

Illustrated manuscripts of Holy Land - Proskynetaria (Soterios Cadas)

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Proskynetaria is the name given to manuscripts containing descriptions of the monuments of Palestine, especially the Christian ones. They have many points of similarity with modern travel books or tourist guides to archaeological sites. The name derives from the word Proskynetarion with which the majority of them begin, and is, of course, connected both with the content of the books and with their readers, who were usually visiting this exceptional part of the world as pilgrims. Many Greek manuscripts of this type are preserved in libraries and collections both in Greece and abroad—an indication of their great popularity, particularly in the period following the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. They date, in fact, from the 16th, 17th and first half of the 18th century, when the production breaks off almost entirely, and their place is taken by printed books of a similar nature. The Proskynetaria are paper manuscripts of small format (21 x 16 or 16 x 11 cm.), containing only a few folios, normally 30-50 each, with the text written in a single column. The language in which they are composed recalls the popular daily speech of the Greek people during the period of Turkish rule, while the script is mostly of a calligraphic nature, so that they could easily be read by their owners. The present

condition of these manuscripts may be described as moderate to poor, with very few of them in a good state of preservation or with their text intact. Their binding consists of card covered with leather-rarely fabric-and in the case of those that were frequently used, the two covers are badly damaged or missing entirely.



Despite their small format and limited number of folios, the Proskynetaria offer a comprehensive guided tour to the monuments that, at their time, were scattered over the territory of Palestine, several of which are still preserved on the same sites today. They begin with a general introduction to the importance of the Holy Land, and proceed directly to Jerusalem, describing in turn David's palace, the complex of the church of the Resurrection, and the other churches and monasteries enclosed within the city walls. They then move on to the monuments located outside the city at the four points of the compass, and end in Joppa. Some of the manuscripts are exceptions to this pattern and either add a long introduction at the beginning, or continue the tour north of the city and harbour of Joppa, as far as Beirut. In most cases, the regular text is followed by verses of a morally uplifting nature, usually eighteen in number, written in the fifteen-syllable metre.

Analysis of their content at once reveals the great value of these manuscripts for many branches of research, especially the geography, topography, history and archaeology of Palestine. The evidence they provide, indeed, is regarded as reliable and of considerable importance, since they deal with a long period of time covering about three centuries, are set out with ingenuous clarity, language and method, and were clearly written with a knowledge of the area. Many of the

Proskynetaria are, of course, the work of copyists and can easily be seen to be copies of a common original. It is nevertheless rare to meet with a manuscript that is a word-for-word copy of the content of another, unless they emanate from the same hand.

Of these numerous manuscripts, the illustrated Pro-skynetaria, dating from about the middle of the 17th and the first half of the 18th century, are of superior quality. I have discovered twenty manuscripts of this kind to date in Greece and abroad, and these form the subject of the present study. It is not impossible, of course, that others are to be found, probably uncatalogued, in private collections or even private houses, where they are kept as family heirlooms.

All are richly illustrated with a great number of miniatures, most of them of very small dimensions, apart from a few larger illustrations that stand out from the rest because of the great importance of the shrines they depict. The miniatures are the work of the authors themselves and were either executed first, or immediately after the text was completed. They are positioned in various parts of the page, normally along with the descriptions they illustrate. The subjects of the miniatures are cities, monasteries, churches, caves, mountains, lakes, rivers and other sacred places; narrative scenes and depictions of human beings, animals and plants are rare. Many points of similarity can be detected in their iconography, a circumstance that is explained by the text they illustrate which, as we have seen, is virtually the same for all the manuscripts. Some of the monuments especially, such as the church of the Resurrection, the twelve monasteries of Jerusalem, the lavra of St Sabbas, and others are represented in a similar manner. Where individual monasteries are depicted, they are usually shown with the katholikon at the centre, the bell-tower next to it, the rows of cells on one or more storeys, and the other buildings on a smaller scale; these are all enclosed by a high wall with an entrance in its facade. Although the illustrations are normally of a conventional character, we not infrequently encounter faithful depictions of monuments, either whole or in part, which attest to a knowledge of their architectural form on the part of the painters.

Differences are, of course, to be found in the illustration of these manuscripts, residing in the subjects, and the number, dimensions, position and order of the miniatures in them. Occasionally these differences are considerable, and in these cases they are due either to variations of the text itself, or to the miniaturists, who are not faithfully copying their models. These differences, and the similarities, form a basis for classifying the illustrated Proskynetaria into three groups.

The first of these groups comprises five manuscripts, four of which are by the

known author and miniaturist Daniel the doctor, while the fifth is very close to them. These five manuscripts are: Docheiariou Monastery 129, National Library, Rome cod. gr. 15, Gregoriou Monastery 159, Byzantine Museum, Athens 121 and Docheiariou Monastery F. 393 (fragment). These are all manuscripts written in a highly calligraphic script, with abbreviations and ligatures, and with comparatively few errors of spelling, accentuation or punctuation. Their state of preservation is not very good. All the folios of the Roman manuscript in particular are damaged, and only a few folios survive of the last of them. The second group consists of the following manuscripts: National Library, Paris cod. supp. gr. 1151, Bodleian Library, Oxford cod. canon. gr. 127, National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation (Pezarou collection) 53, Institute of Ecclesiastical History, Sofia cod. gr. 876, Municipal Library, Kozani 146, a manuscript in my personal collection, Great Lavra Monastery (printed books library) 22, and Academy of Science, Petersburg (RAIK collection) cod. gr. 163 (fragment). Half of these are signed by Chatzi-Ioannis, Charitos, Nikolaos and Ioannis, while all are richly illustrated with complex scenes, in which there are a few human figures, and decorative motifs, especially in the larger compositions.

The remaining seven manuscripts from the third group: Bavarian State Library, Munich, cod. gr. 346, Byzantine Museum, Athens 120, Institute of Ecclesiastical History, Sofia cod. gr. 845, Academy of Science, Petersburg (Ancient World Committee collection) cod. gr. 118, and Library of the Romanian Academy of Science, Bucharest cod. gr. 396 (252) and 1116. The compositions in these are, generally speaking, simpler and, apart from a few exceptions, are rendered simply in the ink used for the text, with no colour. They are also more densely illustrated than the others, the human figures, which are also found here, are identical, the drawing is simple, and the miniatures rest on broad bands that serve as bases.

In addition to the illustration, the Proskynelaria also have similar decoration, consisting of a headpiece at the beginning and a large number of illustrated initial letters, all decorated with floral motifs, which are placed at the beginning of the individual sections. Simple ornaments (scrolls, etc.) are also to be found at the end of some of the sections, contributing to the elegance and charm of these manuscripts.

The miniatures are generally simple, in keeping with the simple text. Throughout they combine the painters' knowledge and first impressions with their imagination and enthusiasm for the sacred places of pilgrimage; these were the features that helped them during their work and made them concentrate on the technical rather than the aesthetic depiction of their subjects. Moreover the miniatures are of historical and cultural significance, while their didactic nature is apparent, since

they were designed to help pilgrims become better acquainted with the Holy Land.

Amongst the stylistic features of the miniatures, we may note the simple, rapid execution, the vivid outlines, the distinct stylisation, and the use of a limited range of colours. The fortifications of the cities and monasteries are depicted in a geometric fashion, and buildings are arranged one above the other with no attempt at a perspective rendering. On the contrary, the miniaturists, who were also the authors of the manuscripts, simply placed in the foreground, or magnified, a monument that they themselves preferred, or which they considered for some reason to be more important than the others. They thus worked representationally, arranging the secondary subjects around their main theme.

Despite all this, the creators of the manuscripts rendered their subjects rather freely and avoided rigid uniformity, everywhere imposing their own personal style; the result is that the manuscripts differ from each other with regard to the general rendering of the scenes and decoration. Whether named or anonymous, they have been described as casual, folk painters, who were concerned rather with drawing than painting, and whose major hallmark was simplification, sometimes reaching the point of self-taught drawing. Unhappily, we have no further information about the lives and works of these naive painters. Finally, colours are used without any tonal gradation and have no function other than to stress some of the special features of the scenes. There are also a few manuscripts in which there is no use of colour, the illustrations being executed in the ink used for the text.

The illustrated Proskynetaria date, as we have already seen, from the end of the Post-Byzantine period and continue the folk tradition of the contemporary wall-paintings found in churches and mansions, and of portable icons. Their illustration also finds parallels in single-sheet Proskynetaria, in a variety of travel books adorned with pictures, in the miniatures of other Byzantine manuscripts, and in fabrics and marble or stone reliefs. It is also conceivable that the art of the Proskynetaria, with its particular, local character, provided many features for western printed materials, and created its own tradition.

These manuscripts are thus brilliant examples of folk art and tradition—small, humble works of art that give us some idea of the Greek aesthetic of their period, which is full of sensitivity and beauty. At the same time, their miniatures deal with the topography of Palestine, and also recall some of the important events from the Bible (Old and New Testament) and the history and tradition of the church. In this way, both the miniatures and the text, from which scholars draw a great deal of information, act as a basic source of knowledge for the land of Palestine, and enrich the collection of depictions of the Holy Land. For all these reasons, it is my

belief that their publication here is a contribution to the study of Post-Byzantine painting, which has unfortunately not yet been studied as a whole, on account of the limited number of photographs published to date, not only of manuscripts, but also of wall-paintings, portable icons, etc.

Four of the twenty Proskynetaria have been set aside for various reasons, without detracting from the study and its contribution to scholarship: I have already published two of them (Docheiariou Monastery 129 and Gregoriou Monastery 159) in special articles, National Library, Rome cod. gr. 15 is badly damaged and impossible to reproduce, and Academy of Science, Petersburg cod. gr. 163 is a fragment with very few miniatures, and is fully represented by others in third group above. The other manuscripts published here are, by groups and in chronological order, the following: a) Byzantine Museum, Athens 121 and Docheiariou Monastery F. 393; b) National Library, Paris cod. suppl. gr. 1151, Bodleian Library, Oxford cod. canon. gr. 127, National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation (Pezarou collection) 53, Institute of Ecclesiastical History, Sofia cod. gr. 876, Municipal Library, Kozani 146, a manuscript in my personal collection, and Great Lavra Monastery (printed books library) 22; and c) Bavarian State Library, Munich cod. gr. 346, Iviron Monastery 874, Byzantine Museum, Athens 120, Library of the Romanian Academy of Science, Bucharest cod. gr. 396 (252), Institute of Ecclesiastical History, Sofia cod. gr. 845, Library of the Romanian Academy of Science, Bucharest cod. gr. 1116, and Academy of Science, Petersburg (Ancient World Committee collection) cod. gr. 118.

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