

Rural Communities in Late Byzantium

Late Byzantium faced economic, political, and demographic crises. This book argues for the ability of rural communities to transform their socioeconomic strategies and become resilient in the face of such crises from an island perspective. It seeks to reinstate ordinary people in the historical narrative and reintroduce them as active participants in the events of the period, pointing to their ability not only to react to change but also to initiate it. Combining new archaeological evidence with archival material pertaining to the islands of Lemnos and Thasos in the Northern Aegean, this book provides concrete examples of Byzantine socioeconomic strategies that successfully mitigated the various crises and thus contributes to a diachronic perspective on crisis management. The result is to rethink the nature of the Late Byzantine period, and to question the ways in which we have come to divide historical periods into “good” and “bad.”

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Fotini Kondyli
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Resilience and Vulnerability in the Northern
Aegean

FOTINI KONDYLI

University of Virginia



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*To my parents, Angeliki and Andreas, to whom I owe
everything*

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Preface

This book, or at least parts of it, was conceived already during my childhood when as a young girl I spent my summers with my grandparents in their village in the Northeast Peloponnese.¹ A child's heaven for carefree play and endless exploration in the sea, mountains, and fields, I could not have imagined back then how these early experiences in that village would become the inspiration for this book decades later.

My memories of that village pertain mostly to women and their lives, since I followed them around as they cooked, worked, prayed, gossiped, and prepared the village for all kinds of life-altering occasions. Despite the hard physical labor and the typical early rise and long hours that go with agricultural and pastoral activities, my grandmother spoke of her life as difficult but also happy, and she was very proud of the sense of community that characterized village life. I also experienced that on many occasions, including during seasons of winemaking and olive harvest; there I saw how a village worked together, people helping and working in each other's fields, sharing equipment, pooling their resources, and exchanging manual labor for produce. These early experiences taught me about the nature and value of collectiveness and how it could coexist with feelings of jealousy, competition, and suspicion among villagers. They introduced me to the rules that bounded people's behavior and impacted their social interaction; these were village rules, internal, unspoken, and yet powerful in shaping people's identity and perception of others. These memories of village life were valuable in appreciating how daily activities as well as annual rituals, celebrations, and even times of sorrow could and did bring people together. I return to this village every year to have these lessons repeated as I reflect on my own work and life.

Entering Byzantine studies, I encountered a great interest in rural communities and Byzantine villages that I wanted to be part of. I also saw different attitudes toward the study and interpretation of village life, some of which were presenting a very static view of rural communities that

¹ This village and its surrounding areas have been the subject of an excellent ethnographic study by Forbes (2007).

I was finding difficult to accept. My disagreement was not that such scholarly works did not correspond to my own experiences of village life; after all, Byzantium is not modern Greece, and we are dealing with different political and social structures that cannot be directly compared. I was mostly troubled by what was not discussed about Byzantine villages, such as the role of social ties in rural communities, their agency and participation in major political and economic events, and their ability to successfully navigate change. Such issues became the starting point for this book. Even if I could not answer them all (and I did not), I maintained that these questions were still worth pursuing and could invite multiple and different readings of Byzantine rural communities and their ability to be resilient.

Parts of the book were written in libraries, in offices, and on balconies in Greece, the UK, Netherlands, and the USA, including in numerous villages. I consider it a collective endeavor, shaped by my early memories with my grandparents in their village, the love of my family, the support and inspiration of my friends and colleagues, and the kindness and generosity of people on Lemnos and Thasos, who all taught me something about community and resilience, and to whom I am deeply indebted.

I started this work as a part of my graduate studies, and despite the data pour and lack of narrative for the most part in my thesis, I am enormously proud of my PhD work and the time I spent alone in the field, grappling with the archaeological material and with my ideas. The data I collected in the field remain valuable considering the limited work done on the Byzantine history and archaeology of Lemnos and Thasos and has served as the foundation for this book. I am greatly thankful to the Greek Ephorates of Antiquities at Kavala and Lesbos for permitting me to undertake the extensive survey on Thasos and Lemnos, and to Charalambos Pennas who allowed me to study and publish the material from his excavation at Kotzinos, Lemnos.

I could not have done this work without the guidance and support of my PhD advisors, John Haldon and Archie Dunn at the University of Birmingham, who encouraged me to pursue questions worth asking and gave me the freedom to design and undertake my own research project with all its mistakes and shortcomings. John Haldon in his incredible ability to bring people together showed me the value of collaboration and of building teams – the most significant lesson I have learned in my career so far.

Dumbarton Oaks (DO) became an important research environment for my early career, and parts of this book were written while I was a Junior

Fellow (2008–2009) and Summer Fellow (2016) there. My encounter and discussions with Alice Mary Talbot were instrumental in appreciating the dedication it takes to change a narrative and to expand our views of Byzantine society. My work also shifted significantly due to my long-lasting friendship with some of the pre-Columbian fellows at DO who introduced me to a more anthropological approach to landscapes and to non-elites, and encouraged me to argue for rural communities and their importance unapologetically. My archaeological and anthropological development continued during my two years as a postdoctoral fellow at the Joukowsky Institute at Brown University. The institute's emphasis on island archaeology and Mediterranean survey helped me position my arguments within larger narratives of archaeological thought and practice, and the influence of John Cherry, Sue Alcock, and Peter Van Dommelen can be seen in various parts of the book. I am grateful to all three for the support and advice they continue to offer me.

I consider myself extremely lucky to be surrounded by academic friends who discuss Byzantine archaeology with me and inspire me with their work and attitude in life. They are many, but I particularly want to thank here a few who have been instrumental in the making of this book in different ways. In alphabetical order, Darlene Brooks Hedstrom Bill Caraher, Marica Cassis, Nikos Kontogiannis, Kostis Kourelis, Georgios Makris, and Deb Stewart: I am profoundly grateful for your friendship. I also owe great thanks to Ben Anderson, Adria LaViolette, Amanda Phillips, and Tyler Jo Smith for their constant encouragement and support, and for kindly agreeing to read parts of this book in various stages and offer feedback that led to a stronger book.

Sharon Gerstel very generously read the entire manuscript and offered invaluable feedback, support, and tremendous encouragement, making sure I stayed true to my vision; I cherish our conversations and owe her my deepest gratitude.

The book has benefited tremendously from the anonymous reviewers' comments, and the experience and advice of Michael Sharp at Cambridge University Press. Its publication has been possible with the generous support of the College of Arts and Sciences and the Department of Art at the University of Virginia. I am also grateful to the Mary Jaharis Center for Byzantine Art and Culture, which has supported my work with a Grant Publication Award. I am equally thankful to the State Heritage Museum, the British School at Athens, the École française d'Athènes, and the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation for allowing me to reprint images from their collections. Paschalis Androudis and Giorgos Soupios kindly gave me

permission to include one of their photos here, and I thank them for their generosity.

To finish this book, I often had to delay work on other archaeological projects in which I have been involved in the past decade. I am indebted to all my colleagues involved in the Thebes Synergasia Excavation (Stephanie Larson, Kevin Daly, Katherine Harrington), MAP survey (Syl Fachard, Alex Knodell, Sarah Craft), and the Athenian Agora Excavations for their friendship and tremendous patience while my attention was focused on Byzantine villages.

In completing this book, I relied on the love and forgiveness of my family and friends for my many “absences.” My two close friends, Eliza Angelopoulou and Xanthi Proestaki, have been by my side through all the good and bad moments surrounding this book and my career overall, and I am eternally thankful for their friendship. The driving force behind this work, and all the work I do, is my family, Angeliki, Andreas and Kostas, and their love and support. During my fieldwork at Thasos, intense fires on the island and very poor cell coverage up on the mountains made it dangerous to be conducting a survey on my own. My parents joined me in the field and worked as drivers, photographers, note takers, and field walkers. They walked long hours, hiked some impressive mountains, and took meticulous notes. I cherish the time we spent together in the field, and I am grateful for their help, comments, and questions that helped me clarify my ideas. I dedicate this book to them as fellow explorers and as loving parents who support my passion for archaeology and endure my long absences from Greece.