
The Byzantine monastery as a Commons

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ABSTRACT

Although scholars have paid increased attention to Commons, most studies explore modern cases, disregarding historical Commons. The analysis of the latter can contribute to understanding the long-term effects of past behaviours on future generations and provide inspiration for solutions to contemporary problems arising from similar social dilemmas. One historical Commons that still exists is the Byzantine monastic institution. Drawing on historical sources and contemporary studies, the paper uses (a) historical institutional analysis, to outline the structure of the institution, and (b) the community design principles of successful Commons, to explore whether the Byzantine monastery can be classified as a Commons. We find that the Byzantine monastery was a successful case of a historical Commons, which developed a credible governance structure to sustainably manage and preserve their common goods, both intangible and tangible, despite the lack of direct democratic processes that characterize modern Commons.

KEYWORDS: Commons, institutions, Byzantine monasteries, historical institutional analysis, design principles for communities.

JEL CODES: B52, Z12, P48, O13.

1. Introduction

Commons are governance regimes developed by communities for the management of common goods (tangible or intangible). They are in essence institutions of collective action that emerge from the bottom up, aiming for sustainable utilization and exploitation of collective goods, the strengthening of the community and the welfare of its members. Although various such in-

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stitutions have been developed throughout human history, it was only recently that scholars from different scientific disciplines (e.g., economics, political sciences, sociology) began to appreciate their value, developing theories and models to study their workings, not least as a consequence of the challenges the world is facing regarding the depletion of global natural resources (De Moor 2011). As such, the majority of these studies explore cases that are rather contemporary with a relatively short time of existence, aiming to identify the determinants of successful Commons and to provide a basis for effective policymaking.

Scholars in economic history (e.g., Demsetz 1967; McCloskey 1972; Libecap 1986; North 1990; Acemoglu et al. 2005) have generally paid little attention to Commons as an institution, espousing a different standpoint. Conceiving long-term development as a result of a proper balance between individual property rights and a strong state, they raised concerns that common resources (being essentially open-access and so subject to free-riding and overexploitation) would be harmful to economic efficiency, favouring solutions along the market-state/hierarchy spectrum (Bonan 2018). With the reassessment of collective action theory (Axelrod 1984; Ostrom 1990) a number of economic history scholars, rallying around Ostrom's perspective, have started to look beyond the market-state dichotomy, paying attention to the role that self-governed communities of the past have played in economic development by coordinating and enforcing property rights in the absence of a powerful-enough state (Greif 2006; De Moor 2008). Merchant and craft guilds, communes and other local self-governed institutions (i.e., Commons) are the main subjects of these studies (Casari 2007; Epstein 1998; Greif 2006; De Moor 2008; 2009; Van Zanden 1999; Laborda-Pemán and De Moor 2013). Methodologically, the analysis that was conducted concerned long periods with the aim of assessing the resilience and efficacy of these institutions in the face of changing political, social, legal and economic conditions (Bonan 2018). Yet, despite progress on this front, the number of works has remained relatively small (De Moor et al. 2016) and geographically restricted to northern Europe and Spain (Bonan 2018), necessitating further study of the internal workings and dynamics of historical Commons in different time-space contexts.

There is a lot to be gained from studying historical cases of collective governance as a Commons. First, the interaction between the two disciplines would be beneficial on the methodological front. Commons scholars have provided solid theoretical and analytical frameworks which can strengthen historians' perspective – addressing also the criticism of conceptual laxity historians have received (Laborda-Pemán and De Moor 2016) – whereas command by historians of historical information and of long-term analysis would benefit a discipline that has placed great emphasis on Commons' longevity

and resilience. Moreover, and given the challenges of global resources' depletion, the study of historical Commons and other types of collective action institutions of the past can enrich our knowledge to manage contemporary common goods more effectively; projecting the long-term effects of human behaviour on future generations can inspire efficient responses to contemporary social dilemmas (De Moor 2019). Paradoxically, although Western societies increasingly put forward the Commons as an alternative governance institution, in other parts of the world such institutional arrangements have been under considerable pressure to dissolve and be replaced by private property rights and market-based regimes. Interestingly, history seems to repeat itself, since most European historical Commons had gone through a very similar process of top-down dissolution (defined as 'enclosure').

One historic, collective action institution, still alive, is the Orthodox Christian monastic system that developed and thrived in the eastern part of the Roman Empire (Byzantium), enabling the monastic communities acting in their best interests to successfully manage multiple and diverse common goods for very long periods of time. Using qualitative methods of analysis identified as historical institutional analysis (Arvanitidis 2014) and the community design principles for sustainable Commons (Wilson et al. 2013), the paper first outlines the structure of the Byzantine monastery and then explores it as an institution of successful Commons.

Given that the Byzantine monastic institution lasted for over a millennium, took different forms and spanned to many geographical locations even outside Byzantium, we focus on the middle Byzantine era (from the end of Iconoclasm in 843 to the sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in 1204) and the non-aristocratic, *cenobitic* (communal) monastic institutions that operated within the spatial bounds of Byzantium. This is due to space parsimony, the availability of bibliographical sources, and the fact that during this period the monastic institution has been brought to a state close to its final form. Aristocratic monasteries are excluded from this study because their function and the reasons of establishment were centred on serving the personal needs of their aristocratic founders, who treated them as private foundations (trusts) aiming to sustain the social and economic status of their family (Galatariotou 1987).

To our knowledge this is the first time that the Byzantine monastic institution is explored and analysed in the context of Commons. The value of this study stems from the fact that, as argued above, the literature of Commons has focused on contemporary cases, overlooking the wealth of knowledge that historical Commons can offer to the discipline in terms of theory, methodology and policy formulation. The paper concludes that the Byzantine monastery was a successful case of a particular historical Commons, the community of which, imbued with a solid framework of Christian values, had de-

veloped a credible governance structure that enabled efficient management and preservation of both their collective resources and other material and cultural-spiritual goods of humankind to the benefit of the monastic community, the Empire and all humanity. Although in comparison to contemporary Commons it fell short of direct democratic processes, the monastic Commons managed to prosper and to establish itself as a robust social, economic, cultural and spiritual institution which persisted even after the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 introduces the concepts of common goods and the Commons as an institution. Section 3 discusses the historical context and institutional characteristics of the period under consideration, i.e., the Byzantine middle era. In Section 4 we present the structure of the Byzantine monastic institution, whereas in the following section its specific characteristics are explored through the framework of community design principles of Commons. Finally, Section 5 concludes.

2. From ‘the tragedy’ to Commons as an institution

Although Commons as institutions have existed for thousands of years (Caffentzis and Federici 2014), it was not until recently that scholars of various scientific backgrounds, viewpoints and research interests have systematically started to study their workings (De Moor 2011).¹ As a result, the concept of Commons has been defined and approached in various, not necessarily converging, ways. Some scholars view Commons as gifts of nature or common goods of humankind that need to be protected (Barnes 2006; Negri and Hardt 2009), as well as community organized systems for sustainable management of shared resources (Ostrom 1990; De Moor 2009; Foster and Iaione 2016). Others see Commons as a new collective, peer-based mode of production in which peers collaborate in a self-organized network (Bauwens 2005; Benkler 2006), or as a transformative social process by which communities build new social relations and values to defend common goods and to move beyond capitalism (De Angelis 2007; Linebaugh 2008). Finally, scholars see Commons as complex socio-politico-economic institutions for community self-governance, alternative to market-based and state-based systems of governance (Bollier 2016; Helfrinch 2012). Without dismissing any of the above perspectives, our approach is closer to the latter. We focus on analysing the structure of the mo-

1. De Moor (2011) suggests using the term “institutions for collective action” (as done by Ostrom) to avoid confusion between ‘Commons as institutions/regime’ (the intended meaning) and ‘commons as resources’. Drawing on institutional economics, we suggest shorter and less cumbersome terms, i.e., ‘institutions of Commons’, ‘Commons institutions’, or ‘Commons as institutions’, which capture the idea of Commons that is increasingly used in the literature.

nastic institution as an alternative governance system without necessarily asserting that it is the only functional or, a priori, and under any conditions, the most optimal (most efficient) framework for the sustainable management of collective goods, or that all collective goods it manages are necessarily in a state of depletion or overuse.

The contemporary discussion and interest on Commons were sparked by Hardin's (1968) classic paper on the tragedy of the common pool resources. These are a special kind of goods (natural or man-made, tangible or intangible) characterized by non-excludability – that is, difficulty in excluding potential appropriators – and subtractability – meaning that usage reduces availability or quality. These features compel rational economic agents to exploit the resource without taking full responsibility for their actions, that is, disregarding the social, long-term costs from overuse (Bromley 1991). As a result, the resource is gradually depleted and eventually led to degradation and destruction, a situation known as “the tragedy of the Commons” (Hardin 1968).

Possible solutions to the situation include the development of a stewardship ethic and a moral behaviour toward sustainability among appropriators (Barclay 2004; Worrell and Appleby 2000), or/and, as Hardin (1968) and others (e.g., Demsetz 1967) have highlighted, to allocate credible (that is, clearly defined and enforceable) private property rights, either to individuals or to a higher-level authority (usually the state), giving the owner incentives and power to guarantee the sustainability of the resource.

However, these solutions have been criticized on the basis that they restrict the rights and interests of the actual users, undermining their social relations and networks (i.e., their social capital), to the detriment of both their community and the sustainability of the outcomes. The main exponent of this view is the 2009 Nobel laureate in economics, Elinor Ostrom, who drawing on multiple cases across the world demonstrated that communities of interested stakeholders can develop successful institutions by themselves, even in the absence of private property rights and a strong state authority (Ostrom 1990; 1992; 2000; 2010b; as well as, *inter alia*, Dietz et al. 2003; Stern et al. 2002; Wade 1987). As a result, a third, more socially acceptable, option emerges: the Commons, where stakeholders, building upon trust and reciprocity, cooperate to overcome collective action problems, aka social dilemmas,² and form credible and stable arrangements (rules, norms, practices, etc.) for collective governance and sustainable development. These arrangements define and allocate rights and obligations among involved parties and provide mech-

2. Social dilemmas are situations in which those involved must make choices between acting for the well-being of the respective group (which they are part of) and acting upon individualistic standards, which can lead to suboptimal outcomes for the group (Ostrom 2007). The core issue with social dilemmas is how to build trust and reciprocity so as to achieve higher joint outcomes over time (Ostrom 2010b).

anisms for monitoring, enforcement and conflict resolution, thereby resolving participants' social dilemmas in a way that serves the collective interest and increases collective net benefits (Ostrom 2007; 2010a).

In addition, based on extensive empirical work globally, Ostrom and other scholars (Cox et al. 2010; Wilson et al. 2013) identified eight design principles of communities for sustainable governance of the commons. They could be considered as a kind of basic checklist, used to assess the success, longevity and resilience of a commons institution, whereas each principle can provide insights into areas for evaluation or next steps (a roadmap) for policy formation (Wilson et al. 2013; Arvanitidis and Almyriotou 2021). These principles are:

1. There are clearly defined boundaries of the community involved, whose membership, identity and strategy are obvious to everyone.
2. Commons' arrangements are in line with the local (socio-politico-economic) conditions, prescribing a fair and equitable share of benefits and costs.
3. Rules and decisions are made by consensus through collective-choice arrangements that allow participation of community members.
4. Monitoring by accountable monitors is essential, establishing low-cost, norm-abiding mechanisms.
5. Transgressions are punished by using graduated, low-cost, socially-enforced sanctions.
6. Conflicts are addressed with low-cost and easy-to-access conflict resolution mechanisms that are perceived as fair by members of the community.
7. The right of the community to self-govern is recognized by higher-level authorities.
8. In the case of larger systems: governance is organized in multiple, appropriately coordinated layers of nested enterprises.

By assessing the degree to which these principles are present and applied within a system, one can determine whether it operates as a Commons and assess its effectiveness and resilience. Therefore, the current paper uses these community design principles to recognize and establish the monastic institution as a Commons, to assess its efficacy and to identify strengths and weaknesses. In the next section we are going, first, to analyse the background of the Empire in the period studied, and then to investigate the Byzantine monastery as an institution of Commons.

3. The middle Byzantine era: historical background

Byzantium was the eastern half of the ancient Roman Empire. The Hellenic language and culture, the Roman political and legal framework, and the Christian religion comprised the core elements of the Empire (Mango 2002), constituting it as a distinct political entity (Ostrogorsky 1978) and the only organized state west of China that survived without interruption for about eleven centuries (323–1453).

During the time frame of our study, the Empire (see Map 1) experienced significant changes and faced serious challenges that threatened its very existence. Between the seventh and eighth centuries, a series of Islamic conquests deprived Byzantium of a significant part of its territory (Treadgold 2002). The eighth and early ninth centuries were also dominated by a religious dispute over iconoclasm, which became a major political issue for more than a century, dividing the society and causing critical problems to the functioning of the state (Karlín-Hayter 2002). The situation was stabilized at the beginning of the eleventh century, leading to a more coherent and resilient society and state, but this did not last for long. The confrontation of new enemies and the humiliating defeat to the Seljuks at Manzikert in 1071 gave rise to internal rivalries and revolts (intensified at the end of the twelfth century) that weakened

MAP 1 • Byzantine Empire 1025



Source: © Encyclopædia Britannica (accessed 20/04/23, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Byzantine-Empire/images-videos#/media/1/87186/807>).

the Empire, paving the road for the sack of Constantinople by the armies of the Fourth Crusade in 1204 (Magdalino 2002; Vasiliev 1954).

3.1. The society

Although Byzantium consisted of people of different ethnological origins and races, it exhibited an ability to successfully integrate them into a melting-pot society (Walter 2002). This was due to the cosmopolitan character of the state, the spiritual and cultural values of Christianity and the actions of the Church (Treadgold 2002). Yet, the society had a hierarchically stratified structure and a centralized authority (Haldon 2009), with the emperor being the sole and absolute ruler and the head of both the state and the Church (Walter 2002). Together with his family and court he was at the tip of the social pinnacle. The rest of the society was essentially divided on the basis of wealth and social prestige into three main groups (Beck 2005; Papathanasiou 1995). The local aristocracy, state functionaries, senior military officers and large landowners were all members of the upper class, enjoying significant political and economic power (Vasiliev 1954; Walter 2002). The middle class comprised the urban population of merchants, industrialists and owners of medium-sized landed properties, who possessed material wealth, but not the required social prestige or noble origin (Beck 2005). Finally, the lower class of the populace was comprised by urban wage-earners, rural peasants and paupers (Walter 2002). The clergy did not form a distinct class, despite the fact that they enjoyed special privileges; they were distributed throughout all the social levels.

3.2. The economy

The time before our examined period (seventh to eighth century) was marked by economic recession and stagnation. A series of successive conflicts deprived the Empire of necessary land and economic resources and gave rise to insecurity and uncertainty. At the same time adverse climatological conditions and pestilences, such as the plague, had harmful effects on agricultural production and commerce and the well-being of the population (Laiou and Morrisson 2007; Treadgold 2002).

This situation was reversed at the beginning of the ninth century. The reformation of the state apparatus, the restructuring of the economy and the stabilization of war fronts put the Byzantine economy back on a path of growth (Laiou and Morrisson 2007), that peaked in the early eleventh century and ended with the fall of Constantinople in 1204. During this period, population and production increased and trade flourished and became again the driving force of the economy. Around this time a number of institutional

changes also took place. Large landholders and public benefit institutions, including monasteries, acquired important tax privileges (Laiou and Morrisson 2007), while many independent farmers gradually became *paroikoi*, that is, tenant farmers dependent on large landowners. In the trade sector, the granting of exclusive commercial privileges to Italian city-states gradually undermined domestic commercial activity, leading the economy into recession at the end of the twelfth century (Laiou and Morrisson 2007; Vasiliev 1954).

3.3. *The state in the economy*

Byzantium had developed a highly monetized and relatively stable economic system (Laiou-Thomadakis 1980/81; Morrisson 2002) overseen by strong and centralized state institutions. The Byzantine coinage (the gold *solidus* initially and the *hyperpyron* later) was so scrupulously produced and monitored by the state that it became the international coin of the day, the “dollar of the middle ages” (Lopez 1951). This gave the Empire significant advantages over the Western kingdoms of the time, which, until the end of eighth century, had practically no established monetary system (Feliu 2019).

The Byzantine economy was founded on the principles of private property and free market exchange, but it was largely controlled by the state, which intervened in all important areas of economic activity (Kazhdan 1993; Laiou and Morrisson 2007). Formally the state, and in practice the emperor, had the ownership of all the land and the right to seize, expropriate and grant property rights at its own discretion. Neither the properties of the upper class nor, in some cases, those of the ecclesiastical institutions, which were formally protected by ecclesiastical law, were excluded from this practice (Kazhdan 1993). This power was also reflected in the state’s fiscal policy, where the emperor was able to impose taxes and grant privileges and tax breaks at his own will (Kazhdan 1993; Laiou and Morrisson 2007). Such tax immunity (*excuseia*) was given mainly to officials as a reward for their services, but also to favoured ecclesiastical institutions and particularly monasteries (Kazhdan 1993).

3.4. *Legislation*

Byzantium inherited the ancient Roman legal traditions and law. However, the integration of the Christian faith and Church into the state apparatus made ecclesiastical laws an important part of the legal framework, consisting now of both Civil (Roman) and Canon Law (Papathanasiou 1995). Civil Law comprised the legal rules of the Roman emperors, the imperial laws (*leges*), and the legislation developed by distinguished Roman jurists (*jus vetus*). Gradually the sum of these scattered legal provisions was codified and incorporated into legal codes, the most famous being the Justinian, which remained

throughout the middle period the basis of almost all legislative and judicial acts (Herzog 2018; Papathanasiou 1995; Vasiliev 1954). Canon Law comprised the legal rules established by the Ecumenical Councils of the Church (Papathanasiou 1995). At the end of the sixth century, these were codified in a structured code (Angold 2000; Stolte 2009), which significantly affected the functioning of the secular courts too (due to the entanglement between state and Church). Consequently, this increased the influence and power of the ecclesiastical authorities, but also led to the development of informal, customary, legislation (Papathanasiou 1995; Stolte 2009). Overall, the Empire retained a highly unified and codified legal system, unlike the Western kingdoms, where the law, until the end of eleventh century, was geographically fractured and rested on quite different legal traditions (e.g., Roman, Germanic, local customs, ecclesiastical edicts or even feudal legislation) (Herzog 2018).

3.5. *Religion and the Church*

The Eastern Roman Empire did not see the separation of Church and state that took place in the West (Magdalino 2002). The unity of the two powers is best reflected in the face of the emperor, who was both the ruler of the state and the leader of the Church, possessing significant powers and rights of intervention in all ecclesiastical matters (Ostrogorsky 1978; Vasiliev 1954; Walter 2002). This regime had brought significant benefits to both sides. The Christian faith and the Church enjoyed the support and protection of the powerful state apparatus, while at the same time they contributed by providing important institutional services (e.g., judicial, social welfare, cultural diplomacy) and the required stability to unify the multinational society of the Empire (Ostrogorsky 1978; Papathanasiou 1995; Shepard 2002; Walter 2002).

4. The Byzantine monastery: a historical-institutional analysis

Undeniably, monasticism played a central role in the spiritual, social, cultural and economic life of the Empire. It emerged as *eremitic* monasticism³ and assumed its *cenobitic* form in the early fourth century when St. Pachomius laid out a set of rules to organize monastic life (Talbot 1987; Runciman 2005). This style of living, where monks lived, worked and worshipped together with all resources held in common (*koinobion*), soon enjoyed considerable popularity and proliferation to become the common model in Byzantium (Hussey 2010; Talbot 1987).

3. For more on anachoretism, ascetic groups and the lavriotie kind of monasticism in Byzantium see Papachryssanthou (1973).

In this early period, the institution did not exhibit a uniform structure and it was not regulated by the Church. During the fourth century, St. Basil, Bishop of Caesarea, modulated the *koinobion* and integrated it into the official ecclesiastic life. Having the *cenobitic* model of St. Pachomius as an exemplar, St. Basil argued that each monastic community must be self-sustained, and its members should work in order to achieve this and to contribute to the spiritual and material betterment of the lay communities (Mundell-Mango 2002; Papathanasiou 1995; Runciman 2005; Talbot 1987). These rules, though not mandatory, established a role model of monastic organization, known as Basilean (*Basileiano*) (Hussey 2010; Papathanasiou 1995; Runciman 2005).

The monastic institution enjoyed the favour of both emperors and layman, who provided the monasteries with plentiful resources (Vasiliev 1933), but during the iconoclastic persecution, monks suffered terribly for the orthodoxy of their faith (Hussey 2010; Karlin-Hayter 2002; Runciman 2005; Caseau and Congourdeau 2006). Thus, the second half of the eighth century had been a decadent period, but after this time the institution was revived under the influence of St. Theodore Studites (monk and abbot of the Studios Monastery in Constantinople), who set himself to reforming his monastery and restoring St. Basil's spirit. To effect this, and to ensure longevity, he supplemented Basilean rules with a more practical code of communal-life regulations, drawing up constitutions, which were codified and gradually spread as a practice to all Byzantine monasteries (Hussey 2010; Kountoura-Galaki 1996; Morris 2002).

Making the most of their resources in a sustainable manner, the Byzantine monasteries not only survived, but, over time became larger and wealthier (especially from the tenth century onwards), revealing their superiority as an economic institution. Their income was derived from working on their own landholdings and also taking advantage of their preferential tax treatment by the state (Morris 2002; Runciman 2005; Walter 2002). Most monasteries were independent of each other, even when in close proximity, but in some cases monasteries were tied together, establishing confederations (Holy Mountains) (Charanis 1971; Morris 2002).

4.1. Monastic location and populations

Scholars report that Byzantine monasteries were numerous, though the numbers fluctuated from time to time (Charanis 1971). They were established in various locations, ranging from mountainous and inaccessible sites (ideal for ascetic life) to holy places and to urban areas where the community was in active symbiosis with the lay population (Charanis 1971; Smyrlis 2020).

Over time, researchers (Beck 1959; Bryer 1979; Charanis 1971) have attempted to identify the number of monasteries and their manpower, and the

literature converges on the number of 700 establishments operating in the same period, 417 of which were urban. Most monasteries housed about 10 to 20 monks, although there were convents (like Pantokrator in Constantinople, or Iviron and Lavra in Mount Athos) with much larger communities, numbering, at times, more than a hundred members. More recently Koder (2017), drawing on the lemmas of the twelve-volumed *Tabula Imperii Byzantini*, provided a record of all monastic settlements that ever existed by geographical region (Table 1). These amount to 1043, constituting 15.9% of all Byzantine settlements, but as Koder (2017) acknowledges, in agreement with Charanis (1971), the numbers are approximate and there must have been many more unrecorded settlements.

TABLE 1 • Byzantine settlements

Tabula Imperii Byzantini (all 12 volumes)	Total number of settlements⁽¹⁾	Monastic settlements⁽²⁾	%
1. Hellas & Thessaly	460	146	31.7
2. Cappadocia	300	89	29.7
3. Nicopolis & Kephallenia	405	95	23.5
4. Galatia & Lycaonia	238	42	17.6
5. Cilicia & Isauria	578	95	16.4
6. Thrace	740	77	10.4
7. Phrygia & Pisidia	532	20	3.8
8. Lycia & Pamphylia	528	54	10.2
9. Paphlagonia & Honorias	249	20	8.0
10. Aegean Sea	333	19	5.7
11. South Macedonia	1707	335	19.6
12. Europe / East Thrace ⁽³⁾	471	51	10.8
Total number	6541	1043	15.9

(1) Total number of settlements of any type and size that ever existed.

(2) Total number of monastic settlements of any type and size that ever existed.

(3) Without including the monasteries of Constantinople.

Source: Koder (2017, p. 217)

4.2. *The main actors*

The monks

The monks and their community constitute the basic unit of the monastic institution. This was indeed a diverse group of people, in terms of age, racial, social, economic and educational backgrounds (Angold 2000; Beck 2005; Talbot 1987; Walter 2002), since there were no exclusions and anyone willing (from emperors to beggars, even slaves) could join and become, after a probationary period, a full member of the monastic community. This social diversity was reflected in the educational level of its members. Some monks, of aristocratic origin, were highly educated, but others did not even have the basic knowledge of writing and reading (Beck 2005). The educational level of individuals had an impact on their position within the monastic ‘family’ where the most educated usually held positions of responsibility (Talbot 1987; 2009).

The reasons for choosing to become a monk were personal, with the common line being the salvation of the soul, although there were people motivated by less spiritual reasons, such as to evade various social, economic or military obligations or to reach high ecclesiastical offices (Angold 2000; Beck 2005; Talbot 1987). The everyday life of the convent was largely standardized. The monks were required to observe strict rules of conduct, to have discipline and to contribute with their work (individually and collectively) to the well-being of the community.

The abbot

The ‘father’ of the community was the *hegumenos* (leader), the abbot. Over the centuries, his role was upgraded and his authorities institutionalized. During the examined period the abbot possessed a wide range of responsibilities, looking after the material and spiritual welfare of the community. In particular, he represented the monastery in its dealings with the outside world (including the state, religious bodies and other monastic and lay communities), he sought resources and support, and together with other officers he oversaw the management and the efficient functioning of the monastery. He held authority over all his monks, could receive novices, examined disputes and inflicted punishments; but he was bound by the monastery’s rules, the monastic tradition and the ecclesiastic canons, and he had to consult a committee of the more experienced monks (*synaxis*) in all cases of major concern (Angold 2000; Galatariotou 1987; Laiou 1985; Morris 2002; Talbot 1987).

Obviously, the position required a skilful person with a personality that inspired respect (Laiou 1985; Talbot 1987; Walter 2002). So, the appointment

of the abbot was a very important decision for the *koinobion*, especially due to the fact that the position was for life (Galatariotou 1987; Talbot 1987). According to the legislation the abbot was elected by the community through a majority vote, and the decision needed to be ratified by the local ecclesiastical authorities; however, over the years this process has shown some variations (Runciman 2005). As such, over the examined period, the first abbot of a monastery was usually appointed by its founder, and his successors were selected in accordance with the specific tradition and practices of the establishment. Thus, in some monasteries the abbot was chosen by the entire community, in others by the officers, while in some cases, such as in Athos, by the previous abbot from among his spiritual students (Galatariotou 1987; Morris 2002; Walter 2002).

The founder

A founder (*ktetor*) was the person (monk, clergyman or even layman) who provided the necessary means for establishing or re-establishing a monastery (Angold 2000; Galatariotou 1987; Morris 2002; Papachryssanthou 1973). He was the one that drew up the charter of the *koinobion* (*ktetoriko typikon*), which described in detail the rules of behaviour, the obligations and rights of the monks, the organizational structure of the monastery and the purpose of its establishment (Galatariotou 1987; Talbot 1987; Walter 2002). Although each founder was allowed to form his own *typikon*, they were usually influenced by prominent monastic reformers and thus they adopted earlier successful charters (Angold 2000; Beck 2005; Hussey 2010). The founder was also required to provide his establishment with certain land property, or sufficient resources, that would ensure its financial independence and longevity. The quantity and quality of that property played a significant role, because it determined the size of the community and, most importantly, its survival prospects (Epstein 1981; Mundell-Mango 2002). The title of *ktetor* provided the holder with symbolic prestige but also with legal rights, which by the time of Justinian's legislation were already officially coded in the form of a separate law (Ktetor's Law) (Angold 2000).

4.3. Organization

Byzantine monasticism was characterized by great diversity and flexibility. Unlike its Western counterpart, it was never organized into monastic orders (which prescribed a strict structure and a single uniform regulatory framework for each order) and any 'rules' established over the centuries, although influential, were not binding. This means that in practice every monastery had its own formulary organization and rules of operation, which met

the needs, requirements and tradition of its specific community (Angold 2000; Beck 2005; Hussey 2010; Morris 2002). However, there were some common features, which characterize the monastic organization and function.

The Byzantine monastery had a clear hierarchical structure (Galatariotou 1987; Morris 2002; Walter 2002). Under the abbot there was a line of high-ranked officials (usually forming the *synaxis*) and numerous lesser offices, the number of which varied depending on the size of the community. The *oikonomos*, who usually acted as *deutereuon* replacing the abbot in case of absence or sickness, possessed administrative duties and was in charge of all the property; the *kellarios* cared for the food; the *kanonarches* guided the singers during the Divine Office, and the *epistemonarches* looked after rule compliance and resolved disputes and quarrels with the assistance of *epeteretes*, who supervised the monks. The rest of the internal organization consisted of a number of different positions, such as doctors, cooks, storekeepers, librarians, fishermen, cultivators, skilled craftsmen, etc. that contributed to the proper functioning of the whole community.

Although the Byzantine monastery constituted a largely independent unit, there were cases where monasteries formed groups and developed dependent monasteries and *metochia* (Beck 2005). The dependent monasteries were institutions that after monastic reformations ended up operating under the supervision of a more powerful one. They retained their own charters and traditions and instead of an abbot they had a financial caretaker appointed by the supervising monastery (Angold 2000; Epstein 1981). In turn, *metochia* were geographically-distant monastic establishments (usually of small size), created for the management of a monastery's remote properties. This was done by an appointed administrator (*metochiarios*) assisted by a few members of the brotherhood, who lived in the *metochi* and were accountable to the mother monastery (Angold 2000).

The most complex form of monastic organization was the Holy Mountains. These were confederations of monasteries (Angold 2009; Charanis 1971; Vasiliev 1933) governed by the assembly of the respective *hegoumenoi* representing their monastic communities, and presided by an elected leader called the "First Hesychast" or simply the "First" (*Protos*) (Angold 2000; Morris 1996; 2002), who was the official representative of the Holy Mountain having administrative and non-administrative responsibilities (Oikonomides 1988; Morris 1996; 2002). As the case of Athos reveals, Holy Mountains enjoyed relative independence, tax privileges, and judicial authority to adjudicate and resolve issues concerning internal disputes without external, lay or even ecclesiastical, intervention.

4.4. *Institutional framework*

The Byzantine monasteries were regulated by a complex institutional framework comprised of the original rule of the founder (*typikon*), the laws issued by the emperors, and the canons of the Church councils (Frazee 1982). To these should be added a fourth category: the tradition developed by each institution over the centuries.

For several hundred years the establishment of monasteries did not require a written charter and the majority of the institutions operated on the basis of oral tradition. A written *typikon* was widely used in the tenth century, and only towards the end of the middle era it emerged as one of the legal conditions necessary for the establishment of a monastery (Angold 2000; Galatariotou 1987). According to Galatariotou (1987), the charter regulated both the functional and administrative matters of the community and the interpersonal relationships of its members. Also, due to its legal power, it emerged as a means of safeguarding the autonomy and independence of the institutions against possible state and church intervention.

The official integration of the monastic institution into the life of the Church was carried out by the Synods, starting with the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, which tried to homogenize the monasteries by placing them under the control of the ecclesiastical authorities and the Canon Law (Beck 2005; Frazee 1982). This question occupied the imperial legislature too, which issued a series of decrees aiming to regulate and control monastic operation. An important step towards this end was Emperor Justinian's decree promoting the *cenobitic* Basilean model in an effort to impose some uniformity and, through this, greater state and ecclesiastical control upon the institution. Although the state's legislative initiatives were supported and complemented by the ecclesiastical and synodic regulatory framework, their success was rather marginal: monasticism was not easy to control (Beck 2005; Frazee 1982; Runciman 2005).

The monastic tradition, consisting of all the practices, writings and teachings produced through the centuries by the great monastic reformers, was an informal regulatory source with huge influence on the institutional formation and everyday life of monastic communities. In essence, it provided a common institutional core that gave a degree of homogeneity to Byzantine monastic institutions (Angold 2002).

4.5. *The resources*

Monastic resources were collectively owned and managed by the monastic community in a sustainable and equitable manner, for the benefit of all members, both present and future (Kaplan 1994; 2020). Governance was

based on a system of self-enforced rules, regulations, norms and customary practises that enabled them not only to efficiently preserve their resources but also to foster the cooperation, trust, solidarity and shared spirit of responsibility that was central to the monastic way of life, contributing to the long-term viability of the *koinobion* and to the common good of society (Krausmüller 1994; Walter 2002).

These resources were manifold and constituted of tangible property and intangible assets (Talbot 1987; 2009). The latter concerned scholarship and knowledge in various fields, including theology, philosophy, history, craftsmanship, medicine, sciences and arts (especially iconography and liturgical music), as well as spiritual practices, such as fasting and meditation, which constitute common heritage of humankind, i.e., global common goods, open to risk of degradation and destruction if not properly managed and protected.⁴ The monastic communities addressed the externality and assumed an essentially social role by undertaking the maintenance, reproduction and dissemination of knowledge both of antiquity and of their time, at their own cost for the benefit of the whole of society/humanity. They developed structures (such as scriptoria and libraries) for the safekeeping and preservation of works of art and literature, copying, translating, interpreting and commenting on texts and making them available to other monks and to outsiders, while equally “important was the work of compilation and original composition and scholarship that was pursued within monastic precincts” (Talbot 2009, p. 275). Mankind’s collective knowledge was therefore safeguarded, reproduced, cultivated, shared freely and openly and passed down through the generations by the monks, constituting a source of spiritual nourishment and inspiration for humanity (Angold 2000; Morris 2002; Talbot 1987; 2009; Theodosiou et al. 2010).

Tangible property was the main revenue source that not only ensured the survival of the communities but also assisted them in their spiritual and social work (Walter 2002). In addition to sheltering people in distress (e.g., or-

4. Applying strictly and narrowly the criteria of subtractability and excludability, scholarship and knowledge are typically considered to be either club goods or public goods (depending on the degree of accessibility and openness they embrace), and not common-pool resources (CPR), aka common goods. However, this classic economic categorization of goods is somewhat problematic (De Moor 2011) on the grounds that it associates certain goods with specific forms of property, it ignores the fact that goods may change (e.g., due to technological changes) or that they appear in different or complex forms (e.g., knowledge as information vs tacit knowledge) which do not fit uniformly, consistently or easily within the simplified criteria of subtractability and excludability. In this sense, scholarship and knowledge can be qualified as CPR (see Hess and Ostrom 2007) when their governance/management promotes open-access and this gives rise to rivalrous situations that may compromise either the availability of the resource or its quality, or even qualitative aspects of the Commons, such as community social capital, cohesion, identity, culture, etc. (all of which may lead to the degradation of the resource, a ‘tragedy’ situation).

phans, the elderly, etc.), monasteries carried out philanthropic activities (e.g., distributing goods to the needy) and ran public-benefit institutions (e.g., hospitals and poorhouses), increasingly undertaking functions that were in the purview of the state. Furthermore, they frequently engaged in social actions assisting their lay neighbours in need (e.g., during disasters and emergency situations), and went even further to build and maintain public infrastructures (e.g., defensive towers, bridges and roads) (Angold 2000; Talbot 2009). This diverse social work, combined with the cost of living, the upkeep of the facilities and the restrictions imposed by the monastic rules and life, necessitated a steady flow of income to the institution and property possession to secure it (Talbot 1987), an issue that was from early on acknowledged by the monastic reformers who advocated the economic independence of the communities. Thus, they gradually began to acquire estates nearby, the exploitation of which was undertaken by their own members (Mundell-Mango 2002).

Monastic properties were of two kinds: immovable and movable (Mundell-Mango 2002; Talbot 1987; 2009). The former concerned land and buildings, including fields, orchards, vineyards, pastures, saltworks, as well as urban rental estates, workshops and businesses such as mills and retail shops. Movable possessions concerned capital goods, including monetary reserves, tools, animal stock, manuscripts, icons, sacred relics, even naval vessels.⁵ Most of these were acquired through purchase, monastic absorptions and donations of emperors and private pious benefactors (Charanis 1971; Harvey 1996). Monasteries regularly received gifts of cash and precious liturgical objects from the faithful in exchange for old-age pensions (*adelphata*) or posthumous commemoration. It was also customary for new members to voluntarily offer entrance gifts (*prosenexeis*) as a kind of ‘dowry’ (Kaplan 1994; Talbot 1990; 2009).

Of all the aforementioned, it was the landed estates that could secure a steady flow of revenue (Kaplan 1994; Smyrlis 2020), enabling the communities to achieve autarky based on their own labour, as stipulated by monastic rule and tradition (Krausmüller 1994; Talbot 1987). To this end, they established a division of labour into different offices and posts (*diakoniai*) according to needs, and prudently organized daily life into periods of work, rest and prayer, adjusting their attendance to work hours (Krausmüller 1994). In addition, they carefully designed and implemented investment plans and rationalisation tactics (e.g., acquiring adjacent land to minimise transportation and management costs), carrying out important land improvements (e.g., irrigation and land clearance projects) and increasing their landholdings, to the de-

5. A quite detailed presentation of the volume and the types of monastic assets is recorded in the literature (Oikonomides 1991; Morris 2002; Mundell-Mango 2002; Hussey 2010; Talbot 2009).

gree that quite soon monasteries (or at least some of them, such as Iviron and Lavra in Mount Athos) became so wealthy to be ranked among the most prosperous landowners in Byzantium (Harvey 1996; Kaplan 2020; Laiou and Morrisson 2007). In fact, monastic Commons were such efficient institutions that when their own internal workforce fell short of that required for optimal utilization of land (especially in distant areas), the monastic communities found other ways to maximise productivity and not let their resources be underutilised or depleted. They adapted to the new circumstances and employed the assistance of lay workers and *paroikoi* to produce what they required, always under the active supervision of their own members (Kaplan 1994). All these led the monastic estates to be regarded among the best managed, exploited and preserved throughout the Empire (Smyrlis 2020).

Overall, ownership and management of land by the monastic Commons, rather than by private individuals, was in many cases the most efficient arrangement for the resource, the economy, and the Empire. Unlike lay landowners, who often lacked the necessary capital and manpower to put land to its best and highest use (Talbot 2009), the monks' pursuit of a solitary and frugal life, coupled with the long tradition of monastic labour, allowed monastic communities to secure the means necessary not only to maintain this vital and scarce resource (which due to constant invasions and adverse climatological conditions was at risk of depletion; Kaplan 2020; Lambert 2022), but also to expand and optimize it, as it was often the monastic communities that brought "unused land into cultivation" and carried out substantial improvement and clearance works, "on a scale which few but the richest laymen could emulate" (Morris 2002, p. 118; Kaplan 2020), which boosted land productivity and efficiency.

Moreover, monastic institutions played an important role by ensuring the "defence of a region", consolidating "imperial authority" and structuring a secured and stable environment in the countryside (Smyrlis 2006; 2020, pp. 156, 158), which allowed for the better exploitation of all the resources in a region, including private and state ones (Oikonomides 2004; Bakirtzis 2013; Smyrlis 2016). This was certainly a reason why the emperors granted privileges to existing monasteries or promoted the foundation of new ones, especially in peripheral, disputed, or newly conquered territories or in times of distress (Smyrlis 2020).

4.6. *East vs. West*

From the socio-economic point of view, Christian monasticism, despite the many and different forms it has taken between the East and the West, should be seen as an institution aiming to support (spiritually as well as materially) the faithful by providing an organizational structure that was able to

deal efficiently with the economic, social and political challenges of the time (Raftis 1961). Although an analytical description is beyond our scope, it is of interest to outline some of the elements of Western monasticism vis-à-vis its Eastern counterpart in order to make clear their different organizational structures and economic functions. Whereas in the East monasteries were organized on a rather autonomous, horizontal, bottom-up, collective basis, the Western institutions assumed a more controlled, hierarchical, top-down form, resembling private corporations run by the abbots (Raftis 1961), who, at least until the Gregorian reforms (eleventh century), could be lay people appointed by the rulers (Loud 1994; Vanderputten 2020b). Certainly, these developments were driven by, and reflected, the overall socio-political framework of the places, where the East, contrary to the West (Bugiulescu 2018), was organized into a single and stable state ruled by one person, the emperor.

The organizational diversity, political instability, and rivalry among Western kingdoms contributed to the emergence of feudal systems where land ownership and tenure became subject to a series of arrangements that eventually compromised the independence and integrity of Western monasticism (Evans 2016). In particular, monastic lands and revenues in the West were officially placed under the authority of the abbot alone, who personally retained “the position of a tenant-in-chief and became a magnate or baron next to the king” (Raftis 1961, p. 461). Although such a development was almost unavoidable, the personal possession of monastic assets by the abbot conferred upon him enhanced political, as well as military and judicial, powers that separated him from the convent and made him into a political figure⁶ (Cantor 1960). The fact that the abbot assumed surplus authority put the convent in a fundamentally negative or rigid position in terms of governance, especially in strategic decision-making concerning economic policy (Devroey 2020). Obedientiaries held land and administered revenues but they did not have the right to purchase assets or new sources of revenue, “not even to conduct a decisive re-organization of their own administrative areas” (Raftis 1961, p. 466). Ultimately, the management of the monastic land resources in the West, at least at the strategic level, came either under royal patronage (since abbots were appointed by the king) and custody (when kings anointed wardens instead of abbots) with the aim of directing surpluses to the royal treasury, or was placed in the hands of the abbot, who usually leased them out on long term leases as an investment for immediate profit (turning the convent from a community of labourer-users into rent-seeking investors) (Loud 1994; Raftis 1961; Vanderputten 2020a).

6. This separation often went to great lengths (especially during Carolingian rule), with the abbot “usually acquiring a separate residence and living a public life apart from the monastic routine” (Raftis 1961, p. 461).

As for the organization of the monasteries, there were many different systems corresponding to different monastic orders and communities, but a key structural feature highlighted by scholars is a clear hierarchical, discrete and closely audited distribution of roles to the various agents involved (Evans 2016; Real 2020). This was associated with the fact that from the eighth century the monasteries were brought into the institutional nexus of the developing feudal order, turning the abbots into “vassals of kings”, and the convent into an ensemble of landlords supervising “hundreds, or even thousands” of dependent agricultural lay laborers that worked as serfs on their manorial estates (Devroey 2020, p. 472; Cantor 1960). Partly this transformation was due to the growing emphasis on liturgy and prayer service, especially during the Carolingian era (Vanderputten 2020a). To meet these needs, the monks were released from land farming and their manual labour was reduced to four hours a day, or was “replaced by work in the scriptorium” (Vanderputten 2020a, p. 48), necessitating the allocation of many agricultural and manual jobs to lay servants or employees (Devroey 2020). As such, despite the embracement of the Christian ethic of self-sufficiency, Western “monastic communities never had pure and simple domestic economies governed exclusively by the logic of autarky and isolationism”, at least to the degree this was happened in the East (Devroey 2020, p. 472).

5. The Byzantine monastery as a Commons: the community design principles

Principle 1: Well-defined boundaries

The Byzantine monastic institutions have clearly defined boundaries regarding both the members of their community and their living space and resources. From the first years of the institution, the monks were obliged to live isolated as a community within the identified boundaries of the monastery building complex. This was necessary in order to fulfil the purpose of the institution (i.e., to live apart from the rest of society so as to get closer to God and to achieve holiness), to cope with the needs of daily life and to facilitate the efficient function of the community, but it was also an accepted practice and a rule of the monastic tradition (Hussey 2010; Talbot 1987). The boundaries around the community were also clearly defined and regulated. Membership in the monastic community was open but controlled, accepting people who shared the same Christian principles and values and were willing to undertake a similar degree of lifelong commitment, that is, to give up secular life and live the rest of their life with the community having little contact with the outside world.

Principle 2: Rules aligned to conditions prescribing fair balance of benefits and costs

The first condition of the principle highlights that Commons' rules need to conform in some way to the contextual environment, whereas the second necessitates correspondence between costs encountered and benefits obtained, which is frequently expressed as dependence of commoners on their resources (Cox et al. 2010).

Regarding the first part of the principle, it becomes evident that Byzantine monasteries showed considerable flexibility in adjusting their framework to suit the socio-politico-economic conditions of the time. For example, when expansion led to the spatial dispersion of estates, they circumvented their established tradition of spatial concentration to found monastic establishments (*metochia*) for the efficient appropriation of those remote properties. Similarly, although the monastic tradition stipulated that the community itself had to labour its land, when it was made clear that the monastic manpower was not enough to do so, the community proceeded to increase its workforce by recruiting external layman workers. Moreover, the correspondence between monastic rules and contextual conditions was not limited to the issue of resources, but extended to the overall organization of the monastic institution. In fact, its organizational structure mirrored the hierarchically stratified structure of the wider socio-political environment, characterized by the central figure of the emperor and structured roles for the remaining social classes. Similarly, the abbot emerged as the leader of the monastic family, heading a structured community with allocated roles and functions.

As concerns the second part of the principle, we have to acknowledge that the survival of the monastic communities depended to a large extent on the efficient utilization and sustainable exploitation of their resources. The needs of everyday life, the living and maintenance costs and the social work of the community, required expenditure of significant resources, which had to flow steadily into the institution (Krausmüller 1994; Talbot 1987). Donations and financial grants did not guarantee a constant source of such an income. Moreover, the religious nature of the institution itself placed significant restrictions and limitations. Monks had to devote their lives to spiritual goals and obey the strict rules of the monastic way of living, and so they did not have the same freedom of movement and action as the laity. All this led to restrictions on both the way and the form their work could take. For this reason, they proceeded with actions aimed at optimizing their organization and assets, in accordance with the contextual conditions. Thus, within the socio-politico-economic context that monasteries were obliged to function, economic priorities came to the fore, triggering respective changes in both the operational and the collective-choice fronts of the rule structure.

Principle 3: Collective-choice arrangements

Byzantine monasticism was a religious institution with a clear hierarchical structure and a solid value system, based on love for God and fellow humans. Principles such as obedience, chastity, poverty, discipline, and physical and spiritual work were key elements of the monastic communities, reflecting a Byzantine society where values such as respect for order, hierarchy and tradition were held in high esteem (Ragia 2016). In these terms, it is not surprising that the monastic Commons fell short of direct democratic processes and collective decision mechanisms that contemporary Commons exhibit.

Of course, the lack of direct democratic processes did not mean that the Byzantine monasteries were absolutist institutions with no participation on the part of the community. In fact, monks were engaged in decision-making but through indirect ways and processes of ‘internal’ democracy. An example is the case concerning the acceptance of the community’s regulatory framework by its candidates. From the early years of the institution, the novices had first to go over and then embrace the rules and practices of the monastery of their choice (Galatariotou 1987; Charanis 1971). Furthermore, an important process of collective decision-making was the selection of leadership. As discussed, the election of the abbot was a substantial issue (for the survival and well-being of the community) that required collective acceptance by the community members, and, in many cases, he was directly elected by them.

Similar collective processes were followed in making decisions in all significant matters (although admittedly, without the direct participation of all monks). According to Galatariotou (1987), decisions in important business affairs were taken by the abbot in collaboration with the officials and the elders who were prominent, experienced and respectful monks of the community. This practice was often explicitly specified in the monastic charters, giving it institutional formality and mandatory status. Overall, the monks possessed the instruments of democratic voice and of monitoring, and they knew that they would be heard. They created a unique organizational structure where important issues were solved in open discussions by people having the intrinsic motivation to fully invest their potential in the long-term future of their community.

Principle 4: Monitoring

Monitoring plays a significant role in the efficient function of a Commons, since it makes those who do not comply with the rules visible to the community and informs strategic and contingent action for enforcement, through various (including informal) channels. Of course, monitoring is a costly procedure requiring credible commitment and investments on the part of the partici-

pants. Such investments are usually undertaken once members are convinced that the effort is justified and worthwhile (Cox et al. 2010).

Focusing on our case, it has been documented that the Byzantine monastery had established a number of formal and informal control mechanisms, which allowed it to monitor not only the action of its members but also the proper functioning of the institution and its resources. To start with, there were formal offices assigned with such tasks, usually specified in the monastery's *typikon* (Talbot 1987). Besides the abbot, who had the overall supervision, and the founder, who externally watched the actions of the community, the implementation of the charter and the proper management of the resources (Galatariotou 1987), some examples of such positions were the *epistemonarches* and the *epeteretes*, who oversaw daily rule compliance (spiritual and labour) and enforced order within the community. Similar monitoring mechanisms were also developed with specific reference to the resources, facilitating the successful management of the brotherhood's property. Specific officials assigned to this role were the *oikonomos* and the *metochiaros*. Moreover, it should be highlighted that the Byzantine monastery was a spiritual institution with a robust value system based on Christian ethics of love, morality and duty. The monks took lifelong vows of obedience, discipline and devotion, comprising a solid community with strong ties, fostering and rewarding loyalty, mutual respect and trust among its members (Krausmüller 1994). In that sense, they wilfully followed the rules and orders provided, while self-monitoring, self-controlling and self-enforcing their actions.

Principle 5: Graduated sanctions

A system of graduated sanctioning deters commoners from excessive or recurrent violations of the rules. It also indicates the community's commitment and the reliability of the Commons institution.

In the case of the Byzantine monastic community, violations of the rules were punished based on the provisions provided by the charter, the tradition of the institution and, to a lesser extent, by the ecclesiastical canons (given that the Church did not interfere with the autonomy of monasteries). The penalties were announced in front of all members of the community, aiming to deter possible future violations. The sentences – the so-called penances (*epitimia*) – were usually carried out in a common area, such as the refectory, in the view of the assembled community (Talbot 2007). Regarding the type and severity of the sanctions, there was a scale of punishments ranging from special fasts and prayers or the *apeulogiam* (that is, privation of the abbot's blessing), daily penances concerning spiritual and physical exercises, and rarely some kind of physical punishment, to the *aphorismos* or solitary confinement and excommunication from all common prayers and the sacraments. Of

course, the ultimate sanction was the expulsion of the individual from the community (Galatariotou 1987; Talbot 2007). Moreover, the communal way of living, the daily interaction, and the social ties of respect and loyalty among the members, facilitated deployment of other types of sanctions of social, tacit and informal character, such as peer pressure and various forms (even subtle) of interpersonal approval or disapproval of an action regulated by norms, rules or laws (Krausmüller 1994).

Principle 6: Conflict-resolution mechanisms

Scholars state that conflict within and between social groups is an inevitable situation, necessitating mechanisms for conflict resolution which are ‘low-cost’ and ‘easy-to-access’ (Cox et al. 2010; Ostrom 1990).

Naturally, the activities and functions of the Byzantine monasteries gave rise to conflict situations, both within and between monasteries. Many internal disputes between the members of a monastic community were usually solved in goodwill, through direct or mediated discussion among involved parties on the basis of mutual respect, sincerity, solidarity and fidelity, which characterize a community with such high social capital (Krausmüller 1994). If an issue persisted, it was taken up initially to the officials in charge of dispute resolution (*epeteretes* and *hepistemonarches*) and eventually to the ‘father’ of the community, the abbot, who had the final decision on the matter (Morris 2002; Walter 2002). Now, if the dispute involved the leadership and/or could not be resolved without harming the harmony (unity) of the community, then the solution was given by the ecclesiastical lord or, in exceptional cases, by the emperor himself (Runciman 2005).

The resolution of intra-monastery conflicts was a rather more complicated matter. Some of them were brought to the secular or to ecclesiastical courts, as in disputes between monasteries and lay people, but many were resolved within the community and without external interference (Morris 1996; 2002). For example, on Mount Athos communities usually settled disputes through arbitration or conciliation under the aegis of *Protos*, allowing the monastic communities to remain largely independent and self-regulated (Morris 1996; 2002). However, when the outcome was not satisfactory, then the matter could be taken to the patriarch or even to the emperor (Morris 2002).

Principle 7: Recognition of rights

Principle 7 highlights that higher-level authorities recognize the self-governance rights of the community. This was certainly the case in the Byzantine monasteries. Both the state and ecclesiastical authorities accepted the institution of monastery and attempted to standardize, and control, its operation

and activities with, however, poor results. Byzantine monastic institutions remained largely independent, exhibiting great flexibility and diversity (Angold 2000; Morris 2002). This independence was eventually accepted and officially recognized by both the state and the Church (Morris 1996; 2002).

Being practically autonomous, each monastic community had its own organizational structure and operational rules (specified in its charter) following the tradition of monasticism. Apart from identifying the roles, rights and obligations of its members, the charters also provided an institutional formality, since they were legal documents protected under the Ktitor's Law, acting in that way as an additional safeguard of the community's autonomy (Angold 2000; Galatariotou 1987). In turn, the monastic tradition emerged over the centuries as a core of common institutionalized practices, critically influencing both the form of the institution and its evolutionary path (Angold 2000). This was the bottom-up outcome of long accumulated monastic experience and guidance of monastic fathers who, being monks themselves, recorded the collective experience of the institution and set principles, standards and norms that the community willingly followed.

Principle 8: Nested enterprises

This principle states that successful governance is organized in multiple layers of nested enterprises, whereas nesting may occur vertically, that is, around external organizational structures, and/or horizontally, i.e., around different community groups or forms. We have seen that the Byzantine monastery deployed both organizational types in an attempt to achieve strategic advantages enhancing its survival prospects. A clear case of vertical nesting was the Holy Mountains, a system of confederate organization among adjacent monasteries headed by an elected *Protos*. A rather horizontal-nesting kind of organization appears in *metochia* and certainly in the hierarchy of offices divided among the community members, serving certain functions for the spiritual and material development and the orderly operation of the institution.

6. Conclusions

The current paper explored the Byzantine monastic institution as a Commons. We perceive Commons as a complex socio-politico-economic governance regime (an institution alternative to market-state dipole) that stakeholders subject to social dilemmas develop to efficiently self-manage resources and goods they shared in common. In that sense we argue along with Verrax (2019) that we need to see Commons as a concept that goes beyond the sole

issue of CPR depletion and management. It is a regime, an institution, that advances cooperation and collective action to effectively address social dilemmas in a way that serves the collective interest and benefit.

It is not until recently that economic history has started to pay attention to Commons as institutions (Laborda-Pemán and De Moor 2016). Drawing on Ostrom's new-institutional approach, scholars have tried to analyse the complex systems related to the management and exploitation of common resources, the make-up of the community, the rules regulating appropriation, and the struggles over resource control (Bonan 2018). Yet, despite the increasing interest, studies remain limited in both number and spatial coverage, necessitating further research of the workings and dynamics of historical Commons in different space-time contexts (De Moor et al. 2016). Their study enriches our knowledge and our 'institutional toolbox' to manage resources collectively (De Moor 2011), or at least providing inspiration for solutions to contemporary social dilemmas (for example, related to global resource depletion) that arise due to similar pressures, behavioural patterns and social conflicts that past generations were facing.

One such a historical Commons, still alive today, has been the Byzantine monastery, a religious commune whose members, lived, worshipped and worked together following self-developed and self-imposed rules, that enable them to sustainably exploit and preserve the diverse and multiple common resources. As far as we know, this is the first time that the Byzantine monastic institution is explored and analysed in the context of Commons using an analytical tool of the Ostromian approach. A number of points were made apparent, revealing the essential nature of the monastic Commons institution and the reasons behind its success, resilience and longevity, which are succinctly outlined next.

Despite the hierarchical, authoritative and interventionist nature of the state, through the centuries the monastic institutions developed and remained independent, autonomous, self-sufficient and self-organized entities, exhibiting sufficient flexibility, adaptability and resilience. They were organized on a rather horizontal, bottom-up, collective basis, aligned with the Commons' paradigm, in contrast to the Western counterparts that took a more hierarchical, top-down form, resembling private corporations of rent-seeking landlords run by rather detached leaders.⁷ This practically signified that every monastery had its own (officially recognized) formulary, organization and rules of operation, established by its charter in line with the monastic tradition.

7. As noted, Byzantine monasticism was never organized into monastic orders, such as the Benedictines or the Carmelites, adopting and abiding by the same way of life, regulatory framework and feudal organizational structure and management regime for all communities.

Monastic common resources were manifold and comprised mainly of landed estates, essential for their economic survival, and cultural-spiritual assets (common heritage of humankind), important for their social, intellectual and spiritual role and fulfilment. As scholars certified ownership and management of land by the monastic communities – rather than by private individuals or the state – was in many cases the most efficient arrangement for the resource, the economy and the Empire, since their organizational structure and way of life enable them not only to maintain this vital and scarce resource (which due to constant invasions and adverse climatological conditions was at risk of depletion), but also to expand and optimize it, to the benefit of all. In addition, monastic communities fulfilled an essentially social role by undertaking the maintenance, reproduction and dissemination of past and existing knowledge (that was subject to degradation and destruction if not properly managed and protected), at their own cost in the interest of the whole of society/humanity.

The monastic Commons exhibited well-defined boundaries of both its community and its resources; membership to the monastic community, though open to everyone, was essentially controlled and available to the faithful who were willing to undertake such a lifelong commitment; there was an overlap between the community's residential location and resource location; the physical boundaries of the convent and of all monastic estates were clearly specified and legally recognized and protected, and intangible resources were generally available to the public, but were cultivated and reproduced collectively by the community.

Mirroring a society where values such as respect for order, hierarchy and tradition were in high esteem, the monastic Commons fell short of direct democratic practices of governance (evident in modern Commons) and rather employed indirect democratic mechanisms of decision-making in important affairs, based on monitoring and the democratic voice of its members. Armoured with an outright value system of Christian ethics and bounded by lifelong vows of obedience, discipline and stability, the monastic community developed a high degree of social capital, based on mutual respect, trust, solidarity, self-denial and offering. As a result, monks wilfully followed the rules and orders provided, in that sense self-monitoring, self-controlling and self-enforcing their institutions. Yet, the regime put in place an internal, self-organized, multi-layered, low-cost system of monitoring (member compliance and resource management), conflict resolution (based on assigned offices), and graduated, socially-enforced sanctions (for different levels of offences), as a second, formal, level of safeguard.

Concluding, it becomes evident that the Byzantine monastic institution constituted a successful historical Commons, founded upon a tight-knit community of credibly-committed anchorites who were highly dependent on their

resources for their livelihood, spiritual fulfilment and social mission. The moral system of Christian virtues, the consolidated monastic experience and tradition, and the community social capital, enabled them to develop an independent (of state, political and ecclesiastical, authority) regime, the monastic Commons, that successfully utilized their common goods (immovable, movable, intangible, cognitive and spiritual) to sustain the institution for hundreds of years. Interestingly, the monastic Commons showed such efficiency, resilience, and adaptability that enabled its survival even after the fall of Byzantium; a research area that future studies are welcomed to explore.

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Author contribution statement

Paschalis Arvanitidis: framework, theory, methodology, literature review, writing, supervision. Charalampos Sofiadis: data search, data collection, data elaboration, methodology, writing.

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El monestir bizantí com a Commons

RESUM

Si bé els acadèmics han posat cada cop més atenció en els *Commons*, entesos com a institucions d'acció col·lectiva per al govern dels béns comuns, la majoria dels estudis exploren casos moderns, deixant de banda els *Commons* històrics. Tanmateix, l'anàlisi d'aquests darrers pot contribuir a comprendre els efectes a llarg termini de comportaments passats sobre les futures generacions i a suggerir solucions a problemes contemporanis derivats de dilemes socials similars. Un exemple de *Commons* històric que continua existint és la institució monàstica bizantina. Basant-se en fonts històriques i estudis contemporanis, l'article utilitza (a) l'anàlisi històrico-institucional per descriure l'estructura de la institució, i (b) els principis de disseny comunitari de les institucions d'acció col·lectiva per al govern dels béns comuns, per explorar si el monestir bizantí es pot classificar d'aquesta manera. Es conclou que el monestir bizantí va ser un cas exitós de *Commons*, que va desenvolupar una estructura de govern creïble per gestionar i preservar de forma sostenible els seus béns comuns, tant els intangibles com els tangibles, malgrat la manca de processos democràtics directes que caracteritza els *Commons* moderns.

PARAULES CLAU: *commons*, institucions, monestirs bizantins, anàlisi institucional històrica, principis de disseny per a comunitats.

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El monasterio bizantino como Commons

RESUMEN

Aunque los académicos han prestado cada vez más atención a los *Commons*, entendiendo las instituciones de acción colectiva para el gobierno de los bienes comunes, la mayoría de los estudios exploran casos modernos, dejando de lado los *Commons* históricos. El análisis de estos últimos puede contribuir a comprender los efectos a largo plazo de comportamientos pasados sobre las generaciones futuras y sugerir soluciones a problemas contemporáneos derivados de dilemas sociales similares. Un ejemplo de *Commons* histórico que sigue existiendo es la institución monástica bizantina. Basándose en fuentes históricas y estudios contemporáneos, el artículo utiliza (a) el análisis histórico-institucional, para esbozar la estructura de la institución, y (b) los principios de diseño comunitario de las instituciones de acción colectiva para el gobierno de los bienes comunes, para explorar si el monasterio bizantino puede clasificarse de esta manera. Se concluye que el monasterio bizantino fue un caso exitoso de *Commons*, que desarrolló una estructura de gobierno creíble para gestionar y preservar de forma sostenible sus bienes comunes, tanto los intangibles como los tangibles, a pesar de la falta de procesos democráticos directos que caracteriza a los *Commons* modernos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Commons*, instituciones, monasterios bizantinos, análisis institucional histórico, principios de diseño para comunidades.

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