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Philanthropic institutions in byzantine Constantinople

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1. Introduction

The philanthropic institutions of Byzantium constitute the main mechanism through which the Christian imperative of philanthropy was expressed and aid to the destitute was offered. The starting point of a study on these institutions should be an outline of the categories of population to which they were addressed. Poverty and large percentages of destitute constituted a constant feature in the Byzantine society, as was the case in other societies of the same period. But the Byzantine perception of philanthropy was not addressed to the poor in general. According to the Byzantine perception, the destitute who should receive help and charity were people who were physically unable to work and cover their needs. More specifically, such cases were the elderly, the disabled, the patients, the orphans, and particularly those who did not have relatives to look after them. The concern for these people was expressed through the operation of special institutions, founded and managed by the State, the [church](#) and wealthy individuals, always according to the principle of philanthropy.¹

There was a distinction in the Christian-Byzantine perception of philanthropy in relation to that of the Greek-Roman past, and it concerns the process of the philanthropic action. While in the Greco-Roman antiquity the philanthropic activity constituted a duty of the State and an was an action of competence on behalf of the government, in the Christian perception it was considered a personal duty.² However, this individualisation of the Christian duty regarding philanthropy had its limits, meaning that that philanthropic activity had also institutional aspects. First of all the church, as an institution, soon made the philanthropic activity one of its primary duties. It has been supported that, when, in the late Byzantine period, the state did not have the economic means of maintaining institutions of welfare, this mission was mainly shouldered by the Church and the monasteries.³ Moreover, the philanthropic activity constituted the duty and one of the main

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priorities of the [emperor](#) - and, in his name, of the central administration, in general - according to the principles and values upon which the legitimisation of imperial power was founded. The institutions of welfare are considered as one of the means through which the emperor expresses his philanthropy. Moreover, most emperors made sure to respond to these principles by founding philanthropic institutions, which survived for centuries after their construction since their management was run by the central administration.⁴

2. The institutions

Forms of welfare for people in misfortune existed also in the Greco-Roman antiquity, and they were mainly the work of the public authorities, religious institutions or individuals. From the beginning of the Byzantine history these practices were systematised and acquired institutional consolidation in the framework of the principals of Christian philanthropy. An element of innovation that was established at that time and it constitutes since then the basic parameter of practices of care for people in misfortune, is the construction of institutions of hospitality. The foundation and operation of such institutions constitutes from now on a standard practice in the Eastern, Byzantine part of the previously Roman empire, and it was imported later in the West, through the Byzantine influence.

Care for the destitute was not limited to a strict institutional form. For example, the Church and monasteries maintained their practice of distributing food and other goods on great feast days; also through the Church, charity work was offered by pious women, the so-called *diakonisses* (deaconesses) who took care at home of the parishioners in need.⁵ The care provided by the institutions to their inmates is usually considered more effective than the system of benefits outside those institutions. Moreover, philanthropic institutions ensured specialised care, according to the individual categories of people in need to whom care was provided. Thus there were special institutions with specific roles, such as hospitals, nursing homes, hospices, the imperial Orphanotropheion, and other, even more specialized institutions, such as leper-houses, that corresponded to the particular needs for each category of destitute people.

The conditions of the establishment of welfare institutions constitute a complicated phenomenon that has not been addressed by scholars. In general it could be supported that the emergence of such institutions was the result of the need for regularisation of philanthropy dictated after the establishment of Christianity, and of the according entanglement of the State and ecclesiastical administrative mechanisms. However, we should not ignore the economic parameters related to the preferential arrangement of the fortune and income of philanthropic houses, to which such institutions belonged.⁶ Another aspect is also very probable when it comes to the establishment of welfare institutions: namely the need not for hospitality but for the restriction of the people in need, so that their presence in public should be limited, annoying as it could be considered for the everyday social routine and derivative of lawlessness (mendicity, vagabondage, exploitation of the invalid by shifty people etc). This aspect should certainly not be overestimated,

and undoubtedly it did not characterize every type of institution. In the case of hospitals, for example, something like this cannot be supported. But the leper-houses were a different case, since they aimed exactly at restricting people who were carriers of contagious and deforming illnesses. Despite the widespread emphasis on the ideal of philanthropy, the perception of the Byzantines on poverty and the poor was dubious and wavering between idealisation on the one hand, mistrust and scorn on the other. In religious texts in particular, poverty is idealised as a situation agreeable to God, and poor are considered as those who will enjoy the divine favour in the Last Judgement. Equally present, however was the contemptuous attitude toward the poor. Particularly revealing are the references of Alexios Makrembolites in his "Dialogue between rich and poor" that demonstrated the reciprocal mistrust and antipathy that had dominated the [late Byzantine period](#). Poverty was connected to a reprehensible condition of passivity, which was ascribed in general to the poor and which could become tolerable only in the destitute. Indicative is also the penalization of several aspects of poverty (such as mendicity, vagabondage) as it is shown in the relevant provisions of the Justinian Code.⁷

As regards the specialisation of various institutions, their name is sufficiently revealing, so that it does not need particular commentary, with the exception of the term *xenon* ("ξενών", hospice) the meaning of which is not very clear, especially when it comes to compare it with the term *xenodocheion* ("ξενοδοχείον", hotel). During the early period, the term *xenon* was applied to a complex of welfare institutions centered around a hospital and also including other departments offering hospitality to the destitute. Characteristic examples are the institution of Basil the Great in Caesarea (named Basileias), as well as the hospice of Sampson in Constantinople (6th c.), a complex of philanthropic institutions, which, apart from the hospital, also included spaces for the accomodation of destitutes. The use of this term designates hospitality offered to inmates of sorts; so *xenon* could have had a more general meaning and have been associated with any type of philanthropic institution. Since philanthropic complexes of the early period had multiple roles but their core was always a hospital, the term *xenon* was connected particularly with hospitals, so that, even in the late period, the term was employed to designate institutions that were essentially hospitals (for example the so called *xenon* of Kral that had been founded in Constantinople by the king of Serbia Stephen II Uroš Miloytin). However, in no way should the *xenon* be confused with a *xenodocheion*, since the latter was a specialised institution with a specific mission: hospitality extended to poor wayfarers, as the word itself denotes.⁸

3. The most famous institutions in Constantinople

3.1. Hospices - hospitals

Hospitals were perhaps the original and basic core of the institutions of welfare in Byzantium. The examples of Basileias or the hospice of Sampson show that specialised philanthropic institutions had their origins in appendages of hospitals. Hospitals' aim was to provide medical care for those who did not have the financial capacity to pay for a doctor, but because illness was considered as a condition in which no differences between wealth or social class should matter,

hospitals provided care to anyone and not only to the destitute. The better care that was offered in hospitals, thanks to a specialised personnel of doctors and the appropriate organisation for that, resulted in even affluent patients seeking medical care there. It has been established that the organisation of those hospitals resembles in many aspects that of today's hospitals, since they included specialised departments for specific categories of diseases, and the doctors were assisted by a specialised personnel with nursing and paramedic knowledge, as well as from a support personnel (cooks, servants etc). The biggest and richest monasteries had also a hospital, to the service of both the monks and the population. Thus, there were hospitals not only in the cities, but also in the countryside as appendages of monasteries (such as the hospital of the Barlaam Monastery in Meteora), so that the residents of the countryside were provided with medical care.

The best known hospitals in Constantinople were those of Sampson and of the [Pantokrator monastery](#). The hospital which had been developed around the hospice of Sampson was founded in the years of Justinian I (527-562) and its founder was a distinguished doctor in this period. A characteristic example of the longevity of these institutions is that the hospital survived surely until the [fall of Constantinople](#) by the Crusaders (1204). It is assumed that it survived even later, until 1453. The hospital of the Pantokrator monastery constituted an imperial foundation of [John II Comnenus](#) (1118- 1143) and his wife Eirene. Its organisation is described in the [typikon](#) of the monastery and shows that it was a model for medical care, with distinguishable departments for general diseases, chirurgical, ophthalmologic, as well as quarters for the special care of women (it is not clear if it was a specialised gynaecological department) and seriously ill or bedridden patients. In the hospital there was also a *xenotapheion* ("ξενοτάφειο") allocated, namely a space for burial of patients who passed away and had no relatives to receive their corpses. The hospital of the Pantokrator Monastery functioned as a model for hospitals that were founded at that time in the West by monastic orders, such as by the Hospitaler knights. Another well-known hospital of the late period which had not been founded by a Byzantine patron, was the so-called hospice of the Kral and it was an appendage of the [metochion](#) of the Chilandari monastery in Constantinople, which had been founded by Serbian Kral Stephen Miloytin.⁹

3.2. Xenodocheia

Xenodocheia (hotels) were the response to and expression of the value of hospitality, an additional aspect of philanthropy, which was particularly honoured in the Christian thought. They were addressed to poor travellers and wayfarers, who did not have the possibility of residing in an inn, and for this reason *xenodocheia* could be found frequently in the countryside, as appendages of monasteries. The most known *xenodocheion* in Constantinople was the one founded by emperor [Romanos I Lekapenos](#), the so-called *Xenodocheion* of Maurianos, (10th c.), which was addressed to poor who lived in the provinces and had to visit the capital for their affairs. We could also include the *xenodocheion* that had been founded by Michael Attaleiates in Raidestos (11th c.) that was addressed to pilgrims who travelled to and from the Holy Land. For fear of guests attempting to abuse the hospitality of *xenodocheia*, the period of

hospitality was usually limited to three days.¹⁰

3.3. The Orphanotropheion

The reference to the Orphanotropheion is in singular number, because apart from the imperial Orphanotropheion in Constantinople, no other similar institution is known to have existed. According to Konstantelos and Thomaidis, during the 4th and 5th centuries two Orphanages had been founded in Constantinople, the Orphanotropheion of Zoticus (founder also of the leper-house) and the Orphanotropheion of Saint Paul; of the two, the latter would survive as an imperial foundation. According to Miller there was only one such foundation, the one founded by Zoticus in the 5th century.¹¹ Byzantine administration was greatly preoccupied with the care and upbringing of orphan children, both from a legal and a practical point of view. The upbringing of orphans was undertaken by relatives and foster families, as well as monasteries, and the role of this Orphanotropheion was to accommodate children with no foster parents, abandoned babies or children who had lost their parents in times of raids and natural destructions. Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1118) took action to refound and expand the Orphanotropheion, for which his daughter and biographer Anna praises him especially and extensively; such preoccupation on his side was surely connected to the fact that great numbers of orphan children flooded Constantinople, as a result of the emperor's expeditions to Asia Minor. The director of the Orphanotropheion, the *orphanotrophos*, was selected among administrative officials, and juridical training was certainly a factor to that selection, since the *orphanotrophos* was also invested with judicial authority in cases pertaining to family law and the protection of orphan children rights. Thus, the office of *orphanotrophos* was particularly high, as the successful career of the best known such dignitary shows: eunuch [John from Paphlagonia](#) was the most powerful man in the Empire between 1034 and 1041, and he managed to raise to the throne his brother [Michael IV](#) and his nephew [Michael V](#). The imperial Orphanotropheion functioned also as a school, which in the 12th century was known as one of the best [educational institutions](#) of the Empire. The Orphanotropheion functioned again under [Michael VIII Paleologus](#) after the [recapture of Constantinople](#) in 1261, and survived up to the first decades of 14th century, when the general decline of the State administrative mechanism caused its falling into decay. By 1350, when the treatise of Pseudo-Kodinos 'De officiis' is dated, the Orphanotropheion had ceased to exist because in this treatise the dignity of the *orphanotrophos* is recorded as having no concrete aim.¹² The last reference concerning the Orphanotropheion shows the weakening of social welfare and in particular of the system of philanthropic institutions at the late period. The references of Alexios Makrembolites draw a gloomy picture of the period, which was the result of the general decline of social welfare and of the weakening of the ideals of philanthropy. The state of collapse in which the Byzantine state had fallen from the mid 14th century - territorial shrinkage, civil wars, lack of resources, and dissolution of the administrative mechanism - contributed to the serious weakening and disorganisation of the institutions of welfare. Despite that, a number of foundations continued to function in the remaining - before 1453 - Byzantine territory. Indeed, foreign visitors, such as

Bertrandon de la Brocquiere, pointed out the great number of philanthropic institutions that functioned in the Constantinople.¹³

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