

1 | In Search of Late Byzantine Rural Island Communities

In AD 1299, a village in the area of Kake Rache on the island of Thasos was celebrating the construction of a new church dedicated to Prophetes Elias. An inscription commemorating this event survives immured in the west façade of the early modern church of Metamorphoses (Fig. 1.1). The inscription also lists the donors involved: the priest Kaloioannes and his entire village, who bore the expenses for the church, as well as the mason Loukas from Christoupolis (modern Kavala, a town opposite Thasos on the Greek mainland), who was responsible for its construction.¹ This inscription thus bears witness to a collective act of donation in which an entire village pooled its resources to create a new focal point of prayer and ritual while reaffirming its collective identity by collaborating in an act of gift-giving and thanksgiving to God.

Almost a century later and 97 km southeast, on the neighboring island of Lemnos, two siblings by the name of Kondylis were forming an official complaint against the Athonite monastery of Lavra. The Kondylis siblings were accusing the monks of unlawful possession of an icon of the Virgin called Serbouniotissa, which they claimed was their family heirloom.² In response, the patriarch charged the local elites and governing officials of the island with investigating the claim and collecting people's testimonies pertaining to the case. The final decision was in favor of Lavra because the monastery had had the icon in its possession for more than sixty years! It is interesting, however, that this claim caused such a commotion on the island, involving monks, imperial officials, and locals offering their testimonies and opinions on the case. We do not know much about the identity of the Kondylis family, but the lack of any titles accompanying their names

¹ Kalopissi-Verti 1992, pp. 107–08; Koder 1998, p. 182. The inscription reads: *Ανηγερθη ο θηρος κ(αί) πανσεπτως ναος του αγι[ου] κ(αί) ενδοξου προφητου Ηλια δια σηνδρομης κ(αί) εξοδου παττα Καλοιωαννου σην της αυτον χόρας [. . .] Λουκας δε τουνο μα εκ Χ(ριστο)υποληνη ηκοδομησε ταυτην. ετ(ους) ζωζ'(6807 = 1299).*

² Lemerle et al. 1979, no. 152 (1392), 122–24. Lavra Monastery found itself in court again in 1407 for a similar case pertaining to an icon that was also claimed by the metropolis of Imbros; see Lemerle et al. 1979, no. 160 (1407), 149–53. For the specific icon of the Virgin Serbouniotissa, see also Oikonomides 1991, 39.



Fig. 1.1 The early modern church of Metamorphoses at Kake Rache, with the Late Byzantine dedicatory inscription to Prophetes Elias embedded in the west wall.

and the way they are presented in the surviving document suggest that did not belong to the local elite. A reference to them in the document as ανασταντες δια όχλου (“appearing/coming forward with a crowd”) further identifies them as non-elites, because the word όχλος (ochlos) is often used in descriptions of court cases to indicate loud and unruly crowds.³ This description also suggests that the two siblings had gathered some locals in support of their claim against the powerful monastery.

Both stories tell us something about collective action – people coming together to build a church, offer testimonies in a dispute, or mobilize to support someone’s claim. They also speak to the actions, material culture, and agency of non-elites who, despite their modest resources and limited influence, were still able to translate their needs and desires into action, even pressing a claim against a powerful monastery. Such stories should already make us suspicious of generalizations about powerless and static non-elites.

Furthermore, these stories contribute to our understanding of life in the provinces, and specifically in the Northern Aegean islands in the Late

³ Krallis 2018.

Byzantine period. While the Late Byzantine period has often been portrayed as a period of decline, plagued by political uncertainty, piracy, and depopulation, these stories highlight dynamic communities and individuals who certainly were not expecting the empire to fall. We see them investing in their future, building communities, and claiming better conditions in life. In that sense they invite us to reconsider both how we have come to understand this period and how notions of decline and fall have tainted our approach to non-elites, particularly rural communities.

These stories also provide a very distinct island perspective to the Late Byzantine period. Considering that most of what we know about this period comes from mainland examples (Constantinople, Macedonia, Asia Minor, and the Peloponnese), a focus on island communities offers a new perspective on studying Byzantine society in a period of crisis. While islands are easily imagined as isolated and extremely vulnerable to political, environmental, and economic changes, they can also be incredibly resilient by capitalizing on their island geography and the various degrees of connectivity it allows. In these stories, we catch glimpses of the political, religious, and economic networks that extend beyond Lemnos's and Thasos's geographical borders. For example, in the inscription at Kake Rache, the reference to the mason's place of origin (Christoupolis) affirms Thasos's close connections to the mainland. Although references to masons both in inscriptions and textual sources in the Late Byzantium are not rare, in this case the villagers are showcasing their economic and artistic connections beyond their island and their ability to tap into them for the building of their church.⁴

In the Kondylis' incident we also get a first taste of Lemnos's economic and spiritual relationship to the Athonite monasteries, as well as the operations of ecclesiastic and imperial administration on the island. These stories then speak of active island communities with extensive economic and political networks beyond their geographic borders and systems of support that involve holy figures as much as they do locals and imperial officials.

These diverse and dynamic rural communities that proved to be resilient in the face of significant political, economic, and demographic changes experienced during the Late Byzantine period are the protagonists of this book. I combine archaeological and textual sources to reconstruct the living conditions of rural communities, explore their responses to crisis, and examine their overall role in the political and economic realities of their times. In doing so I employ a framework of social resilience and islandness

⁴ Ousterhout 1999, 56–57.

in support of new perspectives on Byzantine society and identity, as well as new insights pertaining to the Late Byzantine period. By arguing for resilient rather than passive and static island rural communities, I seek to reinstate ordinary people in the historical narrative and reintroduce them as active participants in the narratives of the Late Byzantine period, pointing to their ability not only to react to change but also to initiate it. I have thus set out to write a book about survival, resilience, and community-building in the Late Byzantine Northern Aegean.

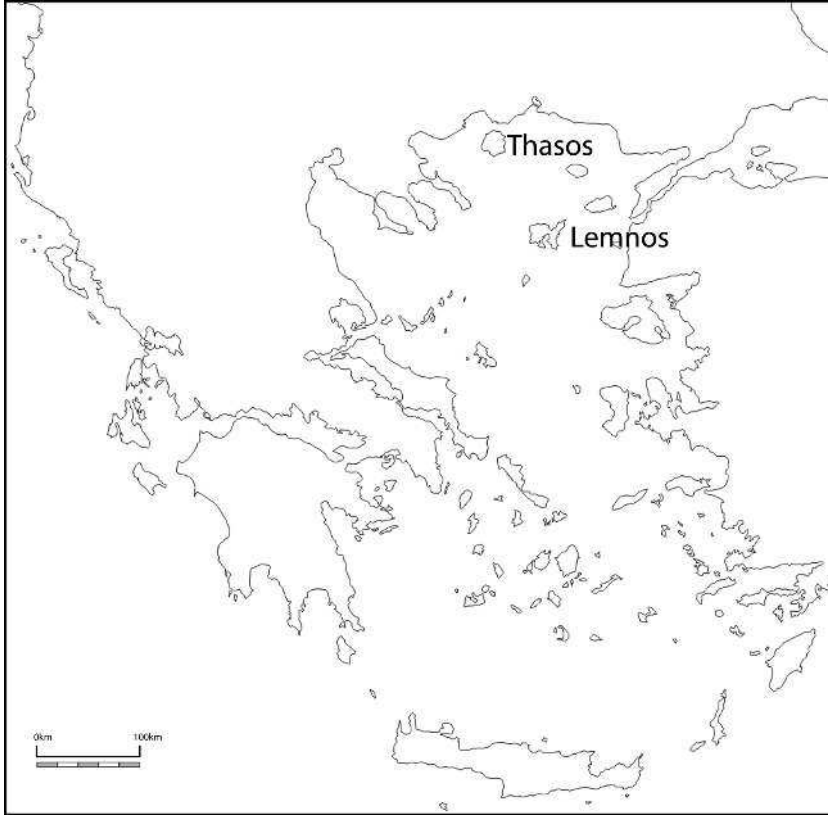
In Search of the People

Recent works on Byzantine communities privilege a more holistic and multidisciplinary approach, successfully bringing together material, pictorial, and textual evidence to interrogate issues of collective identity, daily life, and experience in the provinces.⁵ This book follows a similar approach; it relies on a variety of archaeological, textual, and ethnographic data and draws inspiration from different theoretical approaches on community formation, collectiveness, and place-making processes that enhance a sense of belonging and contribute to resilient societies.

The study of rural communities' social and spatial organization has been foundational for understanding their responses to crisis and evaluating their degree of resilience. Emphasis has thus been placed on the investigation of site location and on distribution patterns, defense networks, and communication avenues among sites, understood here as parts of coping strategies that brought these communities together and better positioned them to deal with catastrophe and trauma. This analysis is based mainly on the results of an extensive field survey I completed on Lemnos and Thasos between 2004 and 2008, combined with previous archaeological works in the region.

My fieldwork on the two islands was a targeted, site-focused, period-specific, extensive field survey whose principal goals were to identify and record Late Byzantine sites and study each site's location, possible functions, and relation to the surrounding built and natural environment (Map 1.1). During four field seasons I identified and recorded 140 sites, including fortified and unfortified settlements, forts and free-standing towers, monasteries, monastic estates, churches, and ports (see Maps 1.2 and 1.3).

⁵ See, for example, Veikou 2012; Gerstel 2015; Ousterhout 2017.

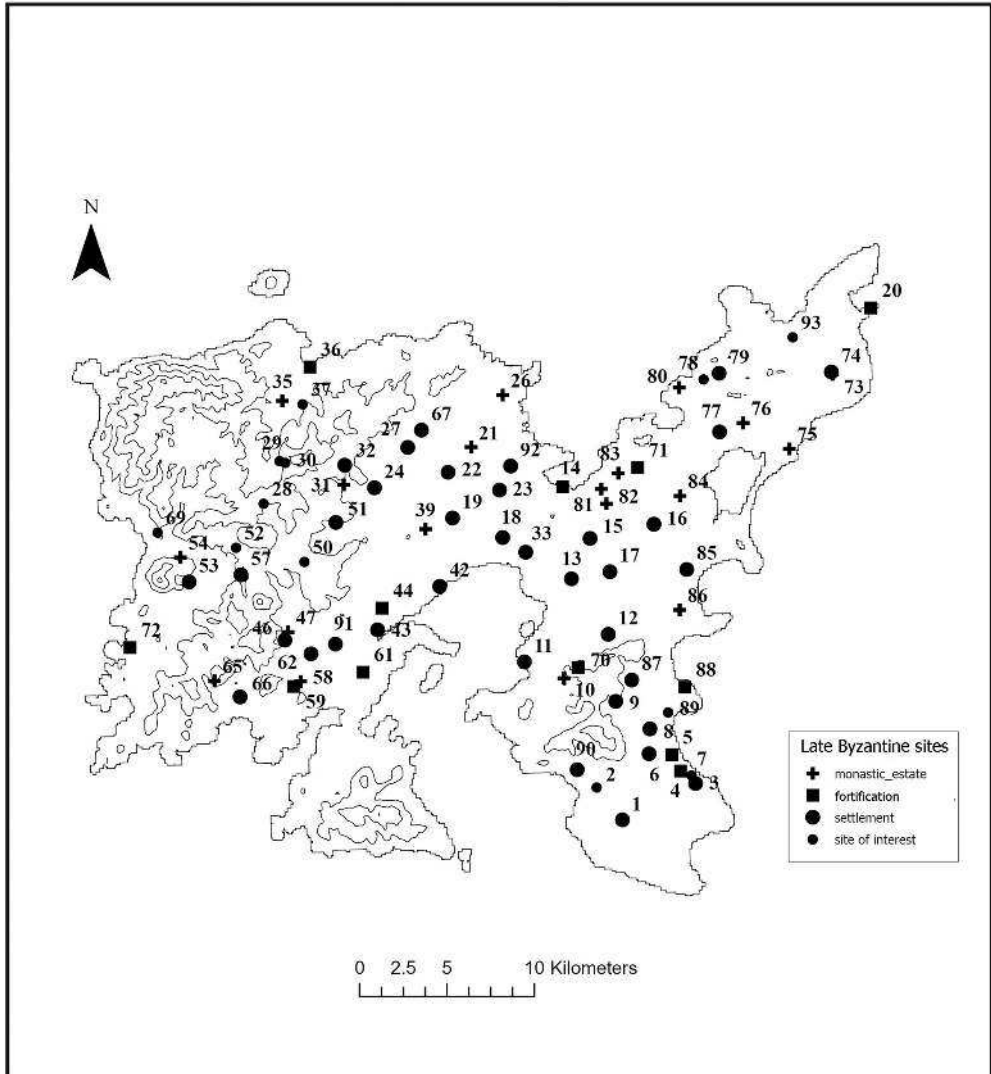


Map 1.1 Map of Lemnos and Thasos in the Northern Aegean.

These sites are in no way an exhaustive record of all Late Byzantine sites on Lemnos and Thasos. I undoubtedly missed sites that were perhaps smaller, with no diagnostic material visible, or located on inaccessible parts of the islands, such as Thasos's heavily forested mountaintops. Some sites have also completely disappeared because of recent building activities, soil erosion, or modern developments related to the increase of tourism on these islands.

The recorded sites' variety of primary function, estimated size, location, and material signature are discussed in detail in Chapters 3 and 4, where I also explore how such findings participate in discussions of crisis and resilience. Here I wish to dwell a bit more on the survey's methodology, presenting its limitations and strengths in an effort to be transparent about the project design and its impact on the survey results.

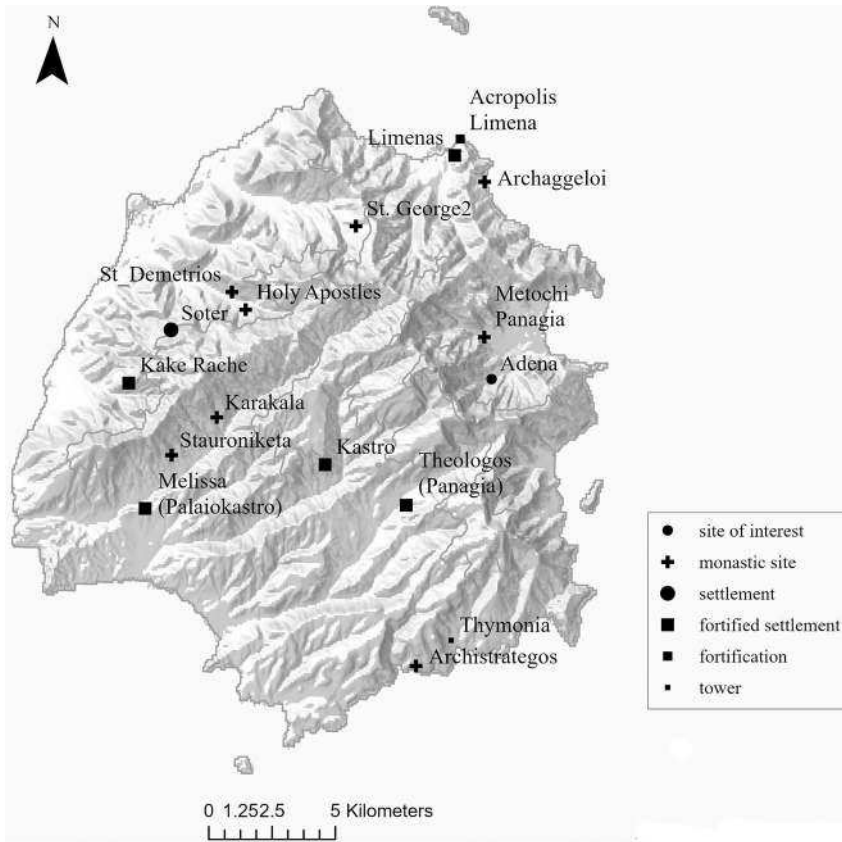
Inspired by and building on more than seventy years of archaeological field surveys in the Mediterranean, my survey maintained a focus on site



Map 1.2 Distribution map of recorded Late Byzantine sites on Lemnos.

function and location and the relation between the human-made and natural environments. I also relied on the experiences of previous surveys to develop a working definition of “site” that best fit my project’s parameters.⁶ Thus, in this survey, Late Byzantine sites are understood and

⁶ There has been much discussion among Mediterranean survey projects on the definition of sites as well as a reaction against site-based research and a move toward an off-site approach that privileges an artifact-based survey. Bintliff 2000a; Terrenato 2004; Caraher, Nakassis, and Pettegrew 2006.



Map 1.3 Distribution map of recorded Late Byzantine sites on Thasos.

recorded as areas of human activity that both had a high concentration of artifacts against background material distribution and had definable limits. Although I assign a primary function to each of the recorded sites (labeling them as settlements, fortifications, etc.), I recognize that they encompassed a variety of different and overlapping activities; this complexity of social, economic, and spatial attributes will emerge in the following chapters. On site, I recorded and mapped each site's exact location using a handheld global positioning system (GPS) device; later, I uploaded the coordinates to ArcGIS to further explore the sites' spatial attributes and the relations among them. For each site I used a recording sheet to note its coordinates, geology, and soil type, as well as degree of vegetation and visibility, which could affect the identification and size estimation of sites.

All types of material evidence found that were certainly or possibly dated to the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries were recorded. As seen in

Appendices A and B, these included the presence/absence of standing features, architectural remains, pottery, coins, metal objects, marble, stone, glass, and animal bones.⁷ I noted separately the presence of diagnostic finds, in most cases diagnostic pottery sherds that offered a more secure dating of site use. Site size estimation was based on the size of artifact scatter and location of monuments in the vicinity. Finally, the primary (or the suspected primary) function of each site was noted, based both on the material evidence found and on relevant information from the monastic archives. Where primary function could not be determined, sites were still recorded and labeled as sites of interest.

A number of practical factors also played a role in the project design, such as the research permit, budget, time and manpower limitations, as well as previous research done on the islands.⁸ I was able to conduct an extensive survey thanks to the support of the Kavala–Thasos Ephorate and the Lesvos Ephorate of Antiquities, who are responsible for the antiquities and cultural heritage of the islands of Thasos and Lemnos, respectively. However, while I was allowed site visits, and to record and photograph known sites and standing monuments, I was not allowed to collect (i.e., physically remove) any surface artifacts (Fig. 1.2) for further study and analysis.

The limited archaeological work on the islands also informed my own survey design. On the one hand, existing archaeological maps with Byzantine sites were useful and, together with extensive lists of toponyms and site descriptions found in the monastic archives, formed the basis of my survey. On the other hand, the excavations at the port of Limenas at Thasos and at Kotzinos at Lemnos, albeit extremely valuable for their stratigraphic finds, pottery especially, do not offer further insights into Late Byzantine rural sites. Even in the case of fortifications and churches, which are the most visible and numerous standing monuments, the lack of earlier excavations and detailed architectural studies for many of them permits only a limited discussion about their original date of construction and span of use. Nevertheless, the data I present in this book provide valuable information on Late Byzantine rural communities and new

⁷ The Appendices A and B include all sites with Late Byzantine material that I recorded during my fieldwork.

⁸ See Cherry 1983 for a discussion on extensive and intensive surveys and the variety of factors that inform the survey design.



Fig. 1.2 The author studying artifacts on site.

avenues of exploration pertaining to their economic strategies, social networks, and spatial practices. Combined with archival material and brought into dialogue with ethnographic studies on the early modern Greek village, these data open new avenues for exploring rural communities' living conditions and their residents' abilities to respond to economic, political, and demographic challenges.

A major focus of this book is the social and economic strategies that rural communities employed to cope with economic and demographic changes. These strategies were often informed by people's social affiliations and coexisting, overlapping, and conflicting social memberships. To understand these social networks and the role they played in resilient communities, I needed to understand the individual as much as the community. Fortunately, the monastic archives of Mount Athos and the monastery of Saint John of Patmos provide a large dataset pertaining to their monastic fortunes on the islands of Lemnos and Thasos and their rural communities. These documents register monastic fortunes, and include imperial letters; acts of buying, selling, and donating; and long lists of properties, property boundaries, and rights. They also record the names of *paroikoi* – dependent peasants tied to the monastic lands – their families, fortunes, and tax

obligations.⁹ As documents that record economic transactions and property rights, these archives certainly privilege studies in economy, demography, and power relations and can often be misleading or silent on the social life of rural communities.¹⁰ Furthermore, their fragmentary nature creates an imbalance of available information. For example, there are more surviving monastic acts regarding Lemnos than Thasos, and those dating in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries are more detailed than those dated just before and after the plague in the mid-fourteenth century. Despite such limitations, these monastic archives provide detailed descriptions of both places and monuments, and thus have contributed significantly to the identification of sites and a deeper appreciation of the islands' built and natural environment.

Questions about community and the dynamic between individual and communal interests turned my attention to ethnographic studies of early modern villages, particularly in Greece. I sought in them paradigms of and analogies to social activities that don't always leave a trace in the archaeological record and yet define social interaction and inform social behavior, such as collaborations beyond kinship, the role of social capital, ritual kinship, reputation, and so forth. Apart from interesting analogies, ethnographic studies also provided further insight into what mattered to members of such communities and how they thought about themselves in relation to kin and non-kin groups; they thus function as a valuable warning and reminder of our own modern and personal biases, expectations, and mentalities that do not always correspond to those of past societies. Finally, what I encountered in the field were not Late Byzantine sites but multi-temporal sites, conditioned by early modern and modern practices as well as by Late Byzantine ones; thus ethnographic works granted me a better understanding of issues of temporality and increased my appreciation of parallel discourses about the sites under study.¹¹

Such a multidisciplinary approach has allowed me to work in different scales of investigation moving between the community and the individual and between different social groups. It has further enabled me to tell the same story – that of rural communities – from different points of view and to investigate their actions, choices, mentalities, coping mechanisms and

⁹ Laiou-Thomadakis 1977, 142–81; Lefort 1993, 112–13; Kaplan 2009, 153–57.

¹⁰ Laiou-Thomadakis 1977, 72; Smyrlis 2010a.

¹¹ For the role of ethnography in diachronic surveys, see Fotiadis 1995. For archaeological ethnography, see Sutton 2000; Hamilakis 2011. For the use of ethnographic studies in the study of Byzantium, see also Gerstel 2015.