



Summary :

Arethas Patreus, the subsequent metropolitan of Caesarea, was one of the most important figures of the great intellectual flourishing of Byzantium after the end of Iconoclasm in the 9th century (843), which is often referred to as the "Macedonian Renaissance". His extensive efforts in transcribing and publishing the works of ancient authors, his education, as well as his political activity make him one of the most outstanding figures of the transitional phase between the 9th and the 10th century, a period marked by the unrest that the dispute over emperor Leo VI's fourth marriage had triggered.

Other Names

Patreus

Date and Place of Birth

first half of the 9th century or a little later, Patra

Date and Place of Death

after 932, Constantinople (?)

Main Role

Metropolitan of Caesarea, Protothronos 902/903-932 (?)

1. Family - Surroundings

Arethas was born in Patra, a city in the northern Peloponnese. It is known that he had a sister and a brother and it seems that his family was rich and prominent in the city.

During the mid-9th century, when Arethas was born, Patra was an important metropolis of the [Patriarchate of Constantinople](#), known for her patron saint Andrew and the namesake church. The city, as well as its surrounding area, was still experiencing the influence of the Slav population which had infiltrated to the south. Arethas himself seems to have been well informed on the history of the region and the Slav attacks against his home-town, as show his comments concerning some events of Patra's local history.

2. Education - Career

Despite the fact that Arethas was one of the most educated people and one of the most active scholars of his era, we have no information on his education. He must have received [encyclical education](#) in his home-town and he most probably continued his studies in [Constantinople](#), where an intellectual blooming followed the end of [Iconoclasm](#), also known as the "[Macedonian Renaissance](#)". We have no information on the content or length of these studies.

In the past it was thought that Arethas was a pupil of patriarch Photios. This opinion, however, has now been withdrawn for there is no evidence to suggest that Photios ever headed an educational establishment. Also in doubt, without any evidence to support such an idea, is that Arethas himself ever taught in some school.¹ Thus, all we know about the early years of the life of the future metropolitan of [Caesarea](#) in Constantinople is that until 888 he was still a layman and must have been ordained sometime over the following seven years, since he appears as deacon Arethas in a text dating from 895.²

In 900 or 901 he was accused of impiety but was found innocent by the ecclesiastical court. It also seems that for a short period of time (901-902) he was also an imperial orator.³ In 902 or 903 he was appointed to the [metropolitan throne of Caesarea](#) in Cappadocia, the first metropolis in the hierarchy of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.⁴ Even after his appointment, however, he



remained in Constantinople where he had penetrated the entourage of Photios. He also had close relations with Photios' successor to the patriarchal throne, Nicholas Mystikos. It seems, moreover, that he had asked Mystikos to take revenge on his behalf for the accusation against him and that the patriarch's refusal turned Arethas against the side which Mystikos represented within ecclesiastical circles.⁵

After the outbreak of the controversy over Leo VI's **tetragamy**, Arethas initially supported Nicholas Mystikos' position. The controversy broke out after the birth of Constantine Porphyrogenetos by Leo's fourth wife Zoe (September 905), on the issue of the legalization of his heir, as the Church did not recognize the emperor's fourth marriage. Later, however, Arethas turned against the patriarch and in favour of the emperor, thus starting an open conflict with Nicholas.

In any case, Arethas belonged to the core of the capital's intellectual circle. This circle also included [Niketas David Paphlagon or Philosophos](#), author of the "Life of patriarch Ignatius" (*Βίος του πατριάρχη Ιγνάτιου*) (848-858, 867-877), and, possibly, a student of Arethas. Niketas corresponded with Arethas, was also a member of emperor Leo VI's close circle, and it appears from his correspondence that his dedication and respect towards Arethas was that of a pupil towards his teacher.⁶ Arethas' shift on the issue of the emperor's fourth marriage also brought him into conflict with Niketas, who supported an uncompromising stance to the end. Moreover, when Niketas was accused of writing a libel against the emperor and patriarch Euthymios, who recognized the fourth marriage, Arethas did not hesitate to support Niketas' condemnation.⁷

Arethas developed important publishing-literary activities as commissioner of manuscript copies and was the owner of an important library in which secular works far outnumbered theological texts. We do not know the exact date of his death, which however is placed after 932.⁸

3. Activity

Arethas Patreus' activity can be roughly divided into two areas. The first includes the copying and publication of texts, mainly of ancient philosophers, to which he devoted himself in Constantinople and which is integrally connected to his personal intellectual work as commentator. The second area concerns his political activities as metropolitan of Caesarea.

3.1. Activity in the field of copying ancient authors' texts

Arethas was one of the most important commissioners of manuscripts at the end of the 9th and the first half of the 10th century. Thanks to this activity, which he had become involved with prior to his ordination, numerous works of prominent ancient authors were saved, among others, Plato, Aristotle, [Aelius Aristides](#), Athinaios, [Dio Chrysostomus](#), Euclid, etc. It is very interesting that Arethas, like Photios before him, gave greater emphasis to the copying of ancient works rather than works of Christian authors. The fact that theological works were far more accessible and that far more copies of them existed led these two scholars to give emphasis on saving the secular works of ancient authors; Arethas' fascination with secular thought was also an important factor.

The change in the written form of the Greek language, which from being written in capitals started to be written with lower case letters, definitely helped Arethas' publishing activities. Letters became smaller and suitable for faster writing, a fact which facilitated and hastened the work of copying texts, while the systematic transcribing of all texts from capital to lower case letters increased literary interest and gave the incentive for essentially new "editions" of the texts.⁹

Arethas did not confine himself to commissioning the copying of texts. He managed and reviewed the work of the calligraphers and filled the margins with extensive comments of varying content. His comments portray a vivid picture of Byzantine attitudes regarding various issues and depict Arethas' portrait as a true archaeolater, but not an inspired intellectual. His comments show an experiential relationship with the texts, they open a heated dialogue with the authors or contain important information on historical events, such as the wars against the Bulgarians and the struggle over Leo VI's fourth marriage.¹⁰



Arethas' style has often been criticized as pretentious, and his contemporaries accused him of "vagueness". He defended himself in his writings, deeming that the conscious avoidance of a simpler language was a sign of his education and that the accusations against him came from semi- or uneducated people. Regardless of his expressive success, through his perseverance with pretentiousness, Arethas became one of the pioneers of byzantine rhetoric.¹¹

3.2. Arethas' political activity

Arethas had an active role in the conflicts caused by imperial politics within ecclesiastical circles during his days. The first time he actively participated in a political-ecclesiastical conflict was on occasion of Leo VI's fourth marriage, a conflict which beset the Church in Constantinople from 906.

Patriarch Nicholas Mystikos, giving in to the emperor's wish to secure his son Constantine's (born from his relationship with Zoe Karbonopsina in September 905) succession to the throne, accepted to baptize his son with the condition that Leo would end his relationship with his fourth wife and would not formalize their union (January 906). However, Leo married Zoe, provoking the ecclesiastical circles which had already had difficulty accepting the emperor's third marriage.

The dispute which broke out in the ecclesiastical circles quickly evolved into a conflict between those who viewed the emperor's action with understanding and those who did not accept the emperor's fourth marriage. The first supported that Leo VI should receive a light sentence and absolution (according to the principle of *oikonomia*) and, thus, the crisis could be surpassed. Patriarch Mystikos himself wished for the emperor to be treated with a spirit of conciliation, while, on the other hand, he was exposed to the pressures from more conservative sections; with his actions he appeared to uphold a harsh stance towards Leo VI: he forbade him entry into Hagia Sophia, firstly over Christmas 906 and then on the Epiphany, on the 6th January 907.¹² During this period Arethas was against any action which would appear to overlook the emperor's misconduct and sin. Thus, during this period Arethas appears as one of Nicholas Mystikos' closest associates and companions.

Finally, Leo VI, disappointed by the delays and the harsh negotiations with the leadership of the Byzantine church, bypassed the patriarch and turned to Rome for recognition of his marriage. Moreover, in 907 he forced the patriarch to resign, planting a seed of ecclesiastical discord within the Church which outlived him.¹³ Following Nicholas Mystikos' removal in 907, Arethas turned into an advocate of imperial choices on the issue of the tetragamy and compiled a polemic treatise against Mystikos, abandoning his previous opposing opinions, which surpassed Nicholas Mystikos' positions in their severity; moreover, he accused the deposed patriarch that in the resistance and struggle against the emperor he was driven by a personal passion for power.¹⁴ We do not know what caused Arethas' shift, but the fact that during this time the emperor broached the charge for impiety against him may have pressured the metropolitan of Caesarea into changing his position.¹⁵

After Leo VI's death in May 912, Nicholas Mystikos returned to the patriarchal throne, pushing aside the patriarch Euthymios and causing the reactions of the latter's supporters. There are evidence that Arethas was at that time deposed from his metropolitan throne, but we later find him back in the same position. The conflict did not really end until the reign of [Romanos I Lakapenos](#), when at the [Synod of 920 in Constantinople](#), fourth marriages were prohibited by the **Tome** of Union, and a strict penance was set for those marrying for a third time. Arethas claimed in his writings that he had co-authored the Tome with the emperor.¹⁶

Arethas' last mention in the sources seems to be his advocacy in favor of the accession of Theophylaktos, the adolescent son of Romanos I, to the patriarchal throne, in 931. Arethas, perhaps in agreement with Romanos Lakapenos, wrote to the metropolitans who opposed Theophylaktos' appointment, which shows how close he was to the new emperor.

4. Evaluation and assessment

Arethas' restless spirit earned him adversaries throughout his life. Among them were his political opponents, but also those who did not agree with his writing style. His contemporaries (as well as later generations) criticized him for unpleasant style, vagueness and



generalization, leading Arethas to feel the need to defend himself and explain the intentions behind such a way of writing.¹⁷

Modern researchers also do not always have a positive opinion of Arethas. The most severe criticism against the metropolitan of Caesarea has come from Romilly Jenkins, who has frequently edited and annotated parts of his oeuvre. He has criticized Arethas for hypocrisy and inconsistency in his political positions, which he changed easily, as proved on the issue of the tetragamy when, over a short period of time he shifted from being a powerful decrifier of the emperor's stance to being one of his closest consorts and apologists. Apart from this, Jenkins criticized Arethas for arrogance and a simulative style, considering it the result of an inadequate education rather than a conscious intention to make his letters and the rest of his works all the more incomprehensible and full of esotericism.

In more recent bibliography, however, Arethas is faced with more leniency by researchers such as Alexander Kazhdan and Paul Lemerle, while Jenkins' austere and rather moralistic criticism has been abandoned.

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 4. According to Beck, H. G., *Kirche und theologische Literatur in byzantinischen Reich* (München 1959), p. 591, the first date is more likely, while Jenkins, R. J. H., *Byzantium: The Imperial centuries* (London 1966), p. 220, argues in favour of the second.
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 15. Jenkins, R. J. H. – Laourdas, B. (ed.), “Eight Letters of Arethas on the Fourth Marriage of Leo the Wise”, *Ελληνικά* 14 (1956), p. 370.
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17. Westerink, L. G., (ed.), *Aretha archiepiscopi Caesariensis Scripta Minora I*, (Leipzig 1968), pp. 186-191.

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Glossary :

	enkyklios education The secondary education in Byzantium. The students, from 12 years old, were taught grammar, rhetorics and eloquence.
	oikonomia (theol.) Term which in Byzantine ecclesiastical literature denotes the canonical power of the Church used to loosen up the strictness of the ecclesiastical law, removing thus an impediment to salvation.
	tetragamy A political and ecclesiastical controversy that followed the fourth marriage of emperor Leo VI (886-912). Since his only male heir had been



a product of this marriage, it was of vital importance to Leo to have the marriage recognised, whereas to the Church this was unacceptable. The issue was finally resolved in the Council of Constantinople in 920.



tomos

A term denoting the official ecclesiastical acts.

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Quotations

Arethas' epistle to Leo VI, where he condemns the emperor's fourth marriage

οὐδὲ γὰρ ὡσπερ τι τῶν τῆσ ἀρχῆσ παρασῆμων ἤδη καὶ τρυφή καὶ ἀβρότης ἐξαίρετα βασιλεῖ· τούναντίον μὲν οὖν· εἰ μέλλει μὴ διακένω σεμνύνεσθαι τῷ ὀνόματι, πόνοις καὶ ἀγρυπνίαις προσδαπανήσεται καὶ φροντίσιν ἐφ' ᾧ τὸ λυσιτελέστατον τῇ ἀρχῇ ἀνευρήσειν. εἰ δέ ποτε καὶ ὑπερόριον ἐξηνέχθη, δεδόσθω γὰρ ἀνθρώπῳ γε ὄντι, καὶ τὸ τῆσ ζωῆσ ἐντονον ὅποι παρεῖκοι καταλύοντι ὡσ ἂν μὴ τῇ ἄγαν ἐντάσει ὡσπερ τῶν τόξων τὰ διηνεκῶσ ἐντεινόμενα χωρῇ πρὸσ τὸ ἄχρηστον, αὐτῷ μόνῳ περιῦστᾶν τὸ κακὸν τῷ τῆσ αἰσχύνῆσ λανθάνοντι, ἀλλ' οὐ τῷ πᾶσι τὸ ἄτοπον ἐξορχήσασθαι, διπλῶ τῶν αἰτιαμάτων περιστοιχιζέσθαι, ᾧ τε αὐτὸσ ἐπλημέλησε καὶ ᾧ τοὺσ ἄλλουσ πρὸσ ζῆλον ἠρέθισε· σωφρόνων δὲ οἶμαι τῶν τ' ἀγαθῶν ἐκλέγεσθαι τὰ πλείῳ τε καὶ βαρύτερα, κᾶν τοῖσ κακοῖσ τὰ μείονα καὶ κουφότερα. ἀλλ' εἰ γάμον φῆσει τις τοῦτο φημίσαντα καὶ καινίσαντα τοῦ αἰσχουσ ἀπαλλάξαι τε καὶ καθᾶραι, ἦν ἂν ἐγὼ φαίην τῷ ἔργῳ τὸ βούλημα σύνδρομον, εἰ καὶ τοῖσ ὀνόμασι μετεστοιχειούτο τὰ πράγματα· νῦν δὲ δέδοικα μὴ καὶ κενοσπουδίας ἀλῶμεν· μέχρισ γὰρ ἂν ἡ τὰ πράγματα πάγια, μῆδὲν συντελούντων εἰσ ἀλλοίωσιν τῶν ὀνομάτων τῇ φύσει, μάταιον ἢ σπουδῆ·

Jenkins, R. J. H. – B. Laourdas (ed.), "Eight Letters of Arethas on the Fourth Marriage of Leo the Wise", *Ελληνικά* 14 (1956), p. 307.

Arethas' stance towards his former pupil Niketas Paphlagon (who was accused of writing a libel against Leo VI and the Patriarch Eutymios).

πολλοὶ δὲ τῶν ἐκεῖσε παρόντων τῷ πατριάρχῳ [Ευθύμιῳ] ἐπετώθαζον εἶσαι τῷ βασιλεῖ τὴν τῆσ ἐκκλησίας ἐκδίκησιν ποιῆσαι, ἐξαιρέτως δὲ καὶ Παῦλοσ, ὁ τούτου [του Νικήτα Δαβίδ του Παφλαγόνοσ] θεῖοσ ὁ καὶ σακελλάριοσ, καὶ ὁ Ἀρέθασ ἐκεῖνοσ, ὁ Καισαρείας πρόεδροσ, ὃσ καὶ μαθητὴν αὐτοῦ τούτον τυγχάνειν ἔλεγεν.

Karlin-Hayter, P. (ed.), "Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP (BHG 651)", *Byzantion* 25-27 (1955-1957), p. 114.

Chronological Table

Mid 9th century: Birth of Arethas in Patra

888: Arethas still a layman



895: Mentioned as a deacon

902 / 903: Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia

end of 906 / beginning of 907: Arethas supports Leo VI on the issue of his fourth marriage

912: Patriarch Nicholas Mystikos, after his return to the throne, deposes Arethas from his position together with other supporters of the deposed patriarch Euthymios (907-912)

920: Appears as co-author, with emperor Romanos I Lakapenos, of the Tome of Union

July / September 931: Supports Romanos I Lakapenos in his attempt to get his son Theophylaktos elected as patriarch of Constantinople

April 932: last mention of Arethas (in a manuscript)

after April 932: death, probably shortly after this date

Auxiliary Catalogs

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