



Medieval monasteries on the West Black Sea coast

Summary :

Both monumental and rock-cut monasteries were founded and functioned along the West Black Sea coast and in its immediate hinterland between the 6th and 17th c. Due to the proximity to Constantinople and the importance of the coast as a contact zone, many of them were under royal, imperial and patriarchal patronage and thus, had the duty and the privilege to act as primary literary and spiritual centers in the Black Sea region.

Date

6th -17th c.

Geographical Location

West coast of the Black Sea

1. State of research

No particular study on the medieval monasteries along the western coast of the Black Sea has been made so far. Perhaps a reason might be the insufficient literary evidence and the small number of surviving sites that can be identified as monasteries. With this respect, it is interesting to note that one virtually lacks any written sources for monasteries founded between the Danube delta and Haemus, while there is enough such evidence for the coastal area south of Haemus (Stara planina) down to the Bosphorus. In the same time, the northern part of the coast provides a higher number of extensively excavated or well-preserved sites that have been safely identified as monasteries. Therefore, what one can achieve in presenting the material evidence for monasticism on the West Black Sea coast is a fragmentary yet a rather dynamic and intriguing picture.

2. Monasteries from the 4th - 6th c.

2.1. St Nicholas monastery (Midye)

The only known monastery of that period on the West Black Sea coast is a rock-cut complex. It is situated 2.5 km northwest of Midye (in present-day Turkish Thrace, ancient Mediea) and is presently known as St Nicholas monastery. Most probably it was founded in the time of [Justinian I](#) (r. 525-565). The core of the monastic complex was a single-nave church, carved out of the rock, with five pillars supporting a vaulted ceiling. The carefully executed capitals in the interior decoration served as a chronological indicator. One may note also the [chancel screen](#) carved out of the rock as well as the [synthronon](#) arranged in the [apse](#). The church was flanked by two chapels—the southern one was also a rock-cut structure, while the northern one was masonry. Other rooms had been carved out of the rock above and beneath the [narthex](#) of the main church. Steps to the west of the narthex led to a holy fountain (*hagiasma*) accommodated in a four-column vaulted room carved out of the rock.¹

3. Monasteries from the 9th - 11th c.

3.1. Monastery of Karaačteke (surroundings of ancient Odessos/Varna)

The conversion of the [Bulgarians](#) into Christianity in the second half of the 9th c. revived the religious building activity



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along the western coast of the Black Sea. The earliest monastery of that period attested there so far is situated in the hinterland of ancient Odessos that became known as [Varna](#) since the late 7th c. onwards.² More precisely, the monastery is located on a high terrace of the southern slopes of the Frangensko plateau, a locality presently known with its Turkish toponym of Karaačteke [*The Shrine of the Black Elms*] ([Fig. 1](#)). Perhaps the exact location had been chosen for two practical reasons—the relatively slight inclination of the terrain to the south in contrast to other terraces and the availability of a fed water source, exploited already in Roman times.³

Yet the availability of water could not have been the only reason for the foundation of a monastery on a particular place. The rural surroundings of ancient Odessos/Varna, where the monastery of Karaačteke itself was situated, were one of the most densely inhabited regions of Bulgaria throughout the 8th - 10th c.⁴ All those settlements with their semi-subterranean dwellings and peasant population, however, certainly did not have the potential for founding one of the most interesting architectural complexes in Bulgarian monastic architecture from the 9th - 10th c.

The monastery of Karaačteke is not completely excavated but the structures unearthed until now provide enough evidence for its elaborate layout, architecture and construction. Throughout all construction phases the north-south slope of the terrace and the instability of the sandy terrain were the main factors that the builders had to contend with. The church was established in the flattest, southern part of the terrace yet on a stone platform that assured additionally the stability of the construction. Furthermore, the communication with the buildings situated higher to the north of it was accomplished by means of massive stone staircases. As evident from the layout of the excavated area of about 10 000 m² and the common **opus mixtum** used in the construction of the church and the buildings northwest of it, the setting of the complex originally ran along the east-west axis.⁵ Despite tracing a surrounding wall also to the north and east, the reconstruction of the complex of Karaačteke as an entirely walled enclosure remains hypothetical since the excavations have not yet attested a circuit wall to the west and south.

The church of Karaačteke resembles the Athonite triconch church type yet it had a single-apsed sanctuary and an interior apse-like curve of the western arm of the **naos**. In fact, one is presented with a somewhat unique combination of a pseudo-quatrefoil and a four-column type. The closest comparable examples are the church of the monastery of the Mother of God Eleousa (Veljusa) near Stroumitsa (AD 1080) and Panagia Kamariotissa on the island of Chalki (11th c.). Other peculiar features of the church are the L-shaped and curved dome supports,⁶ the U-shaped gallery-portico,⁷ and the rich interior decoration that consisted of marble architectural decoration, polychrome ceramic tiles, and wall paintings.⁸ Thus, the combination of a number of peculiar architectural and decorative features in the church of Karaačteke makes it exceptional and implies that the commission and the execution had been made by persons with high architectural culture and building experience.

The same conclusion refers to the rest of the buildings attested in the monastery of Karaačteke. As has been attested in the course of the excavations, the building northwest of the church survived a serious reconstruction which might have changed its function. Thus, according to its initial plan of an elongated building with seven rooms opened to a corridor flanked by an **arcade**, the building can be identified as a residential building. Yet the plan of the building after the reconstruction appears to be somewhat unique not only in the architecture of the monastic complex itself, but also in the medieval architecture in Bulgaria in general: two rows of rooms each arranged opposite to each and opened to a large vaulted corridor. The building certainly had an upper floor as evident from the solid vaulted ceiling of the ground floor and the staircase arranged at the southwestern entrance. The considerable number of styluses and hasps of book



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covers found in the debris suggests that it might have served as a scriptorium (Fig. 2). In contrast to it, the elongated building with a double arcade on its south façade situated to the northeast of the church recalls residential buildings with superimposed galleries, *doxata*, known in Greek and Serbian monasteries from the 11th to the 16th c.

Thus, the elegant building technique, the peculiar architectural types of the buildings as well as the architectural decoration, paralleled in prestigious foundations in the capital of Preslav and elsewhere on the territory of the Byzantine Empire, suggest that the provincial monastery of Karaačteke was not a local initiative; rather, its foundation was commissioned by some higher figure of the State administration. Indeed, the seal of Prince Boris-Michael found there suggests not only the approximate date of the foundation of the monastery, the late 9th c., but also suggests that the ruler might be the most probable patron of the foundation. Furthermore, it can be assumed that the founder of had brought the holy patron of the monastery, the Mother of God.⁹ The Byzantine anonymous *follis* (class A, AD 969-1025) found in the stone courses of the wall of the northeastern building indicates the time of the last serious reconstruction work there. It is not unlikely that this building activity was undertaken by the Byzantine authorities who in the middle of the eleventh century established in Varna a *strategia* rather than by the neighboring rural population.¹⁰ Though not definite and precise, the approximate dating of the fresco decoration of the church to the 11th - 12th c. provides rather suggestive evidence in support to such a hypothesis. However, the middle of the 11th c. was a turning point for the complex of Karaačteke too. Most likely, the collapse of the settlement network in the region due to the attacks by the *Pechenegs* in AD 1048 and the Uzi in AD 1064 led to the abandonment of the complex.¹¹ Light dwellings, some of which reused marble *spolia* from the church and other buildings in their construction, illustrate shift in the style of habitation at the site since the second half of the eleventh century onward. In the 12th - 14th c., the area east of the church was occupied by a lay cemetery, while the dwellings were predominantly arranged west of the church.

3.2. The rock-cut monastery at Basarabi

One more monastery of the time of the First Bulgarian Empire has been attested in the northern part of the West Black Sea coast yet farther from the coastline. This is the rock-cut monastery arranged in the chalk massif, known as to Tebeşir ('chalk' in Turkish) Hill near the village of Basarabi 15 km to the west of Constanța (present-day Romania). The northern and northwestern slopes of the hill shaped the core of the medieval quarry, which spread over an area of about 200 m by 40 m.¹² In fact, the quarry and monastic complex carved there belonged to the most densely inhabited area in Dobrudža, the valley of the Carasu River.¹³

The rock-cut structures carved out in the Tebeşir Hill comprise two spatially defined groups (Fig. 3). The first group includes structures, located in the northern slope of the hill, specifically, at its eastern end, which has been designated as sector B. Only about 25 m southwest of the sector B is located another group of rock-cut structures designated as sector E. Here are attested six rooms and five galleries.

All together six churches of a diminutive size had been arranged in the complex of Basarabi. Four of them are located in the northwestern area of the Tebeşir Hill (sector B), and two, in its southwestern part (sector E).¹⁴ Five out of the churches, B 1-4 (Fig. 4) and E-5, are single-nave buildings with single apses, while the layout of church E-3 resembles a *basilica-type* (Fig. 5). A common feature of all the churches is their slightly vaulted ceiling. However, their interiors are far from uniform. Two churches, B-3 and E-5, have only a naos and a sanctuary, three others, B-1, B-2, and B-4, are divided into narthex, naos, and sanctuary, while church E-3 has one more room—an *exonarthex*.



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Another distinctive group of rock-cut rooms is comprised by the rooms used for burial purposes. In contrast to the churches, the variety in the burial structures is considerably higher and one can distinguish four types: burial chambers, tombs adjacent to churches, funerary chapels, and galleries-catacombs. The number of the rock-cut dwellings in the Basarabi complex is considerably smaller than that of the churches and the burial structures — altogether four dwellings were attested in the two sectors. Two of them were turned later in burial chambers.¹⁵

The establishment of the Basarabi monastery can be generally dated to the first quarter of the 10th c.¹⁶ Most likely the rock-cut complex was abandoned as a result of the collapse of the settlement network at the Lower Danube due to the raids of [Russians](#) and Pechenegs in the late tenth century.

The rock-cut complex was not a simple hermitage but a monastic complex the core of which was comprised by two hermitages centered on churches B-1 and E-3 respectively. The preferable single-nave type of the churches, their diminutive size, and the transformation of cells into burial chambers might be seen as indications for anchorite practice. Yet the function of church B-4 as the main church of the complex implies rather a lavriotic mode of life in the Basarabi complex. However, the lay patronage played an important role in the development of the monastery. Namely the lay patronage was the main reason for the establishment of a distinctive commemorative zone (E) in the monastery. There one finds the most secure claim for a lay commission in the rock-cut monastery of Basarabi as a whole, and these are the subsidiary funerary chapel E-5 and the two graves of women placed in the galleries related to the chapel.¹⁷

The strongest evidence for a lay patronage in the Basarabi monastery, however, is provided by the main monastic church, B-4. Besides its dimensions and elaborate interior, which would have hardly been executed without the skills of trained masons, the main argument for a lay patronage is a Cyrillic inscription incised on one of the pillars between the narthex and the nave stating that "Toupai carved out of stone the church of George" ([Fig. 6](#)).¹⁸

Thus, the Basarabi complex, which inherited the crucial location of the quarry in the dense settlement network in North Dobrudža, turned into the most significant rock-cut monastery in the hinterland of the north part of the West Black Sea coast in the 10th c. known so far. Furthermore, the monastery became a pilgrimage site as evident from the inscriptions informing for various visits to the monastery¹⁹ as well as from the so-called 'boot'-graffiti ([Fig. 7](#)) scratched, as argued elsewhere, as personal signs of worship by a distinctive group of pilgrims who passed through the northeast part of the Bulgarian kingdom sometimes in the tenth century.²⁰

No data for monasteries active in the 9th - 11th c. in the greater coastal centers to the south of Haemus, such as [Mesembria](#) (mod. Nesebăr, Bulgaria), [Anchialos](#) (mod. Pomorie, Bulgaria), and [Sozopolis](#) (mod. Sozopol, Bulgaria), is available until know. In light of the epigraphic evidence, the only active monastic site in that period appeared to have been the rock-cut monastery of St Nicholas in the vicinity of Midye. More precisely, two painted inscriptions in Greek on the interior of the apse are dated to the 8th - 9th c.,²¹ one graffito-inscription in the narthex is dated to the 9th - 11th c., while another graffito incised there bears the date AD 1092/1093.²²

4. Monasteries from the 12th - 15th c.

4.1. The rock-cut monastery of Aladža



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The only surviving monastery in the northern part of the West Black Sea coast that was active between the 12th and the 15th c. was the rock-cut monastery of Aladža situated in the outskirts of the Frangensko plateau 12 km northeast of the modern city of Varna. It is located only 3.5 km far off the coast. The rooms of the complex are carved in a vertical hardly accessible rocky wall 8-12 m in height (Fig. 8). Most likely the monastery was founded in the 12th - 13th c. and was active until the Ottoman conquest of the area in the middle of the 15th c. ²³

Aladža monastery is one of the few rock-cut monasteries where one can clearly recognize the elements of a coenobitic house—a main monastery church (*katholikon*), a chapel, a funerary chapel, a crypt, a kitchen, a refectory (*trapeza*), monastic cells, and service rooms. The main church is the largest and the most carefully executed room in the complex arranged on a higher level than the rest. It has a rectangular layout and flat ceiling. The liturgical arrangement of the interior consists of an arched sanctuary niche in the eastern wall, a *prothesis* niche in the northern wall, an altar and a bench for the monks craved out of the rock. Shallow conches were shaped in the north and south wall. Two layers of mural paintings have been attested on the interior.

Step cut through the pavement of the naos of the church led to a lower level of the terrace where six monastic cells were cut in the rock in a row along a corridor (Fig. 9). A peculiar feature in all of them is the niche shaped in the eastern wall that might have accommodated icons and censers.

The kitchen and the refectory were arranged at the end of the same corridor. They were divided by a frame-built wall. The kitchen has been identified thanks to a large chimney and the cupboards cut into the rock. A small niche on the eastern wall of the refectory substituted for the apse reserved for the abbot the arrangement of the masonry refectories.

The crypt was located on the lowest level of the rock-cut complex. Three out of the five tombs cut into the floor have been attributed to the medieval period. The arrangement of such a small number of tombs indicates that the monastic community followed the burial practice according to which the remains of the deceased were moved to common tombs for 7 to 10 years after the burial. A funerary chapel was arranged above the crypt reproducing through carving a triconch layout similarly to the main church.

One more chapel was arranged at the highest level of the complex, almost 20 m in height. It was accessible by means of a wooden staircase starting from the platform in front of the crypt. The chapel was partly carved out of the rock and partly masonry. It has a rectangular nave with a flat ceiling terminating to the east into a vaulted sanctuary niche. A spacious room furnished with a bench preceded the chapel and perhaps served as a narthex. Both the narthex and chapel were painted with frescoes that survived in a relatively good condition. On the basis of their stylistic characteristics and parallels they are dated to the late 13th - early 14th c.

In the course of the study of the rock-cut monastery in 1987-1988 two remote cells have been found 800 m east of the main church. Apparently, at a certain moment the monastic community followed a lavriot practice combining a coenobitic and anchoritic mode of life.

The so-called "Catacombs" arranged on three levels are situated 500 m to the west of the main church. The ceramic material found there dated to the 4th - 6th c. and 12th - 14th c. Among the more indicative finds is a fragmented glass float light and metal fragments from a polycandilion dated to the 6th - 7th c. ²⁴ It is generally considered that the



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“Catacombs” must have been related to the basilica of the 5th - 6th c. built on the plateau above the rock-cut monastery. The ceramic fragments from the 12th - 14th c. found in the “Catacombs” indicate that they might have been used in the medieval period either.

4.2. Monasteries in the area of the coastal mountain of Emona

In contrast to the previous period, there is sufficient data for monasteries in the southern part of the West Black Sea coast, mostly coming from the Patriarchal chancellery in Constantinople, Byzantine and Bulgarian royal charters as well as from toponymy and local memory. Thus, a considerable concentration of monasteries appeared in the area of the coastal mountain of Emona (mod. Emine), more precisely in the proximity of the fortress of Emona (St Nicholas, St Elijah near the peak of Palaiokastro and St George near the coast) and the surroundings of the village of Vlas (St Blasios, St Peter, St Andrew, and St Elijah).²⁵ Two of the monasteries, St Nicholas and St Blasios, were under the jurisdiction of the [Constantinopolitan patriarch](#) by the 14th c. The independence of St Nicholas monastery from “any demand of the tsar, the church, or the magnates” had been confirmed in a charter issued by the Bulgarian tsar Ivan Alexander (r. 1331-1371) in AD 1354.²⁶ Yet in AD 1379 a charter issued by the Byzantine emperor [John V Palaiologos](#) (r. 1341-1391) transferred the control over the monastery of St Blasios to the metropolitan of Mesembria.²⁷ The reputation of the monasteries of Emona as prominent places for monastic contemplation in the second half of the 14th c. is fully demonstrated by the fact that the famous monk and spiritual leader of the [hesychasm](#) in Bulgaria, Theodosius of Turnovo, withdrew in one of them for a certain period of time.²⁸ However, the only material remains of the monasteries in the area are associated with the present monastery of St Nicholas which is situated 1 km to the east of the village of Emine. Yet its church is dated to the 19th c. and lacks any *spolia* in its construction.²⁹

4.3. Monasteries in Mesembria

Similarly to the monasteries in the area of Emona, the evidence for the monasteries in Mesembria comes out from royal charters and acts of the Patriarchal Chancellery from the 14th c. Thus, the monastery of the Mother of God Eleousa was given two charters by Tsar Ivan Alexander: according to the earliest one, he confirmed the [stauropegial](#) privileges of the monastery and thus, its independence from the metropolitan of Mesembria.³⁰ The year of the issue is not provided yet donors inscriptions on the silver frame of an icon of the Mother of God Eleousa found in Nesebăr enable a more precise dating of the royal charter.³¹ Thus, the inscriptions refer to the donation of the icon itself and a number of precious liturgical items to the monastery of the Mother of God by Tsar Ivan Alexander and his son Michael Asen after the restoration of the church they attempted in AD 1341. Furthermore, the curse in the fourth inscription to anyone, “be it a patriarch, a metropolitan, or an elder, or a powerful [person]”, who dared to touch the treasures of the monastery corresponds to the charter above noted that most likely was issued by the same time. Sometimes later, however, a second charter issued by Tsar Ivan Alexander handed over to the metropolitan of Mesembria not only the control over the monastery of the Mother of God Eleousa, but also over other Mesembrian monasteries, such as the monasteries of Christ Acropolites, the Mother of God Agnosoterissa, and St Blasios.³² The four Mesembrian monasteries appeared also in several acts of the Constantinopolitan Patriarchy issued between AD 1369 and 1391. According to the earliest one, a certain Makarios was appointed a hegoumenos of the monastery of Christ Acropolites and charged with its restoration. However, in the charter from AD 1379 above noted John V Palaiologos granted the trusteeship over the monasteries of Christ Acropolites, the Mother of God Eleousa, St Blasios, and the Mother of God Hagioretissa to the metropolitan of Mesembria. The jurisdiction of the Constantinopolitan Patriarchy over the monasteries in Mesembria,



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however, was restored in AD 1381 and confirmed for the last time by a charter in AD 1391.³³

4.4. Monasteries in the area of Sozopolis

4.4.1. The Monastery of St John Prodromos

Not surprisingly, in addition to Mesembria as an episcopal see Sozopolis was the other town with a considerable concentration of monasteries on the West Black Sea coast.³⁴ The most famous among them was the imperial and patriarchal monastery of St John Prodromos situated in the southern part of the island of Sveti Ivan ca. 1 km to the northwest of Sozopol (Fig. 10).³⁵ The island itself had been mentioned under the name of Zaffarana/Zaffo in two protulans (Catalonian and Italian) from the 14th c.³⁶ Though the history of the monastery of St John Prodromos is one of the best documented among the medieval monasteries along the West coast of the Black Sea in general, the time of its foundation is still a subject of discussion. The archaeological excavations in the period of 1985-1989 have established that the earliest church built there was a **three-aisled basilica** with a single-apsed sanctuary dated to the late 5th- 6th c. (Fig. 11). Whether it was related to a monastic complex is a matter of speculation since no building dated to the same period has been attested around the basilica until now. The basilica originally built in brickwork (*opus latericum*) underwent three major periods of reconstruction the earliest of which is dated to the 10th c. and perhaps that was the time when a monastery was founded on the island. As can be judged on the basis of a chrysobull of the emperor John V Palaiologos from AD 1363, the church was dedicated to the Mother of God Kaleosa. For reasons still unknown the monastery was abandoned until AD 1263. Then, in the course of the conquest of the coast between **Agathopolis** (mod. Ahtopol) and Mesembria, the Byzantine high military commander Michael Glabas Tarchaniotes restored and adorned the monastery of St John Prodromos with a new church. Indeed, impressive remains of a church ca. 5 m to the north of the Early Christian basilica are still visible in now days (Fig. 12). The layout provides an outstanding example of a triconch church the **dome** of which was supported by **pilasters** built in the corners of the naos (Fig. 13). The narthex was divided into three bays: the side bays terminated to the east into brick-vaulted semicircular niches. The sanctuary consisted of spacious presbyterium, **prothesis** and **diakonikon** intercommunicating with each other and opened to the naos. The central apse was five-sided, while the side apses were three-sided. Fragments of wall paintings on the walls and fragments of the marble cornices and altar screen provide evidence for the lavish interior decoration of the church. The walls of the nave and the narthex survived to a considerable height of 2-3 m thus demonstrating to the full the building technique of *pseudo-opus mixtum cum lingo* (alternating bands of stones and bricks with employment of wooden beams in the core of the walls). The picturesque appearance of the church was further stressed by the blind arches that enlivened the western and the side facades. On the basis of the peculiarities of the masonry and the exterior decoration the construction of the church is dated to the late 13th - early 14th c.³⁷ Thus, it can be suggested that the triconch served as a *katholikon* of the monastery of St John Prodromos restored by Michael Glabas Tarchaniotes in AD 1263. It might have been the time of the next significant reshaping of the earlier church of the Mother of God Kaleosa as well as of the construction of the main elements of the monastic complex such as the surrounding wall, the cells along its western section and a number of buildings to the south of the churches (the *trapeza* and the kitchen, a large baking oven, a building with representative functions frescoed on the interior, and a deep **cistern**).³⁸ In AD 1303 the monastery sheltered the former Constantinopolitan patriarch John XII Kosmas who was born in Sozopolis.³⁹ In the second half of the 14th c. St John Prodromos was the richest and dominating monastery in the bishopric of Sozopolis since a **chrysobull** of John V Palaiologos issued in AD 1363 granted it the control over two other monasteries in the city—the monastery of the Holy Apostles built by the emperor's uncle Anastasios Palaiologos and the monastery of St



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Kyrikos and Julitta. The monastery kept and even further enriched his possessions also throughout the 15th c. and survived until AD 1629 when it was finally deserted under the pressure of the Ottoman Turks because it served as a shelter of Cossacks-pirates.⁴⁰

In addition to its well-documented history as an imperial and patriarchal monastery, St John Prodromos on the island of Sveti Ivan became known through its library and scriptorium. Until now forty-five **codices** from the monastic library are known to have had survived and forty out of them are kept in the library on the island of Chalki in the Sea of Marmara where they had been brought after AD 1629. The codices include liturgical books and writings of the Church fathers, all of them written in Greek. The earliest manuscripts dated between the 12th c. and the middle of the 15th c. were copied at various places as evident from the scribal notes, while the majority of the books dated between the middle of the 15th c. and the beginning of the 17th c. were copied in the scriptorium of the monastery itself.⁴¹

4.4.2. Monastery of St Kyrikos and Julitta

Another monastery in Sozopolis the history of which is more or less documented is the monastery of St Kyrikos and Julitta situated on a small island 200 m to the northwest of the town, now artificially bonded to it.⁴² The earliest appearance of the monastery is in a Patriarchal charter from AD 1270 giving in its possession the metochion of St George near Poros (near mod. Burgas). The statue of St Kyrikos and Julitta as a patriarchal monastery is further demonstrated by two Patriarchal **sigillia** from AD 1357 and 1368 as well as by the testament of the monk Theophylaktos from AD 1391 who left all his property to the monastery. In fact, the latter is the latest document related to the monastery which most probably was finally destroyed by the Ottoman Turks in AD 1629. No material traces of the medieval monastery have been attested until now.⁴³

4.4.3. Other monasteries in Sozopolis

Three more monasteries in Sozopolis appeared occasionally in the documents above referred to. Two of them, the Mother of God and St Nicholas, were situated on small peninsulas (i.e. Červenka and Černomorets) in the western corner of Sozopolis gulf.⁴⁴ Only one, the monastery of the Holy Apostles, certainly was situated in the town itself yet its location remains uncertain.⁴⁵ All those monasteries were also destroyed by the Turks in the middle of the 17th c.⁴⁶

In light of the epigraphic evidence it seems that the rock-cut monastery of St Nicholas in the vicinity of Midye had been deserted much earlier than the monasteries of Sozopolis. The latest graffito-inscription that indicates the activity of the monastery in the Late Middle Ages was found in the narthex of the main church. The inscription is an invocation that contains the name of Agallianos identified by C. Asdracha with Theodore Agallianos who was ordained a metropolitan of Medeia under the name of Theophanes around AD 1468. Thus, the latest graffito-inscription in the rock-cut monastery is dated to the period between ca. 1440/1442 and October 1474.⁴⁷

5. Conclusion

Related both to [Constantinople](#) and to the territories from which the "new pagans" came constantly over the Byzantine Empire, the West Black Sea coast had never been a hostile place for monks throughout the Middle Ages. The impression of imbalanced concentration and even scarcity of monasteries between the Danube delta and the Bosphorus is a result of the fragmentary literary evidence and the insufficient level of archaeological surveys. Nevertheless, one has



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to admit that the identified monasteries in the West Black Sea coastal area offer one of the most detailed pictures of medieval monasticism on the Balkans since there one can find both rock-cut monasteries of a lavra type and monumental coenobitic monasteries providing fascinating examples of monastic architecture. What is particularly remarkable, however, is the high-ranking patronage of the coastal monasteries. Apparently, the foundation of monasteries and their maintenance were not a spontaneous process but rather well-planned policy followed by the Bulgarian tsars, Byzantine emperors and Constantinopolitan patriarchs. As a result, most of the monasteries on the West Black Sea coast were not simple shelters for those seeking God but through their missionary and literary activity appeared as strongholds of the Christian faith in that troubled region.

1. S. Eyice, N. Thierry, "Le monastère et la source de Mydie en Thrace turque", *Cahiers Archéologiques* 20 (1970), pp. 47-76.
2. В. Бешевлиев, "Името Варна," *Известия на Народния Музей-Варна* 17 (32) (1982), pp. 5-8.
3. For the monastery of Караачтеке, see С. Покровски, "Разкопки на Караачтеке при Варна при Варна," *Известия на Археологическия институт*, 14 (1940/1942), pp. 249-252; М. Мирчев, "Разкопките в Караачтеке при Варна," *Известия на Археологическия институт*, 17 (1950), pp. 286-7; К. Попконстантинов, Р. Костова, В. Плетньов, "Манастирите при Равна и Караачтеке до Варна в манастирската география на България през IX-X в.," in *Българските земи през средновековието VII-XVIII в. Международна конференция в чест на проф. Ал. Кузев. Acta Musei Varnaensis* III-2. (Varna 2005), pp. 107-121.
4. Д. Димитров, "Варна и близките ѝ околности през VII-IX в.," *Известия на Народния Музей-Варна* 18 (33), pp. 55-79; В. Йотов, "Археологически приноси към историята на Варна през средновековието (1)", *Acta Musei Varnaensis* II (Varna 2004), pp. 312-342.
5. Since the present southern edge of the terrace has been cut by a road in modern times, any remains of buildings which might have been found there would have been obliterated and scattered down the southern slopes. Moreover, these slopes themselves have been terraced and parceled out for vineyards and fruit orchards.
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Glossary :

	anta or pilaster, the
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A shallow rectangular feature projecting from a wall, having a capital and a base and architecturally treated as a column.

apse

An arched structure or a semi-circular end of a wall. In byzantine architecture it means the semicircular, usually barrel-vaulted, niche at the east end of a basilica. The side aisles of a basilica may also end in an apse, but it is always in the central apse where the altar is placed. It was separated from the main church by a barrier, the templon, or the iconostasis. Its ground plan on the external side could be semicircular, rectangular or polygonal.

arcade

An arch is the opening formed between two columns or pillars. The rows of two or even more such openings are called arcades.

basilica

In ancient Roman architecture a large oblong type building used as hall of justice and public meeting place. The roman basilica served as a model for early Christian churches.

chancel screen of presbytery

A short barrier between the bema and the nave. It had originally the form of a parapet that was later made of stone or of marble. It is generally an element of early Christian religious architecture, and it appears on ground plans either as a linear structure or forming a Π. It consists of small columns or pillars in the interspace of which slabs are inserted. Crosses and floral patterns are usually used for the relief decoration of the screen.

chrysobull

(gold seal) Imperial document of the Byzantine state which was so named because it bore the gold seal of the emperor.

cistern

A receptacle for holding rainwater, but also water transported from elsewhere, in order to keep it stored. The cisterns were either covered either open, and they could have more than one compartments.

codex

Manuscript of papyrus, parchment or paper bound according to the form of a today book. The most common type of book during the medieval period. In the 4th century it replaced the roll thanks to its facilities: the codex could be easily opened to any page, the text could be written on both sides of the sheet and was better preserved.

diakonikon

An auxiliary chamber of the church, also known in early years as *skeuophylakion*, which could be a separate building attached to the church. There were kept the sacred vessels but sometimes also the offerings of the faithful, the archive or library. In Byzantine churches the diakonikon becomes the sacristy to the south of the Bema, corresponding to the prothesis to the north, and forming along with them the triple sanctuary. It usually has an apse projecting to the east.

dome

A characteristic element of Byzantine architecture. The dome is a hemispherical vault on a circular wall (drum) usually pierced by windows. The domed church emerges in the Early Byzantine years and its various types gradually prevail, while they are expanded in the Balkans and in Russia.

exonarthex (outer narthex)

The transverse vestibule or portico preceding the narthex of the church.

folles

(pl. folles) A Latin word originally meaning a purse, but used in the Byzantine period for the largest denomination of copper coin, initially worth 40 nummi.

katholikon

The main church in a monastic complex, heart of the monastic activity.

naos (nave)

The main part of the temple, between the *narthex* and the *bema*. It was the place where the congregation took part in the liturgy.

narthex

A portico or a rectangular entrance-hall, parallel with the west end of an early Christian basilica or church.

opus mixtum (ουδ.)

Masonry consisting of small stones and abundant mortar, which often interchange with horizontal double rows of plinths.

patriarchal monastery (stauropegion)

A monastery under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate, autonomous from the administration of the local bishop. The term stauropegion applied also to



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villages, meaning that in tax matters (mostly in regard to ecclesiastical taxes) they were under the control of the Patriarchate and not of the local diocese.

prothesis

In ecclesiastical architecture, the sacristy to the north of the sanctuary. Usually it has an apse projecting to the east. It is the chamber where the eucharistic elements were prepared (*Proskomide*) before the Communion.

sigillion

Lat. sigillion – seal –

1. During the Byzantine Period the word sigillion refers to the official document bearing a seal issued by the imperial secretariat. The sigillia were divided into lead-seals and gold-seals (chrysobullon sigillion). The same name was used by state services for other documents. The imperial secretariat started to use the first sigillia in the mid 13th c. The Ecumenical Patriarchate replaced former documents known as “hypomnemata” with the sigillia.

2. During the Ottoman Period the sigillia were documents issued by the Patriarch usually for the confirmation of some privileges or the notification of some decision of the Synod.

spolia

From the Latin word *spolium* (=spoils, booty). Architectural remains from destroyed buildings that have been reused in later periods.

synthronon

Rows of built benches, arranged in a semicircular tier like a theatre, in the apse of a church. On these benches the clergy sat during Divine Liturgy. The bishop sat on the cathedra at the top of the synthronon.

three-aisled basilica

An oblong type of church internally divided into three aisles: the middle and the two side aisles. The middle aisle is often lighted by an elevated clerestory. In the Early Byzantine years this type of church had huge dimensions.

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“Charter for the monastery of St Nicholas on the promontory of Emona,” in *The Voices of Medieval Bulgaria, Seventh-Fifteenth Century. The Records of a Bygone Culture*, ed. K. Petkov (Leiden - Boston 2008), p. 501-502.

“Charter for the monastery of the Mother of God Eleusa,” in *The Voices of Medieval Bulgaria, Seventh-Fifteenth Century. The Records of a Bygone Culture*, ed. K. Petkov (Leiden - Boston 2008), pp. 500-501.

“Life of Theodosius of Tarnovo, mid of the fourteenth century,” in *The Voices of Medieval Bulgaria, Seventh-Fifteenth Century. The Records of a Bygone Culture*, ed. K. Petkov (Leiden - Boston 2008), p. 287-314.

Quotations

The renovation of the monastery of Prodromos at Sozopolis by Michael Glabas Tarchaneiotēs



Medieval monasteries on the West Black Sea coast

Ἐπειτα Σωζόπολιν ἀπὸ Βουλγάρων (96)
σώζει κατασχῶν ἅμα τοῖς πέριξ τόποις·
[...]

κάντεῦθεν εὐρῶν τὴν μονὴν τοῦ Προδρόμου
σμικρὰν, πνιγηρὰν, δυστυχή παρ' ἀξίαν,
ἣν εἶχεν ἕξᾶς εὐτελῶν μονοτρόπων, (105)
οὕτω καλὴν ἔδειξεν, ὡς ἤδη βλέπεις,
καὶ τὴν πρὸ μικροῦ Νησίον καλουμένην
εἰς νήσον ἀβρὰν ἑξαμείψας εὐρέθη
οὐκ ἦν γὰρ εἰκὸς τὸν προφήτην τὸν μέγαν
ἔρημον οἰκεῖν καὶ μετὰ πότμον τόπον.

E. Miller (ed.), *Manuelis Philae carmina* II, pp. 244-5, v. 96-109.

The desertation of the Monastery of Prodromos by Murat IV after it had served as a shelter of Cossacks-pirates:

21. Ὁ αὐτὸς βασιλεὺς [John VII Palaiologos] εἶχε κτίσει καὶ ἑτέραν μονὴν ἐπὶ τῆς ἀπέναντι Σωζοπόλεως κειμένης νήσου, ἐπ' ὀνόματι καὶ αὐτὴν τοῦ τιμίου Προδρόμου. Περὶ δὲ τὸ 1626 ἔτος ἐπὶ Σουλτὰν Μουράτ τοῦ Δ', ἐπιπλεύσαντες Κοζάκοι μετὰ 150 ἑλαφρῶν πλοιαρίων, καὶ εἰς τὸν Θρακικὸν Βόσπορον παρεισδύσαντες, ἐλεηλάτησαν τὰ κατ' Ἐυρώπην παράλια αὐτοῦ χωρία, καὶ κατέκαυσαν τὸν Βαθὺν, ἢ Μέγαν Ῥύακα (Μπουγιούκ Δερε), τὸ Νεοχώριον καὶ τὸ Σωσθένιον (τὴν Στένην). Εἶτα, ὑποστρέφοντες εἰς τὰ ἴδια, ἄραξαν εἰς τὴν εἰρημένην νήσον· καὶ ἐπειδὴ οἱ ἐν τῇ ἐκεῖ Μονῇ τοῦ Προδρόμου κατοικοῦντες Μοναχοὶ ὑπὸ φόβου κινούμενοι, ἐφιλοξένησαν αὐτούς, οἱ Κρατοῦντες τὴν μονὴν κατηδάφισαν, τοὺς δὲ Μοναχοὺς διεσκόρπισαν ἐκεῖθεν».

«Ἱστορικὸν ὑπόμνημα περὶ τῆς κατὰ τὴν Χάλκην μονῆς τῆς Θεοτόκου ὑπὸ Βαρθολομαίου τοῦ Κουτλουμουσιανοῦ», cited by I. Σακελλίων, «Ἰωάννου Ε' καὶ Ἰωάννου Ζ' τῶν Παλαιολόγων χρυσόβουλλον καὶ ἀργυρόβουλον περὶ τῆς κατὰ τὴν Σωζόπολιν μονῆς τοῦ Προδρόμου», *Δελτίον τῆς Ἱστορικῆς καὶ Εθνολογικῆς Εταιρείας τῆς Ἑλλάδος* 2 (1885), p. 611.