004: 100.

¹⁵ Browning 1978: 46.

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