

## Byzantine Philanthropy - Part I (Demetrios J. Constantelos)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Philantropia in Byzantium was not what we understand today as philanthropy and charity. Nowadays philanthropy implies the prophylactic and therapeutic welfare, concern for the general public and charity so called directed toward alleviation of individual suffering. But in the thought and life of Byzantines philanthropy was: first, a philosophical and theological abstraction; second, a political attribute; third, charity directed to the individual in want; and fourth, philanthropy properly so called and expressed in organized institutions.



If we were to ask a Byzantine what prompted him to believe in and apply philanthropia, he would have answered in the following terms, which formed the philanthropic philosophy of a monastery. Become not only merciful, as your Heavenly Father is merciful, but also just; for as it is written, the just man gives liberally every day and lends, he distributes freely to the poor, his righteousness endures to the ages of ages. Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy; blessed is he who considers the poor and the beggar; he who shows in eleemosyne shall reap the fruit of life; he who is charitable to the poor lends to the Lord; he who oppresses a poor man insults his Maker.

These rules were the foundation of Byzantine philanthropic philosophy because God demanded man's mercy for his fellow man rather than sacrifices. The practitioner of charities was admonished that his deeds of mercy would lead him to the eternal habitation of the Almighty.

The background of philanthropia is theological that is, intended to please or to imitate God. Gregory Nazianzenos counselled his people: "Prove yourself a god to the unfortunate, imitating the mercy of God. There is nothing more godly in man than to do good works.

### **Philanthropic Institutions**

Philanthropic work was institutionalized very early in the Byzantine Empire. The Church, the State, and private bene-factors established numerous charitable

institutions.

The Church promulgated special canons for the erection of hospitals, poorhouses, hospices, and similar establishments, and organized their administration.

The Church was commissioned by her founder not only to preach a new gospel of salvation but also to feed the hungry; to quench the thirsty; to shelter the traveler; to offer hospitality to the stranger; to clothe the needy and look after the sick; to care for the orphans and the widows. It is to the credit of the Byzantine Church that she realized her social mission and sought to lighten the burden of the unfortunate by founding hospitals, hostels, homes for the aged, orphanages, and other welfare institutions.

The Byzantine Church emphasized the establishment of institutions which would help her missionary activities among the barbarians. Thus the episcopal headquarters and the monastic establishments became the shelter for all those in want. Preaching the gospel and caring for the poor and unfortunate were excellent means for the conduct of missionary work. It was understood that supplying man's physical needs was part of the responsibility of the Church.

Monastic establishments maintained many hospitals, old-age homes, hospices, orphanages, and perhaps other charitable institutions. The monasteries had assumed the responsibilities which cities, counties, or states exercise today, in establishing and supporting philanthropic establishments. In addition to separate chambers for ill, aged, or visiting clergymen and monks, the monasteries maintained equivalent charitable institutions for laymen.

The hospitals were usually built next to the "catholicon" or church of the monastery for obvious reasons, while homes for the aged and xenones were usually located outside the walls of the monastery, as at the monastery of Pentele.

The State, too, practiced philanthropy. From the dedication of its capital in 330 to its collapse in 1453, the Byzantine State was characterized by many manifestations of its philanthropic policies. Through special laws and the initiative of the emperors, hospitals were erected; orphanages were established where orphans were not only housed and fed but educated; special institutions for lepers were built; hospices and inns were founded in various cities and on roads of the Empire to provide food and shelter for travelers.

The emperor and those in public office established numerous philanthropic institutions, in part because they were expected to be philanthropists by virtue of their offices. But one cannot draw a sharp line of demarcation between Church and



State. The collection of laws known as Epanagoge, compiled during the reign of Basil I, defines the polity of Church and State and re-veals the nature of Byzantium. It was one organism—a unity composed of lay and ecclesiastical members presided over by two parallel and equal authorities, the emperor and the patriarch. Both, therefore, must be given credit for the numerous philanthropic institutions which we encounter in the Byzantine Em-pire.

But private initiative on the part of clergymen and laymen in establishing charitable institutions was not rare. Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, Sampson, John Eleemon, Stephen the parakoemomenos of Maurice, Dexiocrates, Attaleiates, and others may be classified among many private benefactors who estab-lished and endowed philanthropic concerns.

Unfortunately, our knowledge of those institutions which existed in such cities as Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Thessalonica, Chalcedon, Nicea, Corinth, and others is limited. How-ever, we do know by name many hospitals, homes for the aged, orphanages, hospices for strangers and travelers, homes for the poor, and similar shelters for the unfortunate in Constantinople and its vicinity. Obviously, such institutions must have existed in numerous other provinces and cities of the Empire: Justinian issued a novella concerning both the establishments of the capital and those which existed in all the eparchies of his reign.

## **Hospitals**

The hospitals which existed in the Byzantine Empire were general hospitals, leprosaria, maternity clinics, ophthalmological dispensaries, and foundling institutions. A modern historian of medicine writes that “they were in every respect perfect and nearly similar to present day institutions of this kind . . . they were the first fully equipped European hospitals.” This state-ment seems to exaggerate, and one may safely say that the or-ganization and function of Byzantine hospitals and clinics was medieval, parallel to the scientific progress and the medical means of the Byzantine middle ages.

The care, however, which the Byzantines took in relieving human suffering and prolonging human life was admirable. Their hospitals, clinics, medicines, and methods of treatment reveal that the Byzantines knew much about medicine and that they worked extensively to promote them. “Many operations of pres-ent-day surgery, orthopedics, obstetrics-gynecology, otorhi-nolaryngology, as well as much of the current knowledge on hygiene, epidemiology, anthropology, and physiology, considered as scientific advances of recent years, was knowledge of medieval Greek physicians.” In medical knowledge and in public medical assistance “the

Byzantines were indeed the indisputable fore-runners of the West.” Professor Pournaropoulos writes that the Byzantines made valuable contributions in many fields of medicine, such as anatomy-anthropology-physiology, hygiene-epidemiology, therapeutics-pharmacology, pathology, general pathology-parasitology, pediatrics, surgery-orthopedics, urology, obstetrics-gynecology, neurology-psychiatry, otorhinolaryngology, dermatology, toxicology, physiotherapy, hydrotherapy, stomatology, dietetics, and ophthalmology. Byzantine medicine and organization of medical institutions were spread among the Serbs, Roumanians, the Slavs in general, the Arabs, the Armenians, and the Italians.

Unfortunately, we know only a few hospitals by name, and those mostly in Constantinople. Our knowledge of hospitals in populous cities such as Antioch and Alexandria is not very satisfactory. Nonetheless, hospitals and other philanthropic institutions must have existed not only in the three large centers of the East mentioned above, but in such cities as Thessalonica, Nicea, and even in Kastoria, Hadrianople, Ephesos, Theodosiopolis, Corinth, and other provincial towns.

We must emphasize from the outset that *xenones* or *xenodocheia* and *gerocomeia* also offered medical services. The *xenon* of Sampson, for example, had a well-organized dispensary, as did the *xenonodocheion* of Euvoulos, the establishment of Theophilos, the Myrelaion institution, and others to be mentioned later.

The erection of hospitals and clinics was the work of the Church, the emperor, or the State in general, and of pious lay benefactors. The ecclesiastical institutions were usually attached to a place of worship, which was considered a hospital in the spiritual sense. But the Church was considered not only as a hospital of the human soul but as a depository of healing power for the human body. The sick expected medical help but they never forgot to invoke a visitation by God, Jesus, and the Theotocos or a saint. This tradition, invoking the divine for healing, was also common among the ancient Greeks.

### **Xenones (Hospices)**

The *xenon*, or home for strangers, foreigners, and travellers, was a very important institution in the Byzantine world. Its primary function was to provide food and shelter for country people, visitors, and pilgrims coming to the capital or going to some other city, whether on private business or for religious purposes. It was therefore an institution found in the big city as well as in the provincial town, on the highway as well as at monastic establishments, churches, and shrines.

Travelling was not an easy undertaking in the middle ages, especially for poor people. Special attention was devoted to the problem of feeding and housing travelers from the very beginning of the Empire. The anonymous chronicler of the fourteenth century, who has been identified as Theodore Scutariotes, relates that the twelve great Romans who were brought to Constantinople when it became the capital of the Christian Empire were instrumental in the establishment of several xenones. Justinian and Theodora built or reconstructed several of them in Constantinople for poor strangers and travelers who had no place to stay upon their arrival at the capital, as well as for those who were traveling through the city but were "unable to pay the hire of any stay" in Constantinople. They "built a very large xenon, destined to serve as a temporary lodging for those who should find themselves thus embarrassed."

It is evident that we are concerned in this investigation about rent-free, charitable hospices and not commercial hotels properly so called.

There must have been many such establishments in other centuries as well. Speaking in generalities, Theophanes and Manassis affirm that the Emperor Tiberios II (578-82) repaired a great number of such institutions. Cedrenos avers that in the eleventh century Romanos III Argyros (1028-34) restored those which were damaged by an earthquake. Emperors, bishops, and other dignitaries are credited with the foundation or reconstruction of several others.

Because xenon and nosocomeion are interchangeable terms, it is difficult to determine what a Byzantine writer meant when he used these words. To be sure, a xenon was a house for the poor and for travellers, but it was a hospital as well. Perhaps each of them included a hospital or a clinic. Of the numerous xenones of the Byzantine State we can identify by name only a few. They were erected either by Church officials, state dignitaries, members of the imperial house, or private benefactors.

## **Gerocomeia**

The Byzantines, as the Christian heirs of classical Greek culture, paid special honor to old age. Their church prayed that the last days of man's earthly life might be peaceful, painless, and dignified, and beseeched that God might not forsake a man in the time of life when strength and health fails him. Besides, the Church joined with the Byzantine State and private persons to establish many homes for the aged. We can identify more than thirty of these gerocomeia by name. Most were named after their founders.

Ofcourse, there were many gerocomeia besides those we know by name. Our sources speak of many gerocomeia in terms too general to allow us to identify them. Theophanes and Cedrenos, for example, record that the Emperor Tiberios I Constantine rebuilt not only churches but «many xenons and gerocomeia.» Manasis notes that Tiberios «erected many houses for the consolation of those suffering from mournful old age.» The Empress Irene (797-802) founded many more homes for the aged.

Though some of these general statements refer to institutions in the capital, we may safely assume that gerocomeia existed in other major or provincial cities too, such as Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Thessalonica, Heraclea, Nicaea, Ephesos, Nicomedia, and Corinth.

## **Orphanages**

Orphans have always received special care and sympathy in human societies from early antiquity, and in the religious society of Byzantium they must have fared relatively well. However, we can identify only a few orphanages in Byzantine times. Still, the silence of our sources may indicate that orphanages were departments of other philanthropic complexes, for, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the Church, the State, and Byzantine society in general had taken the necessary measures for the nurture and the welfare of orphans.

That there were more orphanages than those which we know by name is clear for Justinian's Novella 131. Justinian orders that "the orphanotrophoi or administrators of orphanages discharge the duties and honors of trustees and curators, that they may sue and be sued in cases concerning the property belonging to their institutions or to the inmates as individuals" and that they "shall receive property belonging to the orphans or the orphanages of which they are the directors..." Justinian's law assumes that there were orphanages both in the capital and in the provinces. He made, however, a special provision for one particular orphanage which existed in the capital, ordering that this orphanage should enjoy the same privileges reserved for the Church of Holy Wisdom and the Sampson complex.