

PATIENT ENDURANCE: THE NEA MONI, GALESION, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

This, told very briefly, is the tale of two important Byzantine monasteries and the authors' frustrated desire to study the remains of one of them. A relatively short distance – around 130 kms as the crow flies – separates the site of the Nea Moni on the upper slopes of Mount Povatás in central Chios and that of the Resurrection on Mount Galesion near Ephesos. Both have strikingly similar stories associated with their foundation. Both were developed and became prominent in the mid eleventh century through some sort of close association with the emperor Constantine IX Monomachos and his entourage. Both have remarkably parallel histories down to the early fourteenth century as part of the same complex and highly developed monastic web of monastic communities and holy places that embraced the islands, coastlines and hinterland of the eastern Aegean. But, while one is now still in use, renowned and studied as one of the best preserved and most important examples of eleventh-century Byzantine style and decoration, and a significant tourist attraction, the other is quite literally a pile of stones on a deserted hill-top, its site lost until the past few years and prey to the casual depredations of wandering charcoal-burners and treasure-hunters when we last saw it in the summer of 2008. Perhaps a brief historical comparison of these two foundations, which began with such close connections but ended so differently, will help to show why our project to organize the archaeological exploration of Mount Galesion is both important and exciting.

The venerable institution of Byzantine monasticism saw something of a resurgence in the tenth and eleventh centuries and the foundation of both Galesion and Nea Moni was thus part of a broader pattern in which new communities were established. One factor to note in this development was the lavish scale of imperial support as a succession of late tenth- and eleventh-century emperors, among them the empress Zoe and her husband Constantine IX Monomachos, poured money into the restoration of old monastic communities and the creation of new ones. Another was the development of monastic communities grouped in locations that became renowned as holy mountains. While Bithynian Mount Olympos was

already beginning to wane in the early eleventh century as the star of Athos rose, other important mountains, such as Latros and Mykale (Barachios), developed at about the same time and in the same general region as Galesion.

Although the sources are not particularly good, the history of the Nea Moni on Chios is relatively well known. The monastery was founded, or re-founded, shortly before 1042 by two or three ascetics who were already living near the spot tradition associated with the miraculous discovery of an icon of Mary that had survived a forest fire. Miracles continued to be performed by virtue of the icon including one which allowed at least one of the founders, Niketas and John, to predict to the aristocratic and powerful Constantine Monomachos (then in exile on the nearby island of Samos) that he would soon become emperor. When their prophecy came true the monks were richly rewarded and won respect at the court and, now with imperial money behind them and the all-important influence that came with such support, their new foundation flourished.

As with most such stories there are some serious problems, in this case not least because documentary evidence indicates that the monastery was already in existence and being supported by Zoe *prior* to Constantine's accession to the throne. But, whatever the true origins of the foundation and the inspiration for funding, there can be no doubt that a substantial amount of imperial money flowed to the Nea Moni in the 1040s and the following decades, permitting the construction of the main monastery (and at least one dependent establishment for nuns). The central church, or *katholikon*, with its lavish and now much admired and studied program of decoration was completed over a twelve-year period, and this was accompanied by the contemporary construction of a range of essential monastic buildings. Documented imperial largess, tax and legal breaks, as well as the acquisition of significant land holdings and the income that these produced, soon made it an extremely valuable economic concern, while the evidence of the surviving eleventh-century table of the *cenobium*, which seats between 45 and 50 people, suggests that it was quite a substantial establishment as monasteries of the time go.

While all this funding allowed the Nea Moni to blossom in the wilds of Chios, away in Constantinople Monomachos' lavish, arguably spendthrift and irresponsible, policies came under criticism and attack, and many of those who enjoyed and benefited from it became entangled in the murky politics of the capital. The founders of the monastery, Niketas and John, evidently spent quite a lot of time in Constantinople during Constantine's reign, engaged in the rôle of what we might today describe as lobbyists, as they sought to develop and maintain their interests and influence. Like many of their modern counterparts, the two monks appear to have owed their place in the corridors of power to their reputation as reliable predictors (or prophets). But, like all unfortunate advisers who get

things wrong or become too closely associated with a particular regime or faction that then falls from favor, the two founders of Nea Moni seem to have ended up on the wrong end of a dispute within the entourage of the empress Zoe and then become entangled in the vicious power struggle between Patriarch Michael Keroularios and various occupiers of and contenders for the imperial throne. Whatever happened exactly, the two were exiled around 1055/6, shortly after Monomachos' death, on charges of various illicit religious activity, and their monastery's property was temporarily confiscated – a reminder of both how easily prophecy may be spun into divination and paganism and the extent to which success and failure of monastic communities could depend less on religious circumstances than on economic and political considerations. Afterwards the history of the Nea Moni grows extremely vague and confused, but it was obviously not the end of the story for, despite other setbacks, it struggled on and has managed to survive, at least in some form, to the present day.

Now, a lot of this sounds rather familiar to anyone who has read the *Life* of Lazaros, the founder of the monastery of the Resurrection and the other communities on and around Mount Galesion at much the same time. Thanks to this lengthy and detailed *Vita*, written by one of his disciples (Gregory the Cellarer) shortly after his death, we know much more about Lazaros than we do about Niketas and John. What is essential here is that Lazaros, after spending a monastic childhood in the vicinity of Ephesos and then twenty-five years in monasteries at Antalya and Jerusalem, came back home around 1010, when he was in his mid-forties, and established himself as a holy man, first living in the open air on top of a pillar at a small monastery just outside the town and then on the barren, and hostile but (for him) attractively tranquil mountain of Galesion. During the subsequent thirty plus years that he spent on the mountain before he died in 1053, by then in his eighties, he founded three separate monasteries around each of the pillars on which he lived there as well as a number of others in the valley below. The first two of those on the mountain were evidently quite small, but the third, that of the Resurrection, was a much more substantial and ambitious venture, right on the top.

Lazaros seems to have conceived the idea for, and moved the site of, the Resurrection monastery at pretty much exactly the same time as Niketas and John were living at the site of Nea Moni on Chios, that is just before Constantine IX Monomachos married the empress Zoe and became emperor in 1042. There are some fascinating problems with the *Vita* at this vital point that cannot be discussed here, but the story does make clear that, with or without Lazaros' own involvement, one of the monks from Galesion who happened to be up the coast in Izmir (just across from Chios) somehow learned of Monomachos' impending elevation and managed to slip across to Samos, where the future emperor was in

exile. There this monk (just like Niketas and John in the other story) “predicted” to Monomachos, in Lazaros’ name, that he would soon become emperor. Here two things are of particular interest. One, given the reputation evidently acquired by Niketas and John in the capital, is that the unnamed monk is also said to have set himself up as a prophet, having left Galesion on an earlier occasion and traveled far and wide in the Byzantine world proclaiming that Lazaros (and he himself) could foretell the future. A second is that, from around this time, and whether or not he was in on the original prediction, Lazaros’ reputation (like that of Niketas and John) was established at the imperial court and material benefits began to flow to Galesion, just as they did to the Nea Moni. After a short time, Romanos Skleros, the powerful brother of the emperor’s mistress, thus paid a visit to the mountain. This seems to have gone very (possibly suspiciously) well, and the outcome seems to have been a very substantial gift of ten pounds of gold by Romanos’ sister Maria Skleraina. This donation, which is likely dated between 1042 and early 1046, was, however, *not* for the Resurrection, but for another of Lazaros’ foundations down in the valley. At some point around this time too we know that Constantine himself granted Galesion the valuable land on which that other monastery, or yet another nearby, was constructed.

So it is clear that, like the Nea Moni, Lazaros’ projects on and around Galesion enjoyed very substantial support from Monomachos’ court in the mid 1040s. But, as with the foundation of Niketas and John, there are problems both with the story itself and with the imperial funding. In terms of the story, later versions of the *vita*, in particular that by the thirteenth-century patriarch Gregory II, are quite happy to link *Lazaros himself* directly to the prediction made to Monomachos, although the earlier one refuses to do so. Further claims are made that the foundation of the Resurrection monastery was the result of a vision that established its site by means of a fiery pillar, and the fact that the account is so similar to the one concerning the origins of the Nea Moni has prompted some scholars to suggest that the Galesion story may in fact have been the source for the other. Even more importantly, while later versions expressly link construction of the Resurrection to Monomachos’ support, it is by no means clear from what is left of the story in the early *vita* that the emperor ever actually *did* fund its construction. Monomachos and members of his entourage certainly funded some of the other projects associated with Lazaros, but there is nowhere a *direct* record to link him to the Resurrection. In fact there is actually quite good reason, as I have argued elsewhere, to suppose that the later story that the monastery of the Resurrection was built with imperial money was true, but not in the sense that the emperor intended this to happen or even knew for what his money had been used. As at the Nea Moni, too, imperial funding was withdrawn at one point very early in its history, and at Galesion the emperor actually ordered Lazaros and his

community off the mountain. In this case we know that he refused to go and, by means of some skillful lobbying and “fixing” by members of the community who traveled to Constantinople, some of his flock managed to stay put after his death, maintaining their precarious grip on this prime monastic real estate and eventually managing to secure the foundation’s future for the next two hundred years. Like the Nea Moni, then, Galesion experienced serious problems in the later eleventh century but was able to rebound. Unlike the Nea Moni, however, it became a truly major center in the thirteenth century but was then completely destroyed in the early fourteenth and was never re-established.

The point of recounting the tale of the two monasteries here is to show that, if both were indeed funded directly (or indirectly) by Monomachos, then one might reasonably expect to be able to shed light on one by study of the other, something which, to this point, has been impossible. And to do so will be important. It is thus true that the particular quality and wonderful preservation of the Nea Moni and its decorations has made it one of the most studied monuments of the period, one that has been seen as crucial for our understanding of Byzantine culture in the eleventh century. But the fact remains that the Nea Moni was never one of the *great* monasteries of the Byzantine world, and so what it can tell us in broader terms is limited. Galesion, on the other hand, *was* a monastic center of enormous importance between the eleventh and the early fourteenth centuries. During Lazaros’ lifetime it had become a very large community indeed containing at least six separate monasteries which housed over 300 monks and it had already gained a reputation across much of the Byzantine world that rivaled other contemporary holy mountains. Lazaros’ solutions to the inherent tensions of monastic life as expressed in the rules, whether written or oral, appear to have been very influential on other foundations of the time. And, after a period of evident decline, Galesion’s reputation revived under Nicene and Palaeologan rule and it once more became one of the monastic powerhouses of the empire, numbering three patriarchs among its alumni and producing prominent participants in high-level religious disputes of the day, as well as housing an important library and scriptorium. With Galesion, however, the problem is that, despite its great importance, the fact that the site was permanently destroyed in the early fourteenth century and then entirely disappeared from view has meant that it has never been given the attention that is its due. Comparison with the Nea Moni and places like it has simply not been possible.

But, now that the site of Galesion has been identified, and despite its poor state of preservation, it seems likely that a study of its remains, particularly in comparison with those of the Nea Moni, will prove extremely valuable. By looking at the Nea Moni we may be able to learn something about the monasteries on Galesion but by studying the remains on Galesion we might even shed some

light on the early period of the Nea Moni. For example, one serious problem with the later site is that it has been occupied pretty much continuously since its foundation, and so what survives is the result of centuries of renovation and rebuilding, making it very hard to understand what it was really like in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Another is that the church, with its splendid decoration, has received nearly all the attention and so, while we know of five buildings that seem to date back to the first period – the *katholikon*, cistern, refectory, defensive tower, and cemetery chapel – in Bouras' 1982 publication 11 pages out of a text of 196 are devoted exclusively to the *katholikon*, the rest being given very short shrift. The Resurrection on Galesion was, however, abandoned or destroyed in the early fourteenth century, never to be used again, and so its remains, when properly studied, should provide a very good idea of the monastery in its heyday. Without all the later additions, constructions and renovations to obscure things we may thus gain a much better understanding of the history and construction of other similar monasteries in the same general region, like the Nea Moni.

And then, of course, a survey and excavation of this unstudied site would certainly help us understand the many interesting and important questions raised, but left unanswered, by the surviving written sources concerning the Resurrection and the other monasteries on Galesion itself. Was the original church constructed of mud brick, as a twelfth-century source suggests, something that (in sharp contrast to the *katholikon* at the Nea Moni) was clearly an embarrassment that needed explaining in a foundation that was supposedly imperial? Is there any trace of Lazaros' column? If so, how was it constructed, and was it actually built against the church wall as the *Life* seems to imply? Is there any evidence of the peculiar paired apsidal cells mentioned by the twelfth-century source? Is there any trace of particular buildings mentioned in the *vita*: the guesthouse/hospital, bakery, storerooms, pantry, and *archontarion* ('deluxe' accommodation for worthy visitors – it had a bed!)? Was it walled? Is what certainly looks like the remains of a refectory really one? How exactly did the monastery's water supply function and change over time in this notoriously barren location (there is evidence of many cisterns in the surviving ruins, but in the early days water was evidently carried up every day by mule)? Is there any indication of influence in the construction of Lazaros' past in the monasteries of the Judean desert? Are there any parallels with other contemporary foundations with which we might expect links, St George at Mangana in Constantinople for instance? How does the plan of the monastery in its thirteenth-century heyday compare with the original eleventh-century layout? How did the Resurrection relate, at this later time, to Lazaros' other two monasteries on the mountain (we believe that we have located one of these)? Did they develop in parallel or decline? Is there evidence for the cult of Lazaros and continued pilgrimage to the site? Is there evidence of the *scriptorium*

? What did actually happen at the abandonment of the monastery in the early fourteenth century ?

Patient endurance was evidently the virtue that Lazaros saw as most essential for his monks if they were to live on the barren mountain. Despite much encouragement over the past four years from many quarters, our international project, involving Turkish, Austrian and Canadian scholars, still languishes in the webs of archaeological and international politics. But, hopefully, with some further patient endurance there will before long be news in these pages that it is underway ! And any help in making this happen would be much appreciated.

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