SOPHIA KALOPISSI-VERTI (Athens)

CHURCH FOUNDATIONS BY ENTIRE VILLAGES (13TH–16TH C.)
A SHORT NOTE

In his book Ohridska slikarska škola XV veka, Beograd 1980, Gojko Subotić published three dedicatory church inscriptions, which refer to instances of the collective patronage of entire villages. Some remarks on the content of these inscriptions will be provided as will parallel examples from the late Byzantine period and the first centuries of the Ottoman occupation.

In his fundamental study Ohridska slikarska škola XV veka, Beograd 1980, Gojko Subotić analyzed the iconography and style of the painted decoration of a great number of churches thus bringing to light the artistic developments in the region of Ohrid during the 15th century. Among the dedicatory church inscriptions included in his book, a small number testifies to the collective patronage of entire villages.

During the decade of 1450–1460, for example, the great town (Veliki varoš), i.e. Ohrid, undertook the decoration of the small rock-cut church of Sveti Stefan Pancir, near the village of Gorica in the district of Ohrid along with three neighboring villages, Šipogno, Gorica and Konsko1 (Fig. 1). The church of the Prophet Elijah at Dolgaec was erected and decorated with the funds of the inhabitants, both small and great (mali i veliki), of the village Dolgaec in the year 1454/14552 (Fig. 2).

The collective patronage mentioned in the donor inscription of the church of the Ascension of Christ in the village of Lesko(v)ec, whose decoration was completed in 1461/62, is somewhat different. The erection and painting of the church was accomplished through the contribution of “the most honorable householders, small and great, of the village of Lesko(v)ec” (τοῦ ἐντημοσίατον ὀικοδεσπότου μικρίς καὶ ἐντημοσίατον μεγάλου τοῦ χωρ[ί]ου Λεσκοβέτζ). Twenty-two names of village residents with their patronymic follow, their mainly Slavic names written with Greek letters. The first donor listed, who apparently belongs to the “great”, that is, those who probably contributed a larger amount of money toward the execution of the

---

1 G. Subotić, Ohridska slikarska škola XV veka, Beograd 1980, 76–78, 200, esp. 76, drawing 54.
2 Ibid., 52–58, 197–198, esp. 52, 54, drawing 30.
erection and painting of the church, is depicted with his wife in the lower register of the south wall near the entrance. A small-scale kneeling figure represented on the west wall at the feet of Saint Constantine is most likely identified as the priest Peter, who is next on the list of donors.3

Examples of the collective patronage of entire villages, in a variety of alternatives are found in the countryside of both the Byzantine and Latin-or-Venetian-held regions during the late Byzantine period. This practice will continue into the post-Byzantine years. In some cases all villagers are referred to by name, as for example in the church of the Archangel Michael at Polemitas of Mesa Mani,4 where


the dedicatory inscription of 1278 tallies about thirty names of farmers and their families as well as their donations of land, olives, gardens, etc.5

According to a letter issued in approximately the mid-thirteenth century on behalf of all the inhabitants of the village of Geniko in Asia Minor (ἔκδοτήριον γράμμα παρά τῶν ὀλίων ἐποίκων τοῦ χωρίου Γενίκου) all the villagers granted to the monastery of the Virgin Lemiotissa, located between Smyrna and Nymphaion, the “abandoned monastery of the all-holy Virgin of Amanariotissa situated in their village” (ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ ἤμων διακεμένην καὶ Ἧππομημένην μονῆν τῆς υπεραγίας θεοτόκου τῆς Ἀμαναριωτίσσης) as well as its metochion, a small monastic settlement of poor quality dedicated to Saint Marina.6 It is evident that the monastery of Amanariotissa belonged to the entire village, which had the right to legally manage and dispose of it.


In most of the cases of collective patronage of entire villages only the most important or wealthiest residents of the village are mentioned by name and the rest of the peasants follow anonymously. The initiative to found a church is taken by clerics, monks or eminent laypeople, sometimes jointly, followed by the remaining villagers. This is the usual pattern of collective patronage, many examples of which can be found mainly in churches of Venetian Crete of the 14th and 15th centuries but also in other provinces, whether Byzantine or Latin-held, and even in the case of book commissions.\(^7\)

In this brief study I will note only those church examples with dedicatory inscriptions mentioning an entire village collectively and succinctly, without distinguishing certain donors by name, such as the case of Sveti Stefan Pancir and Dolgaec, discussed above.

According to the dedicatory inscription, the church of the Virgin (nowadays of the Archangel Michael) at Doraki Monophashiou in the prefecture of Irakleion in Crete was renovated and decorated in 1321 with the involvement of the entire village “through the contribution and labor and great expense of the village of Doraki” (δια συνδρομής και κόπου και [ἐξ]όδου πολοῦ χαρίου τοῦ Δορακύνου)\(^8\) (Fig. 3). About a half century later, in 1372/3, at Kitiros Selinou in the prefecture of Chania in Crete the dedicatory inscription of the church of Saint Paraskeve mentions that the Christians of the tourma of Kitiros contributed to the erection and painting of the church (διὰ συνδρομῆς καὶ κόπου καὶ ἐξώ[δου τῶν χρηστημάτων τῆς τουρμας τῆς Κιτίρ[ο]),) (Fig. 4). Next, seven to eight villages are listed which belonged to the administrative region of the tourma.\(^9\)

The distinction into small and great villagers, as in the inscriptions of the churches of Dolgaec and Lesko(ν)ec, is also found in the dedicatory inscription of the church of Saint Paraskeve at Vitsa (formerly Vezitsa), near Monodendri in the mountainous region of Zagori in Epirus. The church was erected and painted in 1413/14 through the expenditure of the Voevoda Michael Therianos and “of all the Vezitsian beneficiaries, donors small and greater” (πάντων ὀλῶν τῶν Βεζητζηνῶν, κληρονόμων κτητόρων μηχρῶν τ(ε) κ(αί) μηζόνων).\(^10\) In approximately the mid 13th century another inscription found at Megali Kastania in the Messenian Mani makes a distinction of the population of the village mentioning that the church of

---

7 The different patterns of collective patronage in the Late Byzantine village are the object of extended research, which will be published in a forthcoming study.
9 Ibid., IV, 435–436, no. 7.
Saint John the Forerunner was built and painted with the contribution of the “prokritoi and the common people” (προκριτοί κε του κηνου λαού).11

Social differentiation of village inhabitants, based on property, age, and general prestige, is often found in documents of the late Byzantine period, as Angeliki Laiou has noted.12 Thus, in 13th-century documents from Asia Minor the κρείττονες (the best),13 the οικοδεσπόται (householders),14 the κρείττονες οικοδεσπόται (the best householders)15 are referred to mainly in matters regarding solving discrepancies be-
between peasants and landowners or monasteries. In a document of the monastery of
Zographou on Mt. Athos of the year 1267 “the best from the village of Ierissos” (οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ Ἱερισσοῦ χώρας κρείττονες) are called as witnesses in a property dispute between the Lavra and Zographou monasteries.16 Furthermore, in a document of sale of 1271 to the monastery of Saint John the Forerunner of Nea Petra in Thessaly it is clearly stated that the best inhabitants of the village of Dryanouvaina include priests, monks and laypeople.17 In other instances the eminent villagers are characterized as “elders”, “first of the elders” or “peacemaking elders” (γέροντες, πρωτόγεροι, εἰρηνοποιοί γέροντες),18 who function as witnesses, solve problems or represent the village in disputes with the state, landowners or monasteries.

The collective patronage of entire villages is also common during the early centuries of Ottoman hegemony in Serbia and in the southern part of the Balkans in

---

17 Miklosich — Müller, IV, 398 (1271) συνήλθομεν... ἐνάποιν καὶ τῶν κρειττόνων ἀλων ἔποικων τῆς Δρυανούβανης, ἱερομένων τε, μοναξίων καὶ λαϊκῶν.
There are numerous examples of the collective patronage of villages taken under the initiative of priests, monks or eponymous laypeople and in which every villager participates. Sreten Petković has noted characteristic examples, such as the church of Saint Paraskeve at Pobužje near Skopje, which was renovated in 1500 through the funds of the whole village. Analogous is the case of the church at Štrpce near Prizren, the renovation of which in 1577 is also due to the collective patronage of the inhabitants of the village. This practice continued during the 17th century as well. A typical example is the church of Saint Nicholas at Vitsa in the region of Zagori, which was built and decorated in 1618/19 by one of the painters originating from Linotopi, a village close to Kastoria, “through contributions, funds, labor and expenses of all (the inhabitants) of the village Vezi (= Vitsa)” (δήκ σήνδρομής δασανης, κόπου ται και, έξοδου, δη Όλον χρονον γέγονεν. χόρας Βεζη). To sum up, in the countryside during the late Byzantine period and the early centuries of Ottoman rule, in addition to the individual patronage of ecclesiastical and lay dignitaries as well as to patronage based on the cooperation of eminent individuals from the clerical or monastic ranks or from the lay class, there was the collective patronage of villagers. Gojko Subotić brought to light such examples from the 15th century in the Ohrid region. These examples of the joint patronage of villages illustrate the structures of agrarian society, collectivism, economical collaboration, and the social coherence of peasants. The small dimensions of the churches that were erected and decorated, the mediocre quality of their painted decoration as well as the very limited quantity of land and tree donations, as occasionally mentioned in dedicatory inscriptions, testify to the degree of modesty of the economic resources of peasants. Despite general poverty, the members of the community join their resources, offering their savings toward the erection of small parish churches, which serve their religious needs and constitute the focal point of their social lives.


20 S. Petković, Art and patronage op. cit., 403.

21 Ibid., 403.

22 A. Touret, Οι ναοί του Αγίου Νικολάου στη Βίτσα και του Αγίου Μηνά στο Μονοδένδρι, Athens 1991, 29–30, pl. 27a.
Софија Калописи-Верти

ЦРКВЕ КАО СЕОСКЕ СКУПНЕ ЗАДУЖБИНЕ (13–16. ВЕК)
КРАТКА БЕЛЕШКА

У темељној књизи Гојка Суботића Охридска сликарска школа XV века (Београд 1980), где је уважени аутор сакупио све податке и уверљиво анализирало иконографију и технику израде писаних украса великог броја цркава, показујући развој уметности у области Охрида током 15. века, издат је и известан број ктиторских натписа који сведоче о скупним задужбинах читавих села. Карактеристични примери су пећинска црква Св. Стефана Панцира близу села Горица, која је била украшена о трошку великог града (тј. Охрида) и трију села (1450–1460), црква Св. Пророка Илије у Долгаецу, која је подигнута и живописана о трошку богатих и сиромашних житеља села (1454/55) и црква Христовог Вазнесења у Лескоецу (1461/62), дар богатих и сиромашних сеоских домаћина.

Примери колективног даривања, како сведоче ктиторски натписи, постоје током касновизантијске епохе у Византији и њеним областима под влашћу Латина и Млечана. Истраживање се концентрише на оне примере у којима је извесно колективно учешће читавог села као јединственог чиниоца, без навођења појединачних личности, као што се дешава на Криту цркве Арханђела Михаила и Свете Петке- Параскеве.

Спроведена је такође кратка анализа друштвено-централног статуса сеоских житеља, добро стоећих и сиромашних, као и анализи њихог одговарајућег разликовања на ктиторским натписима, као у Св. Петки у Вици (Епир, 1413/14), и у сачуваним документима 13. века.

Скупни сеоски дарови, познати и у Србији 15. и 16. века, сведоче о структури пољопривредних насеља, њиховом заједништву, економској сарадњи и друштвеној повезаности сељака. Мале размере храмова који се подижу и украшавају, осредњи квалитет живописа и врло ограничена количина дарова у земљи и дрвећу, који се понекад наводе на натписима, сведоче о скромним економским могућностима сеоских житеља.