

Byzantine Philanthropy - Part II (Demetrios J. Constantelos)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Ptocheia (Houses for the Poor)

The Byzantines maintained a special institution for the poor named ptocheion or ptochotropheion. A man was designated as “poor” if his revenues and possessions were worth less than fifty nomismata. This legal distinction of the sixth century was incorporated and maintained by Byzantine legislation of later centuries as well. Among other disadvantages the poor were forbidden to stand as witnesses.



We have no statistical evidence as to the proportion of the poor people in the Byzantine Empire to the rest of the population. John Chrysostom, in one of his sermons delivered in Antioch between 386 and 388 when the imperial government had imposed an increase in taxation, estimated that the poor of Antioch amounted to one tenth of the inhabitants. He remarked that one tenth more were very rich, the remaining eight tenths making up the middle class. He appealed to the middle

class as follows: "The very rich indeed are but few, but those that come next to them are many; again the poor are much fewer than these. Never-theless, although therefore there are so many that are able to feed the hungry, many go to sleep in their hunger." The same church father estimates that the poor of Constantinople were less than fifty thousand. He pronounced this number in one of the sermons which he delivered in Constantinople after his election to the patriarchal throne, sometime between his consecration on February 26, 398 and before June 9, 404, when he was banished to exile. He had made an appeal to the Christian population of approximately one hundred thousand to support the poor. He writes that the rest of the population were pagans and Jews. If the fifty thousand poor made the one tenth of the total population of Constantinople, as Chrysostom had estimated the poor of Antioch, then the inhabitants of the capital might have been close to four hundred thousand, not an extravagant number for the beginnings of the fifth century. Nonetheless, it is very difficult for us to determine the accuracy of Chrysostom's estimate of the poor either of Antioch or of Constantinople. We know, however, that the Church was the true force behind the various charities that were organized in every Byzantine city. Much of the wealth of the Church and monastic establishments of later centuries was used for the poor, who had multiplied, and for the maintenance of philanthropic institutions.

It was for this class of people that the Byzantine Church and State took special measures. Special houses known as *ptocheia* or *ptochotropheia* were built to shelter poor people unable to work and in dire need of support. Chrysostom avers that his church in Antioch, when he delivered his famous sermons on the occasion of the imperial statues, had been supporting many widows, prisoners, maimed, orphans, and others in want, three thousand in all. This charitable work was carried on despite the fact that the revenue of his church was one of the lowest in the city.

The same charitable policy of the Church was exercised by John Eleemon in Alexandria in the seventh century. He had compiled a list of more than seven thousand poor who were supported by his philanthropic program. We may safely assume that Chrysostom's example and John Eleemon's concern for the poor were not unique. Other religious leaders, members of the imperial court, and ordinary citizens did a great deal to relieve the poor, as we have seen in a previous chapter. Here we are concerned with the establishments properly called *ptocheia* or *ptochotropheia*.

Those institutions were for the benefit of poor people who could not work because of some previous illness, or because they were incapacitated by old age or by other reasons beyond their control. The poor who could support themselves had no place

in an institution. Provincial citizens, for example, coming to the capital for no sound reason while in good health and able to work could not receive any help and were sent back to their towns. This policy also accounted for the beggars. It was the concern of the Quaestor of the city to find them employment. If the healthy beggars refused to work they were expelled from the capital. A ptocheion included also a clinic and many times served as a home for the aged.

Of the numerous ptocheia which must have existed in many cities and towns of the Byzantine Empire we can identify several by name. The evidence comes to us in general terms; we lack knowledge in many specifics, such as exact location, size of an institution, and number of its inmates, the diet, and general conditions in a ptocheion. We know, for example, that St. Basil included a house for the poor in his celebrated philanthropic complex of Basileias, but we possess no further information about it.

Other Institutions

In addition to the major institutions which we have investigated in the preceding pages we find in Byzantine society other establishments for social services, either proleptic or therapeutic in nature.

Reformatory Houses

Prostitution was one of the less flattering aspects of a Christian civilization such as the Byzantine. Poverty, social conditions, economic considerations, and above all human nature contributed to the existence of moral and legal outcasts in Byzantine society. Their fate was the same as it had been in previous societies. William Lecky, the nineteenth-century historian of morals and ideas, ably expressed the sentiments of all societies when he wrote that the prostitute is a figure "certainly the most mournful, and in some respects the most awful . . . who counterfeits with a cold heart the transports of affection, and submits herself as the passive instrument of lust; who is scorned and insulted as the vilest of her sex. . . . She remains, while creeds and civilizations rise and fall, the eternal priestess of humanity, blasted for the sins of the people."

In Byzantine society, while some viewed the fallen woman as a means of entertainment, others accepted her as a creature made after the "image and the likeness of God"; a human being who deserves the compassion and love of society. Therefore unlike other social and religious systems, Byzantine society adopted a rather charitable attitude toward the persons of prostitutes, though the legislation of the State and the Church was severe against prostitution as such. Robert Byron

rightly observes that “the story of the prostitute indicates the whole tenor of Byzantine society. That society was one in which practice of the true Christian ideal was possible; not of a tithe to the poor or the turning of the other cheek; but of the sympathy for others, of the understanding of fellow-beings born of the Greek instinct to scatter the pretensions of one man above another.”

In the Byzantine world much effort was exerted so that civil disabilities and stigmas were removed from this class of women who had never met with sympathy before. A brilliant example was set by the Empress Theodora. The illustrious wife of Justinian I was one of the most beneficent empresses of the Byzantine Empire. Not only was she alert in exerting her influence for the cause of justice where justice was at stake, but she initiated several measures to assist miserable individuals of her own sex who had fallen prey to procurers and whoremongers. We are told that she redeemed prostitutes from their masters by paying from her own purse. Once she offered five nomismata to a whoremonger for each woman under his patronage. She not only gave orders against procurers but when setting free certain such women, she gave one nomisma to each one of them. Justinian followed her example.

Individuals of the monastic ranks considered it their duty to work for the moral restoration of fallen women. We are told that St. Vitalios worked to secure many prostitutes' repentance and to return them to a life of morals and dignity. He not only visited houses of ill fame in order to persuade prostitutes to abandon their ignoble profession, but he also prayed for their repentance. The result of his moral crusade was that some abandoned their sinful work altogether, others married and commenced a new life, and a third group, leaving the worldly life, found refuge in monasteries.

We have two other instances of organized philanthropy toward fallen women, one in the sixth and the other in the eleventh century. Procopios, who often exaggerates, writes that “there was a throng of women in Byzantium who had carried on in brothels a business of lechery, not of their own free will, but under force of lust.” To clean up the city, Justinian and Theodora banished brothel-keepers and erected a special institution to provide the needs of the former prostitutes.

It was through the efforts of Theodora that Justinian issued a special novel¹⁰ against procuring and the exploitation of poor and minor girls. The novel, as well as the chronicler John Malalas, indicate that unscrupulous procurers visited villages and country towns where they approached poor families. Poverty pressed upon the unfortunate parents to sell their girls to procurers, who promised the girls shoes,

clothes, and other necessities. However, when the girls were brought to Constantinople, they were confined in dens and miserable houses for the practice of prostitution. The money, of course, was collected by the masters.

The celebrated queen expressed her concern for fallen women in more concrete terms. There was a neglected palace on the Euxine sea across from Constantinople. They converted it into a convent named Metanoia or "Repentance" to serve as a refuge for fallen women who had repented of their ignoble past. Procopios adds that more than five hundred of them were placed in that institution, and that the illustrious sovereigns endowed it with a plentiful income.

The second such establishment was the work of the Emperor Michael IV (1034-41). Psellos writes that after the days of pleasure had passed for Michael and Zoe, the emperor displayed much piety and desired the salvation of his soul. The celebrated philosopher maintains that he is not eulogizing Michael but that he is simply narrating events.

In his catalogue of Michael's good deeds, Psellos includes "an edifice of enormous size and very great beauty" which the Emperor Michael IV founded to house harlots who were ready to reform. The Emperor had issued a proclamation which, in the words of Michael Psellos, "all women who trafficked in their beauty, provided they were willing to renounce their trade and live in luxury, were to find sanctuary in this building: they were to change their own clothes for the habit of nuns, and all fear of poverty would be banished from their lives for ever. . . . Thereupon a great swarm of prostitutes descended upon his refuge, relying on the Emperor's proclamation, and changed both their garments and their manner of life, a youthful band enrolled in the service of God, as soldiers of virtue."

It is not irrelevant to emphasize that because of the humane attitude and the religious philosophy of the Byzantines toward repentant prostitutes, we find a number of saints among them who previously had been great sinners. For the foundation of this policy the Byzantines referred to the Scriptures. While the New Testament speaks caustically against fornication, adultery, and sins of the flesh, the repentant sinner is always accepted by the Church. The example was set by Christ himself. When the Scribes and the Pharisees brought before Him for condemnation a woman taken in adultery, Christ uttered the now-famous words: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." Elsewhere Jesus indicated that repentant harlots go into the Kingdom of God before the priests and pretentious religious individuals. One can easily discern how much this Christian philosophy influenced the Byzantines toward the fallen woman.

Xenotapheia

Among the diverse philanthropic institutions in Byzantium we may classify also the xenotapheion or the cemetery especially put aside for the burial of poor strangers or poor local people. We do not know much about this tradition, but there is evidence that in Byzantium either the Church, the State, or individual philanthropists undertook the expenses for the burial of the poor and had special sections for them. In Constantinople such a cemetery was near the cistern of Mocios.

On the part of the State we are told that the Empress Pulcheria, the wife of Marcianos (450-57) was instrumental in the establishment of xenotapheia. Because the noun is in the plural one wonders how many she had built. Both Theophanes and George Monachos imply that Pulcheria had established more than one. Later in the eighth and early ninth century the Empress Irene (797-802) is given credit for her measures toward the poor. Pseudo-Codinos must have had in mind certain specific cemeteries for the poor and the strangers when he wrote that Irene established ta xenotapheia.

Justinian's legislation implies that the poor were afforded a free funeral and burial in a special cemetery. Later in the tenth century Leo VI (886-912) issued a law concerning the shops of Hagia Sophia. Much of this income was used for philanthropic purposes, including the funeral expenses of the poor and perhaps of strangers who had died while visiting the capital.

Xenotapheia existed in other cities as well. There was one in the small city of Daphne outside of Antioch. John Moschos, the source of this information, implies that the strangers were buried in a somewhat different manner than the local citizenry. Perhaps the religious ceremony was briefer than the ordinary one, the corpse was not washed, and the brief service was without candles and incense. In a similar manner Saint Symeon the Salos (sixth century) was buried in a xenotapheion.

The underlying philosophy for charity toward dead strangers and the poor is expressed by Theodore the Studite. In a letter to the consul Thomas, Theodore emphasized that because of love for God and man, God's image and likeness, the monks of the cloister of the Studion and himself had dedicated their services to those who either because of poverty or because they were foreigners and had no relatives in the capital were left un-attended even at death.

Homes for the blinds

We have seen that Byzantine hospitals included ophthalmological clinics, and among the physicians there was an ophthal-mologist or ophthalmicos iatros, Additional but insufficient evi-dence indicates that the Byzantines had special institutions for the blind. In the narrations of the “miracles” of St. Anastasios (+628) we read that a typhlocomion or home for the blind was in Jerusalem. Considering the sympathy with which the Byzantine Church and society looked upon the blind and the de-formed, we may assume that the typhlocomeion in Jerusalem was not the exception. The Church maintained the fifty-seventh apostolic canon by which anyone ridiculing a blind, a deaf, or a lame man could suffer the penalty of excommunication. Accord-ing to the canonists Zonaras, Balsamon, and Aristenos, the canon implied that the blind and the crippled in general deserved understanding and the philanthropic help of the community.

There must have been other philanthropic institutions of which we know very little or nothing, such as parthenones and cherotropheia. Parthenones might have been orphanages or homes for deserted girls. We find them in the fourth century as well as in the tenth and the fifteenth, in Constantinople and in smaller cities. The cherotropheion, an institution perhaps for poor widows found in the early Byzantine Empire, may not have survived after the fifth century, although protection was extended to widows in Byzantium in later centuries as well.

Extracts from the book of Demetrios J. Constantelos, *Byzantine Philanthropy and social welfare*, c 1968.