

# *The Theban Parthenon: Contextualising Female Lay Spirituality in a Twelfth-Century Byzantine Provincial City*

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*Stemming from a canonical commentary of Theodore Balsamon (1130s–1195), this article examines an underexplored Byzantine Christian practice: the consecration of virgins. It focuses on an unusual religious establishment, a parthenon, founded in Thebes by its metropolitan John Kaloktenes (1166–c.1190), which accommodated lay virgins to pursue asceticism without demonstrating monastic commitments. It investigates the practice's origins, development and significance in Byzantine religious heritage, highlighting Kaloktenes's innovative revival of the practice. This study offers a unique case for exploring Byzantine monasticism and ecclesiastical leadership, while also demonstrating the potential for integrating Byzantium into the religious movements of the contemporary Latin West.*

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In his *scholium* on canon 16 of the Council of Chalcedon, the late twelfth-century canonist Theodore Balsamon (1130s–1195) sheds light on a facet of Byzantine spirituality that remains underexplored. The original canon, dated to 451, forbids the marriage of individuals who have dedicated themselves to God; it provides that the transgressors are to be excluded from receiving communion, though the actual punitive measures are left to the discretion of the local bishop.<sup>1</sup> In his *scholium*, Balsamon gives the following comments on this canon:

*Σύνταγμα* = G. Rhalles and M. Potles, *Σύνταγμα των θείων και ιερών κανόνων*, Athens 1852–9; *Novel* = ‘Novellae’, in R. Schoell and W. Kroll (eds), *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, Berlin 1928. This work was supported by the National Social Science Fund of China under Grant Number 23CSS005. I would like to express my gratitude for the anonymous reviewer's insightful comments on the manuscript of this article.

<sup>1</sup> ‘Παρθένον ἀναθεῖσαν ἑαυτὴν τῷ δεσπότη Θεῷ, ὡσαύτως δὲ καὶ μονάζοντας, μὴ ἐξείναι γάμῳ προσομιλεῖν. Εἰ δὲ γε εὐρεθεῖεν τοῦτο ποιοῦντες, ἔστωσαν ἀκοινωνήτοι.

In the past, certain women approached God in lay clothing and vowed to remain virgins. Therefore, the Fathers decree that those who made such vows, whether men who were monks or women, should not break their vows and enter into marriage; those who breached these vows were to be barred from communion, that is they should be excommunicated. The jurisdiction over this excommunication, that is its extension or reduction, was entrusted to the local bishop. Today in Constantinople, there are neither virgins in lay clothing consecrated to God nor a *parthenon* (παρθενών). Only that holy metropolitan of Thebes, Kaloktenes, founded a *parthenon* in Thebes, and ordained lay virgins within it; because of this, he is commemorated perpetually. Should you wish to refer to such virgins as ascetics (ἀσκητρίας), there is no impediment, provided you do not want to compare them to nuns (μοναζούσας) because of the tonsure and the vows that they take in churches.<sup>2</sup>

The record attests to the existence of a distinctive foundation known as a *parthenon*. Moreover, during the era of Theodore Balsamon, Thebes was home to such a *parthenon*, which will be the subject of this article. Balsamon's interpretation depicts it as a religious initiative, aligned with the enigmatic Christian practice of consecrated virgins – a subject of the mid fifth-century canon upon which he provides commentary. Understanding this practice is crucial for interpreting this religious foundation, but the record itself offers limited information. As a result, the precise nature of the practice remains elusive, and it is uncertain how closely the Theban *parthenon* was connected to it, aside from Balsamon's claims. Therefore, to fully extract what the record has to offer about the Theban *parthenon*, it is necessary first to contextualise it by reconstructing the practice of consecrated virgins.

Ὀρίσαμεν δὲ ἔχειν τὴν ἀυθεντιαν τῆς ἐπ' αὐτοῖς φιλανθρωπίας τὸν κατὰ τόπον ἐπίσκοπον' ('A virgin who has dedicated herself to the Lord God, and likewise a monk, is not permitted to enter into marriage. If they are discovered doing this, they are to be excommunicated. We have decreed that the local bishop has authority to exercise leniency towards them'): *Σύνταγμα*, ii. 256; cf. *PG* cxxxvii.444D–445A; *The acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, ed. and trans. R. Price and M. Gaddis, Liverpool 2005, 99. Only canons and *scholia* from the version of Rhalles and Potles will hereinafter be cited.

<sup>2</sup> 'Τὸ παλαιὸν γυναικῆς τινες προσήρχοντο τῷ θεῷ μετὰ λαϊκοῦ σχήματος, καὶ ὠμολόγουν παρθενεῦειν· διορίζονται τοίνυν οἱ Πατέρες τοὺς ὁμολογήσαντας τοῦτο, κὰν ἄνδρες εἶεν μονάζοντες, κὰν γυναῖκες, μὴ ἀφίστασθαι τῶν ὁμολογημένων, καὶ γάμοις προσομιλεῖν· τοὺς δὲ παραβάτας τούτων, ἀκοινωνήτους, ἤτοι ἀφορισμένους εἶναι. Τὴν μὲν τοι ἐξουσίαν τοῦ ἀφορισμοῦ, ἤτοι τὴν ἐπέκτασιν, ἢ τὴν μείωσιν, τῷ ἐγκριτῷ ἐπίσκοπῳ ἀνέθετο· σήμερον δὲ τέως ἐν τῇ Κωνσταντινουπόλει, οὔτε παρθένοι μετὰ λαϊκοῦ σχήματος τῷ Θεῷ ἀνατίθενται, οὔτε παρθενῶν ἐστὶ. Μόνος δὲ ὁ ἅγιος ἐκεῖνος μητροπολίτης Θηβῶν, ὁ Καλοκτένης, ἐποίησε παρθενῶνα εἰς Θήβας, καὶ ἔταξε παρθένους ἐπ' αὐτῷ λαϊκάς· διὸ καὶ ἐστὶ τὸ μνημόσυνον αὐτοῦ αἰωνίζον καὶ χάριν τοῦτο. Εἰ δὲ θέλεις εἰπεῖν τὰς ἀσκητρίας τοιαύτας παρθένους, οὐδὲν εὐρήσεις ἐμποδῶν· εἰ μὴω θέλεις ταύτας παρεϊκάσαι ταῖς μοναζούσας διὰ τὴν ἀπόκαρσιν, καὶ τὰς ἐπ' ἐκκλησίας συνθήκας αὐτῶν': *Σύνταγμα*, ii. 257.

The consecration of virgins seems to have already been established by the beginning of late antiquity. In the ensuing periods, a variety of traditions emerged, each evolving differently over time.<sup>3</sup> To reconcile the resultant conflicting documentation and to give a comprehensive study of the practice is certainly beyond the scope of this article. Adding to this intricacy is the fact that by the time of Balsamon, the practice had become obsolete.<sup>4</sup> Only erudite ecclesiastics, like Balsamon himself, would have encountered it in their reading. Therefore, since the Theban *parthenon* was connected to the practice through Balsamon's interpretation, the focus should be on reconstructing Balsamon's personal understanding of the practice, which is most pertinent and could be considered the most representative for his contemporaries in Byzantium.

The information in this regard comes from the surviving canonical *scholia* of Balsamon. Within these texts, he does not provide a systematic discourse on the practice; rather, he intermittently references it when commenting on specific canons he deems relevant. In such instances, his explanations of the practice are confined to the aspects pertinent to the canon under discussion. In this case, the materials available for contextualising the practice are twofold: the original sources from which Balsamon learned about the practice, and his own comments on the practice. In addressing the former category, the examination will focus on canons Balsamon annotated or cited in his *scholia*, which include canons from both ecumenical and local councils, as well as pronouncements of prominent church Fathers.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, imperial laws, such as those from the *Novels* of Justinian, or the *Basilika*, which Balsamon occasionally referenced, also fall within this category.<sup>6</sup>

Starting with Balsamon's sources, canon 18 of Basil the Great (329/330–79) gives a detailed discussion of the consecration of virgins.<sup>7</sup> According to this canon, a consecrated virgin was one who took a vow of

<sup>3</sup> For example, the *bnay/bnāt qyāmā* in Syriac Christianity might have represented one such tradition: S. P. Brock and others (eds), *Gorgias encyclopedic dictionary of the Syriac heritage*, Piscataway 2011, s.v. 'Bnay Qyāmā, Bnāt Qyāmā'. For a seminal study on the practice of consecrated virgins in late antiquity see S. Elm, *Virgins of God: the making of asceticism in late antiquity*, Oxford 1994.

<sup>4</sup> See below.

<sup>5</sup> For example, regarding canon 19 of the Council of Ancyra, Balsamon quotes canon 18 of Basil the Great and canon 46 of the Council of Trullo. For canon 19 of Basil the Great, he quotes Basil's canon 18 as well as canons 6, 44 and 126 from the Council of Carthage when he speaks about consecrated virgins. For those in his *scholium* of Basil's canon 40, he quotes again Basil's canon 18 along with the same canon 19 of the Council in Ancyra. See *Σύνταγμα*, iii. 61; iv. 146, 218. As in the subsequent note, only the clause numbers used by Balsamon are quoted.

<sup>6</sup> For example, regarding canon 16 of the Council of Chalcedon, Balsamon quotes *Basilika* 28.6.1. For canon 45 of the Council of Carthage, he quotes *Novel* cxxxiii. For canon 51 of the same council, he quotes *Novel* cxxiii: *Σύνταγμα*, ii. 258; iii. 403, 410.

<sup>7</sup> *Σύνταγμα*, iv. 140–2.

chastity, offering herself voluntarily as the bride of Christ and God's sacred vessel; she renounced marriage in favour of a life of sanctity. To be admitted among the virgins, a woman should be examined in terms of her exercise of discretion and take her vow after the age of sixteen or seventeen. It is worth noting that later, at the Council of Trullo, dated to 692, the minimum age for entering the monastic life had been adjusted to ten, which perhaps applied to the recruitment of the consecrated virgins as well.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the woman must exhibit a consistent resolution to join the consecrated virgins, which may include a probationary period. It seems that this period involved scrutinising the candidate's genuine intentions, as suggested by canons 9 and 10 of the Council of Gangra (*c.* 340), which imply that one who practised as a virgin should be motivated by the pursuit of the holy nature of virginity rather than by a disdain for marriage.<sup>9</sup>

Concerning the status of consecrated virgins, the sources make a clear distinction between them and other female religious vocations. One of the key differences highlighted is that, according to canon 135 of the Council of Carthage (418/19), a virgin was not required to assume the habit (σχήματος), which had been symbolic of those embracing the monastic or clerical life. Nevertheless, the same canon also implies that, in pressing circumstances, virgins could assume the habit before reaching the age of twenty-five.<sup>10</sup> Here, the assumption of the habit actually conveys a particular meaning. The referenced age of twenty-five originates from canon 16 of the same council, which stipulates the minimum age for ordination as a deacon. As interpreted by all its known *scholia*,<sup>11</sup> canon 135 is thus seen as governing the ordination of virgins into deaconesses. The subsequent Council of Chalcedon supports this interpretation, addressing the issues concerning virgins and deaconesses in consecutive canons.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, canon 15 of the council revises the minimum age for becoming a deaconess to forty and mandates a thorough examination for such ordination.<sup>13</sup> In this context, ordination as deaconesses was often on the vocational paths of consecrated virgins.

In the realm of administration, canon 6 from the Council of Carthage hints that the consecration (καθιέρωσις) of virgins (κορών) was conducted by bishops and that presbyters were prohibited from this undertaking.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. ii. 398. The original text of the canon is ambiguous in this regard since becoming a monastic and a consecrated virgin are mentioned in parallel.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. iii. 106.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. iii. 590.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. iii. 590–3. Aristenos even explicitly clarifies that 'the habit' in this context refers to the priestly garment (ιερατικὸν ἀμφιάσματι). For Balsamon's comments on relevant canons see below.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. ii. 254, 256.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. ii. 254.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. iii. 309. The term κορών can be considered synonymous with παρθένων, as the consecration of κορών is notably distinct from the services of chrism application and confession (χρίσμα ἢ καταλλαγὴν μετανοούντων). In this case, it is unlikely that

The above-mentioned canon 16 of the Council of Chalcedon further implies that bishops held the authority to impose penalties for any transgressions committed by the virgins.<sup>15</sup> Delving into the specifics of the virgins' lifestyle, canon 19 of the Council of Ancyra, dated to 314/15, provides that virgins should not cohabit with (συνερχομένας, literally 'go with') certain men (τισὶν) as if they were these men's sisters.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, canon 51 of the Council of Carthage, which pertains to the supervision of consecrated virgins (ιεράς παρθένους), stipulates that upon separation from their fathers, virgins should be placed under the guardianship of the most honourable women at the suggestion of the bishop or, in his absence, the presbyter. The virgins also had the provision to mutually supervise each other while residing together.<sup>17</sup> Collectively, these canons imply that virgins were sent from their familial homes to come under the supervision of the bishop or presbyters. It appears they resided in a secluded building where the presence of men was not anticipated. In some cases, senior virgins were appointed as mentors, playing an active role in the novices' daily lives. Alternatively, the community of virgins could engage in mutual oversight without senior mentorship.

Although the above canons may lead to the assumption that the residence for consecrated virgins – a *parthenon*, as referred to by Balsamon – was exclusively for women, there is evidence that these virgins in fact interacted frequently with men.<sup>18</sup> Canon 45 from the Council of Carthage notes that clerics or ascetics could visit the virgins with the bishop's or presbyter's permission, provided they were accompanied by reputable individuals.<sup>19</sup> A more explicit indication comes from canon 4 of the Council in Trullo, which prescribes punitive measures for those engaging in sexual relations

they were merely ordinary girls. Furthermore, as will be discussed below, in canon 51 of the same council, presbyters were indeed involved in the management of virgins alongside bishops, necessitating a clarification of their respective duties. This interpretation is supported by Zonaras and Balsamon in their *scholia* on this canon, with Zonaras explicitly stating that virgins were traditionally referred to as κόρας: *ibid.* iii. 410.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* ii. 256.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* iii. 60. Considering that the virgins were living together with one another, the term *τισὶν* here probably refers exclusively to men. This interpretation is also supported by Zonaras and Aristenos in their respective *scholia* on this canon. Thus, Zonaras: 'Κολύει δὲ ὁ κανὼν τὰς παρθενίαν ἐπαγγελλομένας συνέρχεσθαι ἀνδράσιν, ἀντὶ τοῦ συζῆν, συνοικεῖν, καὶ ἀδελφὰς ἑαυτὰς ὀνομαζούσας τῶν οἷς συνδιόγουσιν, ἵνα μὴδὲ ὑποψία τις ἦ κατ' αὐτῶν ἀπρεπής' ('The canon prohibits those who have vowed virginity from cohabiting with men, living together, or calling themselves sisters of those with whom they live, so that there may be no improper suspicion against them'); and Aristenos: 'Κολύει δὲ ὁ κανὼν οὗτος καὶ τὰς παρθένους μετὰ ἀνδρῶν ὄλας συναναστρέφεσθαι καθ' οἰανδήτινα πρόφασιν' ('This canon also prohibits virgins from living together with men under any pretext'): *ibid.* iii. 60–1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* iii. 410.

<sup>18</sup> Balsamon uses *παρθενόν* for nominative and *παρθενῶνα* for accusative: *ibid.* ii. 257.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* iii. 402.

with a woman dedicated to God (γυναικὶ ἀφιερωμένη τῷ Θεῷ), including a consecrated virgin.<sup>20</sup> The canon mandates the deposition of clerical transgressors – bishops, presbyters, deacons, subdeacons, readers (ἀναγνώστης), cantors and janitors – and the excommunication of laymen. These canons suggest that men did sometimes enter the *parthenon*, and thus, intimate encounters with the virgins, while not the norm, were within the realm of possibility.

Canons also stipulate that a virgin who violated her vows and entered into marriage should face punitive measures. Canon 19 from the Council of Ancyra equates such a breach with bigamy, meting out a penance of one year.<sup>21</sup> Basil the Great later deemed this offence far more grievous than bigamy, on par with adultery. Therefore, the offenders would be barred from communion until the dissolution of their marriage.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Basil also clarified that those women who broke their vowed virginity prior to baptism – during their catechumenal life – could be absolved, since the vow and the violation occurred when they were not yet ‘under the yoke of Christ, nor had they recognised the legislation of the Lord’.<sup>23</sup>

The examination now proceeds to the pertinent imperial laws, which Balsamon probably referred to as authoritative sources to elucidate the practice of consecrated virgins. In terms of the *Code of Justinian*, Code 1.2.13 from the year 455 characterises consecrated virgins (‘virgo deo dicata’) as bearers of the title of religious honour or dignity, along with widows, deaconesses and sanctified women (‘sanctimonialis mulier’). The same clause also endorses the bequeathing of a consecrated virgin’s estate to ecclesiastical entities such as churches, shrines, clerics, monks or to the indigent.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, *Code* 9.13.1, dated to 528, regards the defilement of consecrated virgins and widows as an affront to humanity and a sacrilege against God, prescribing capital punishment for those found guilty of such acts.<sup>25</sup>

With regard to the *Novels* of Justinian, *Novel* lxxix.1 from the year 539 decrees that any legal disputes concerning the venerable sanctified women (‘aliquibus venerabilibus sanctimonialibus’), the consecrated virgins and women residing full-time in monasteries are to be adjudicated

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. ii. 315. It should be noted that the vocabulary used here does not preclude a consecrated widow from being the subject of this canon; see Balsamon’s comment on this canon: *ibid.* ii. 316. For the canon of Basil the Great, which attested to the existence of a comparable order for widows see *ibid.* iv. 154–5. However, since canon 45 from the Council of Carthage stipulates visits to both virgins, as previously discussed, and widows, it is likely that the establishments for consecrated virgins and widows shared the same arrangement.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. iii. 60. As mentioned by Basil the Great: n. 22 below.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. iv. 140–1, 217–18.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. iv. 146–7.

<sup>24</sup> *Codex Justinianus*, ed. P. Krueger, Berlin 1877, 1.2.13.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 9.13.1.

by the city's bishop.<sup>26</sup> The use of the same term *sanctimonialis* implies that 'the venerable sanctified women' mentioned herein are identical to the 'sanctified women' referenced in *Code* 1.2.13. This group probably constituted a distinct segment of ecclesiastical women from the sixth century. As to 'women living entirely in the monasteries', the *Novel* here clearly refers to nuns. Following this vein, this clause corroborates the previous observation that consecrated virgins held a unique position within the broader assembly of women with religious vocations. In this case, although it has been noted previously that these virgins often sought to become deaconesses in due course, the vocation of a consecrated virgin existed in its own right. In other words, being a consecrated virgin could have been a lifelong pursuit, though many might strive for a change in their vocational path, including becoming deaconesses. On the other hand, the provision regarding legal disputes reaffirms that the bishop had significant authority over consecrated virgins.

Besides the above source information, Balsamon offers his own interpretation of the status of consecrated virgins when commenting on relevant canons, thereby complementing the reconstruction in areas where canons and imperial laws are ambiguous. In one *scholium*, Balsamon clarifies that the virgins following this practice, irrespective of male and female gender, are not those who have forsaken secular life for monasticism. Instead, they are individuals who approached God in lay clothing and promised to remain virgins.<sup>27</sup> Here, he makes it clear that the consecrated virgins he had been discussing could be male or female. Furthermore, he reinforces the previous observation about the distinction between consecrated virgins and followers of other religious vocations, particularly nuns. Regarding the peculiar traits of consecrated virgins, in addition to not assuming the habit as the canons have stated, he adds that they did not renounce the secular world either.<sup>28</sup>

In another *scholium*, where Balsamon offers a concise overview of the status of consecrated virgins, he claims that there were virgins and widows in lay clothing approaching the Church and vowing to maintain their virginity and chastity. Once dedicated to God, their welfare became the responsibility of the bishops.<sup>29</sup> This commentary suggests the existence

<sup>26</sup> 'Εἴ τις οἰανοῦν ἔχοι δίκην πρὸς τινος τῶν εὐλαβεστάτων ἀσκητῶν ἢ τῶν ἱερομένων παρθένων ἢ γυναικῶν ἐν μοναστηρίοις ὄλων οὐσῶν, τῷ θεοφιλεστάτῳ πόλεως ἐκάστης ἐπισκόπῳ προσίεναι / si quis quancumque habuerit causam cum aliquibus venerabilibus sanctimonialibus aut sacratis virginibus aut mulieribus omnino in monasteriis consistentibus, deo amabilem civitatis illius episcopum interpellat': *Novel* lxxix.1.

<sup>27</sup> 'Παρθένους μέντοι ὀφείλεις εἰπεῖν ἐνταῦθα, ἄνδρας δηλονότι καὶ γυναῖκας, μὴ τοὺς ἀποταξαμένους τῷ κόσμῳ, καὶ ἐπιλεξαμένους τὸν μονήρη βίον, ἀλλ' ἑτέρους τινὰς μετὰ λαϊκοῦ σχήματος προσερχομένους τῷ Θεῷ, καὶ παρθενεύειν ἐπαγγελλομένους': *Σύνταγμα*, iii. 61.

<sup>28</sup> This point is reiterated *ibid.* iv. 146.

<sup>29</sup> 'Διαφόρως εἴπομεν, ὅτι παρθένοι γυναῖκες καὶ χῆραι μετὰ λαϊκοῦ σχήματος ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις προσερχόμεναι, αἱ μὲν παρθενίαν ὁμολογοῦν, αἱ δὲ σωφροσύνην' καὶ ὡς



of devotional groups for widows akin to those for virgins. However, as Balsamon specifies elsewhere, only consecrated virgins (παρθένους/παρθένων ἀνατεθειμένων τῷ Θεῷ) were officially recognised within the ecclesiastical hierarchy (κανονικούς), along with clerics, monks and nuns.<sup>30</sup> This distinction implies that consecrated widows may not have been as formally acknowledged as their virgin counterparts. Moreover, Balsamon's remarks indicate that bishops bore the duty of providing for the needs of the consecrated virgins as well.

At the end of the same *scholium*, Balsamon draws parallels between consecrated virgins and nuns or ascetics (μοναζούσας, ἢ ἀσκητριάς). He observes that although nuns were tonsured at a younger age, it seems to him that their vow of chastity remained binding in the future.<sup>31</sup> This comment suggests that virgins, nuns and ascetics likely led similar devotional lives in general, to the extent that Balsamon finds it necessary to underscore their specific differences. To further differentiate consecrated virgins from nuns, Balsamon notes that the former took on their devotional commitment at an older age, and their vows of chastity were deemed less binding. While Balsamon leaves the reasons for this variance in vow commitment unexplained, it could stem from the consecrated virgins' practice of taking a silent (σιωπώμενον) vow, in contrast to a public (ἐναργῆ) one, as suggested in his other writings.<sup>32</sup>

The investigation has already revealed the canonical implication that many consecrated virgins might have pursued careers as deaconesses upon reaching the requisite age. In his *scholia*, Balsamon more explicitly draws the link between consecrated virgins and deaconesses. Most notably, the aforementioned canon 15 of the Council of Chalcedon, which prescribes the minimum age for deaconess ordination, has been frequently associated with consecrated virgins, suggesting that deaconesses should have been customarily selected from their ranks.<sup>33</sup>

The last relevant *scholium* of Balsamon has to do with the lifestyle of consecrated virgins. Canon 51 of the Council of Carthage, which suggests that a virgin lived either with a senior virgin or with her peers, has already been mentioned.<sup>34</sup> In the *scholium* of this canon, Balsamon further illustrates the lifestyle of the virgins by paraphrasing a pertinent *Novel* of Justinian, which mandates communal living in cenobitic monasteries, where all inhabitants

ἀνατεθειμένοι τῷ Θεῷ, ἡξιούντο παρὰ τῶν ἐπισκόπων πάσης σωματικῆς ἐπιμελείας': *ibid.* iv. 143.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* iv. 108–9. The term κανονικάί was already in use by church Fathers in the fourth century, but Elm argues that they were probably more prominent than ordinary virgins, a distinction not suggested by Balsamon in his *scholia*: Elm, *Virgins of God*, 145–8.

<sup>31</sup> 'Ταῦτα τοῦ κανόνος διοριζομένου, μὴ εἴτης ἐξακούεσθαι τοῦτον καὶ εἰς μοναζούσας, ἢ ἀσκητριάς: κἄν γὰρ ἐν ἡττονι πάντη ἡλικία τὴν κοσμικὴν ἀπόθωνται τρίχα, βεβαία ἔσται, ὡς ἐμοὶ δοκεῖ, καὶ εἰς τὸ ἐξῆς ἡ ὁμολογία αὐτῶν': *Σύνταγμα*, iv. 144.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* iv. 146.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* ii. 160; iii. 591.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* iii. 410.



live in one room, dine collectively and sleep separately yet within the same room – suggesting a similar lifestyle for the virgins.<sup>35</sup> Then he continues by noting that, in his time, such communal living was nearly obsolete among monks or nuns (ἀσκήτρια), and only preserved in cenobitic convents and Latin monasteries.<sup>36</sup> Balsamon thus claims here that consecrated virgins dined and slept in the same place, a lifestyle that had become less common in his days.

At this point, the practice of consecrated virgins, as understood by Balsamon and the contemporary Byzantines he represents, can be summarised based on his commentary and the canons and imperial laws he referenced. Firstly, although consecrated virgins were typically women, the practice could theoretically extend to men. Secondly, they were part of a broader category of female consecration that included widows, yet they appear to have held a more prominent position within the church hierarchy. Thirdly, these virgins vowed to keep their virginity for God and abstain from secular marriage. Fourthly, they led a devotional life similar to that of ascetics and nuns, but unlike nuns, they did not take the monastic habit and renounce the secular world. They probably also started their devotional life at an older age, and their vow of chastity, which is the only vow required, was less binding, possibly due to its tacit nature. Fifthly, in terms of administration, after being admitted through a test, the consecrated virgins would generally come under the care of the bishop, who was responsible for their sustenance, initiation rites, monitoring their interactions with outsiders and resolving transgressions. The virgins were supposed to dine and sleep in the same place as one another. Sometimes senior members would be appointed by the bishop to act as the virgins' mentors; at other times, the virgins simply supervised one another while living together. Lastly, regarding their career trajectory, consecrated virgins, while acknowledged as embodying a distinct religious vocation, often sought to become deaconesses upon reaching the age of twenty-five, or forty according to certain sources.

With the above knowledge of the practice of consecrated virgins, the *scholium* of Balsamon that initiated this article can now be revisited. The canonist notes that by his time – the second half of the twelfth century – the practice had seemingly vanished, at least in Constantinople. Thus, there

<sup>35</sup> ‘Ἐν ἅπασιν δὲ τοῖς μοναστηρίοις, ἅπερ κοινόβια καλοῦνται, κελεύομεν, κατὰ τοὺς μοναχικοὺς κανόνας, ἐν ἐνὶ οἴκῳ πάντα οἰκεῖν, καὶ κοινῶς τρέφεσθαι κατὰ τὸν ὅμοιον τρόπον, ἐν ἐνὶ οἴκῳ πάντα κεχωρισμένως καθεῦδειν.’ Balsamon tends to use the term οἶκος in his *scholia* to denote a much smaller space, such as a room or chamber, rather than an entire house for example: *ibid.* ii. 53, 357, 479, 482, 625; iii. 127, 484. The use of ‘separately’ (κεχωρισμένως) by Balsamon suggests that the οἶκος he refers to likely lacked distinct physical divisions for each resident’s space.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* iii. 411. The use of ἀσκήτρια alongside μοναχοὶ (monks) suggests that, in this context, it denotes nuns.

were neither lay virgins consecrated to God nor a *parthenon*.<sup>37</sup> This claim is supported by evidence from Balsamon's other *scholia*. For instance, his commentary on canon 51 of the Council of Carthage suggests that the lifestyle of the virgins had become less common or disappeared entirely in his days.<sup>38</sup> On another occasion, Balsamon employs the term 'once' (ποτέ) when referring to consecrated virgins, hinting that it was no longer a phenomenon of his contemporary society.<sup>39</sup> In a similar vein, John Zonaras (*fl.* 1118–59), a contemporaneous canonist from Constantinople, uses 'in the past' (παλαιόν) in his discussion of the same practice, corroborating Balsamon's remarks.<sup>40</sup>

When was the practice abandoned? The fact that the ongoing presence of consecrated virgins was still implied at the Council of Trullo in 692 indicates that the practice persisted among the Byzantines at that time.<sup>41</sup> An episode from the chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor (*c.* 758/60–817/8) may provide a more precise *terminus post quem* for the abandonment of the practice. In 766/7, during the first period of iconoclasm, the emperor Constantine V launched a series of persecutions throughout the empire against those who transgressed his iconoclastic doctrine. Amidst his oppression of religious foundations, Theophanes reports that '[the emperor] turned monasteries built to the name of God and refuges (καταφύγια) of those seeking salvation into common barracks for soldiers who shared his opinions. Thus he converted into a soldiers' dwelling the foremost *koinobion* of Byzantium, that of Dalmatos, while he completely demolished those named after Kallistratos, Dios, and Maximinus as well as other holy habitations of monks and *parthenons* (παρθενῶνας)'.<sup>42</sup> The 'refuges' used along with monasteries in the first sentence and followed by a list of cenobitic monasteries suggests that the author intended to include cenobitic foundations distinct from monasteries, rendering the subsequent mention of *parthenons* logical and unlikely to be a scribal error.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, since all the named monasteries, those of

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. iii. 257.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. iii. 411.

<sup>39</sup> 'Παρθένοι ποτέ προσήρχοντο τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ': *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> 'Παρθένοι τὸ παλαιὸν προσήρχοντο τῷ Θεῷ ἀγνεύειν ὁμολογοῦσαι': *ibid.* ii. 159.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. ii. 315, 398.

<sup>42</sup> Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor, Leipzig 1883, 443 (A.M. 6259). For an English translation see *The chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern history, A.D. 284–813*, trans. C. Mango and R. Scott, Oxford 1997, 611.

<sup>43</sup> It is necessary to determine the connotation of the term *parthenon* in such contexts, as during the era of the Cappadocian Fathers, which witnessed the earliest uses of this term, the distinction between a *parthenon* and a monastery was not as defined as perceived in Balsamon's twelfth-century *scholium*. The meaning of the term *parthenon* might have undergone a subtle development in between. Theophanes's use of this term implies that, by his time, the difference between a *parthenon* and a monastery was already recognised. For references to *parthenon* in the works of the Cappadocian Fathers see P. Maraval, *Grégoire de Nysse: vie de sainte Macrine: introduction, texte critique*,

Dalmatos, Kallistratos, Dios and Maximinus, were located in Constantinople, it can be assumed that the *parthenons* here were meant to be Constantinopolitan foundations.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, Theophanes's account suggests that *parthenons* likely still existed in Constantinople well into the latter half of the eighth century.

The presence and subsequent decline of *parthenons* in Constantinople could reflect a broader shift in Byzantium. The city had been the paramount centre for the empire's religious foundations, particularly female-oriented ones. Statistical data from Raymond Janin's investigation on Byzantine monasteries reveals that the number of convents in Constantinople far exceeded those in any other surveyed provincial settlements by a factor of ten.<sup>45</sup> The term 'only' (μόνος), which precedes Balsamon's remarks on the Theban *parthenon*, also implies that his observations about Constantinople may be indicative of a wider trend across the empire. Therefore, it is reasonable to deduce that the practice of consecrated virgins, as denoted by the establishment of a *parthenon*, underwent a significant decline after the latter half of the eighth century, dwindling to near extinction by the second half of the twelfth century.

Having clarified the practice of consecrated virgins with the contextual information, attention can now be directed to specifics about the Theban *parthenon* as detailed in Balsamon's *scholium* in question. It is revealed that John Kaloktenes, the metropolitan of Thebes, founded the *parthenon* sometime during his term of office (1166–c.1190).<sup>46</sup> Being a contemporary of Kaloktenes, Balsamon is the only source for several deeds of this metropolitan. Beyond the foundation of the Theban *parthenon*, Balsamon also attests to Kaloktenes's initiative of appointing bishops without the permission of the Great Synod of Constantinople, which he probably heard in person during one of the synods.<sup>47</sup> Considering that

*traduction, notes et index*, Paris 1971, 37, 8–13; *Gregory of Nazianzus: autobiographical poems*, ed. and trans. C. White, Cambridge 1996, 50, lines 547–9; and *Gregory of Nazianzus, PG xxxvi.577A*; cf. Elm, *Virgins of God*, 98, 186–7, 207–11.

<sup>44</sup> *The chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, 612 n. 12.

<sup>45</sup> A.-M. Talbot, 'A comparison of the monastic experience of Byzantine men and women', in A.-M. Talbot, *Women and religious life in Byzantium*, Aldershot 2001, ch. xii; cf. R. Janin, *La Géographie ecclésiastique de l'Empire byzantine: première partie: le siège de Constantinople et le patriarcat œcuménique, III: Les églises et les monastères*, Paris 1969, and *Les Églises et les monastères des grands centres byzantins*, Paris 1975.

<sup>46</sup> Kaloktenes is first recorded as the metropolitan of Thebes in 1166; Vasileios Delvenakiotes has dated the death of Kaloktenes to sometime between 1186 and 1193; *Ο μητροπολίτης Ιωάννης ο Καλοκτένης και αι Θήβαι (ΙΒ' μ.Χ. αιών)*, Athens 1970, 65–8, 76.

<sup>47</sup> He describes how Patriarch Michael III of Constantinople inquired about the matter and the responses it elicited. Although the synod determined that Kaloktenes's appointment of bishops was uncanonical, the records do not specify the penalty he received: see *Σύνταγμα*, iii. 247.

Kaloktenes also attended the synods held in Constantinople at least twice, Balsamon's source of information on the metropolitan's undertakings must have stemmed from discussions at these synods or directly from Kaloktenes himself.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, John Apokaukos, the metropolitan of Naupaktos (c.1200–32), documents Kaloktenes's conversion of a male monastery (ἀνδρῶα μονή) into a convent (γυναικείαν), bestowing it with the name of the appointed *hegoumene*, Dekane (Δεκανή).<sup>49</sup> Although Apokaukos notes the rarity of convents (γυναικείων μονῶν) in Byzantine provincial areas, this conversion occurred amidst a proliferation of 'many other convents' (πολλῶν ἐτέρων γυναικείων καταγωγῶν) in Thebes.<sup>50</sup> Considering Kaloktenes's demonstrated commitment to enhancing local women's religious lives, it is plausible that he also supported these 'many other convents'. In short, Kaloktenes seems to have been acknowledged by his peers as a pioneering reformer, with the establishment of the Theban *parthenon* being emblematic of his innovative spirit and aligning with his reformative endeavours.

The following features of the Theban *parthenon* can be drawn from Balsamon's record. Firstly, the use of feminine terminology – 'lay' (λαϊκάς), 'ascetics' (τάς ἀσκητρίας), 'such virgins' (τοιαύτας παρθένους) and 'them' (ταύτας) – suggests that the foundation was exclusively for female virgins. Secondly, these virgins were described with the term 'lay' (λαϊκάς), which may carry many connotations if used alone. However,

<sup>48</sup> V. Grumel, *Les Regestes des actes du Patriarcat de Constantinople, I: Les actes des patriarches*, fasc. II et III: *Les registres de 715 à 1206*, Paris 1989, no. 1065 and no. 1112.

<sup>49</sup> A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, 'Συνοδικὰ γράμματα Ἰωάννου του Ἀποκαύκου, μητροπολίτου Ναυπάκτου', *Βυζαντις* I (1909), 3–30 at pp. 19–20. The record is dated 1224/5. For the dating and a translated version of this text see A.-M. Talbot, 'Affirmative action in the 13th c.: an act of John Apokaukos concerning the Blachernitissa monastery in Arta', in Talbot, *Women and religious life*, ch. xvi. It should be noted here that Apokaukos's record is ambiguous regarding Kaloktenes's actual role; he may have been the founder of the original male monastery or the one who oversaw its conversion. For the former interpretation see A.-M. Talbot, 'The conversion of Byzantine monasteries from male to female and *vice-versa*', in C. Scholz and G. Makris (eds), *Polypleuros nous: Miscellanea für Peter Schreiner zu seinem 60. Geburtstag*, Munich 2000, 361, and 'Affirmative action', 408. For the latter see Delvenakiotes, *Ο μητροπολίτης Ἰωάννης*, 71, and 'Ἡ Θήβα κατά τον ΙΒ μ.Χ. αἰῶνα και ο μητροπολίτης Ἰωάννης ο Καλοκτένης', *Επετηρίς της Εταιρείας Βοιωτικῶν Μελετῶν* I/1 (1988), 689–705 at p. 701; C. Koilakou, 'Ἡ συμβολή των ανασκαφῶν στην ἔφευνα των βυζαντινῶν ναῶν της Θήβας', in V. Aravantinos and E. Kountoure (eds), *100 χρόνια αρχαιολογικῶ ἔργου στη Θήβα: οι πρωτεργάτες των ερευνῶν και οι συνεχιστές τους*, Athens 2014, 435. The preference for the latter interpretation is based on the fact that the convent of Dekane is cited alongside three other similarly converted monasteries, with only the converters mentioned. Additionally, Kaloktenes's concern for devout women, as exhibited from his foundation of the Theban *parthenon*, aligns with someone who would initiate the conversion of a male monastery into a convent.

<sup>50</sup> Papadopoulos-Kerameus, 'Συνοδικὰ γράμματα Ἰωάννου του Ἀποκαύκου', 17, 20.

within this context, it seems to bear the specific meaning of ‘lay clothing’ (λαϊκοῦ σχήματος), as explained at the beginning of the *scholium*. In other words, the virgins did not adopt the monastic habit but retained their secular clothing. Thirdly, the virgins bore a strong resemblance to ascetics and were possibly often referred to as such. Fourthly, Balsamon draws a clear line between these virgins and nuns, noting differences in their tonsure and monastic vows, although he does not specify these distinctions.

Most of the Theban *parthenon*’s documented characteristics align closely with the reconstructed practice of consecrated virgins: the consecrated virgins were usually women and led a devotional life akin to ascetics and nuns, but, unlike nuns, they did not don the monastic habit and their vow of chastity was distinct. Notably, that the virgins were not tonsured as nuns is an unprecedented detail in the Theban case. However, it is not entirely unexpected. Although the ritual of tonsure was not stipulated in canons, the sixth-century *Novels* of Justinian had already specified that it should accompany the adoption of the monastic habit upon entering monastic life.<sup>51</sup> In the era of Balsamon and the Theban *parthenon*, tonsure was still a critical rite for initiating nuns. Balsamon frequently posited in his *scholia* that embracing monastic life and receiving tonsure went side by side.<sup>52</sup> This practice was also evident in Boeotia during the same period, where the *parthenon* was active. For instance, St Nicholas the Pilgrim (1075–1094), a native of Boeotia who spent most of his life around the region, once enlisted a laywoman as his pilgrim companion. His *vita*, dated to around 1100, records that he observed ‘all those things that are foreseen in the assumption of the monastic habit’: the woman adopted the monastic attire and received tonsure from the saint in a church.<sup>53</sup> In this context, that the virgins in the Theban *parthenon* bore a distinctive tonsure or, more likely, were not tonsured at all, adds nothing new; it merely reiterates their established distinction from nuns, which had always underpinned the status of consecrated virgins. Following in this vein, all the known elements of the Theban *parthenon* are highly consistent with the status of consecrated virgins as perceived by contemporaneous Byzantines like Balsamon. In this case, the foundation of the Theban *parthenon* would have signified a deliberate revival of the practice, making it a rare, if not unprecedented, instance of this type in the history of

<sup>51</sup> ‘Καὶ εἰ μὲν τὸν τριετῆ βίον ἅπαντα διαμένοιεν ... τούτους τῆς μοναχικῆς ἀξιοῦν στολῆς τε καὶ κουρᾶς, / Et dum triennio tota vita permanserint ... hos monachicam promereri vestem atque tonsuram’: *Novel* v.2; cf. A. Kazhdan and others (eds), *The Oxford dictionary of Byzantium*, Oxford 1991, s.v. ‘Tonsure’.

<sup>52</sup> *Σύνταγμα*, ii. 381, 412–13, 419–21; iii. 89–90.

<sup>53</sup> O. Limone, *Santi monaci e santi eremiti: alla ricerca di un modello di perfezione nella letteratura agiografica dell’Apulia normanna*, Galatina 1988, 142, lines 234–8.

## Byzantine Christianity.

Thus this article presents a detailed synthesis of the revival of a lesser-known Christian practice within a Byzantine provincial city. The consecration of virgins, once a common practice, well-regulated in ecclesiastical and legal sources, fell into disuse sometime after the second half of the eighth century. However, in the second half of the twelfth century, the metropolitan John Kaloktenes, a notably pioneering leader, reinstated the practice within his diocese through the establishment of a *parthenon* in Thebes, adhering closely to the prescribed tradition as reconstructed following the lead of Balsamon.

The case of the Theban *parthenon* could have far-reaching implications. It epitomises the practice of the consecration of virgins, which remains a largely untrodden aspect of Byzantine monasticism.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, the exceptional case of reviving an obsolete Christian practice demonstrates that the memory of such religious practices was persistent among contemporary Byzantine clergy. The precise reconstruction of the practice by John Kaloktenes indicates a deep familiarity with the relevant ecclesiastical and legal sources. His example aligns well with the model of intellectual authority that some scholars propose was pursued by Byzantine bishops of this era, in which an intimate knowledge of such materials was essential.<sup>55</sup> More importantly, the investigation prompts further inquiries into the Theban *parthenon*: What was the rationale behind this unusual establishment? Was it an antiquarian experiment to reconstruct an ancient practice that Kaloktenes had learned about from certain sources, or was it the inception of a new tradition, disguised as a faithful revival of the past? The key issue in both scenarios is the impetus behind this initiative: was Kaloktenes motivated by a spiritual quest to rejuvenate a former ecclesiastical tradition, or was he pragmatically responding to a new social condition within his diocese? Balsamon himself does not provide any clues, but contextual information lends credence to both interpretations.

Around the tenure of Kaloktenes, an emerging trend toward reform through the reinstatement of early Christian practices was observed in the religious circles of the contemporary Latin West.<sup>56</sup> There is good reason to infer a connection between this trend and Kaloktenes's initiative,

<sup>54</sup> For a recent seminal work on Byzantine monasticism see A.-M. Talbot, *Varieties of monastic experience in Byzantium, 800–1453*, Notre Dame, IN 2019.

<sup>55</sup> J. Roskelly, *De Très Savants Pasteurs: conceptions et pratiques de l'autorité des évêques dans la société byzantines des XIe–XIIe siècles*, Paris 2022, 275–84.

<sup>56</sup> For example, M.-D. Chenu, 'The evangelical awakening', in M.-D. Chenu, *Nature, man, and society in the twelfth century*, Chicago 1968, 239–69, and H. Grundmann, *Religious movements in the Middle Ages*, Notre Dame, IN 1995, 7–30.



given Thebes's strong ties with the Latin West.<sup>57</sup> Thebes was a pivotal commercial centre for Venice within Byzantium, harbouring a Venetian community attested since the late eleventh century, which persisted even amidst the intense Byzantine-Venetian rivalry in the late twelfth century. The surviving Venetian documents suggest that this community constituted a sizable portion of the Theban population. They were primarily engaged in commerce, operating trade routes across Byzantium and further afield, with a major part oriented towards the Latin West.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, the region around Boeotia, where Thebes is located, had long been an important junction, linking the Latin West with Byzantium and territories beyond. Apart from traders like the Venetians, travellers, pilgrims, diplomats and military contingents are also frequently attested in sources as moving between the region and the Latin West.<sup>59</sup> The convenient sea routes provided by the Gulf of Corinth, coupled with Venetian maritime prowess, likely enhanced such interactions.<sup>60</sup> In this case, the parallel religious developments observed in the contemporary Latin West and Thebes

<sup>57</sup> A few scholars have noted the comparable religious developments in contemporary Byzantium and the Latin West and have attempted to explain them, for example, from the perspective of transmission and mutual influence. See, for instance, R. Morris, 'Northern Europe invades the Mediterranean, 900–1200', in G. Holmes (ed.), *The Oxford history of medieval Europe*, Oxford 1988, 181–9, and A. Jotischky, 'Monastic reform and the geography of Christendom: experience, observation and influence', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* xxii (2012), 57–74.

<sup>58</sup> G. Wu, 'The Venetian community in Byzantine Thebes (1072–1204): a prosopographical study', *Вестник Волгоградского государственного университета. Серия 4. История. Регионоведение. Международные отношения* [Science Journal of Volgograd State University, 4th ser.: History, Area Studies, International Relations] xxviii (2023), 201–11. Although Venetians were most likely drawn to Thebes by silk, it has been suggested that the agricultural and pastoral products around the city were attractive to them as well: A. Dunn, 'Historical and archaeological indicators of economic change in middle Byzantine Boeotia and their problems', *Επετηρίς της Εταιρείας Βοιωτικών Μελετών* ii/2 (1995), 755–74 at p. 770; M. Angold, 'The shaping of the medieval Byzantine "city"', *Byzantinische Forschungen* x (1985), 1–38 at p. 25.

<sup>59</sup> C. L. Connor and W. R. Connor, *The life and miracles of Saint Luke of Steiris*, Brookline, MA 1994, 16, 34, 48, 110; Liutprand of Cremona, 'Relatio de legatione Constantinopolitana', in P. Chiesa (ed.), *Liudprandi Cremonensis opera omnia*, Turnhout 1998, 213–18; *Géographie d'Edrisi*, ii, trans. P. Jaubert, Paris 1840, 120–3; Niketas Choniates, *Historia*, ed. I. -A. van Dieten, Berlin 1975, 72–4; M. Adler, *The itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, New York 1907, 10; *Saewulf (1102, 1103 A. D.)*, ed. and trans. W. Brownlow, London 1892, 32.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. E. Kislinger, 'Reisen und Verkehrswege zwischen Byzanz und dem Abendland vom neunten bis in die Mitte des elften Jahrhunderts', in E. Konstantinou (ed.), *Byzanz und das Abendland im 10. und 11. Jahrhundert*, Vienna 1997, 231–57; D. Jacoby, 'Byzantine maritime trade, 1025–1118', *Travaux et mémoires* xxi (2017), 627–48, and 'Italian traders in Byzantium, c. 800–1204', in N. Drocourt and S. Kolditz (eds), *A companion to Byzantium and the West, 900–1204*, Leiden 2022, 471–95.



could be the result of reciprocal influence fostered by their close ties. However, it is equally plausible that such reciprocal influence was inconsequential or absent, akin to the situation in various Western locales exhibiting similar religious patterns.<sup>61</sup> The resemblance might represent a *Zeitgeist*, emerging independently in areas sharing analogous historical contexts. A thorough comparative investigation will be necessary to explore this possibility further.

From a pragmatic perspective, Thebes's role as the paramount centre for the silk industry in Byzantium during the second half of the twelfth century merits attention in assessing Kaloktenes's motivations.<sup>62</sup> In this context, the framework of the *Parthenon* – supporting a community of women living and labouring together under the aegis of the Church while retaining secular connections – might have been strategically designed to appeal to and integrate the female artisans who played an essential role in the industry.<sup>63</sup> Until more conclusive evidence comes to light, this interpretative angle also has to remain conjectural.

<sup>61</sup> Grundmann, *Religious movements*, 81.

<sup>62</sup> For the industry, David Jacoby's investigation remains seminal: 'Silk in western Byzantium before the Fourth Crusade', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* lxxxiv/lxxxv (1991/1992), 452–500. See also G. Wu, 'The metropolitan and the Theban silk industry: a hypothetical reconstruction', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* xlvi (2022), 64–80.

<sup>63</sup> Wu, 'The metropolitan and the Theban silk industry', 64–80.