SOURCES AND THEMES FOR THE STUDY OF THE CULT OF SAINTS IN THE MIDDLE AGES: THE CASE OF ST DEMETRIUS

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A word on methodology

What we know about the veneration of St Demetrius in late Byzantium comes from five groups of sources: a) iconography, b) literature, c) hymnography, d) architecture, and e) archaeology (including coins). All of these areas merit separate study but it is the literary sources that will concern us here. St Demetrius was most probably martyred sometime in the late third century. Yet his cult and later popular conceptions of him were based on literary sources which can be found in Thessalonica from no earlier than the sixth century. Legends, *passiones*, *vitae*, miracle stories and panegyric speeches are some such examples. Of these, the most influential texts were the *Miracula*, produced sometime during the seventh century (Lemerle). Dating from the ninth century onwards, there also survive three biographies, the first written by Photios, patriarch of Constantinople (858–867, 867–886), the second written by the tenth–century scholar Symeon Metaphrastes ('the Translator') and the third by an anonymous author whose work is preserved in Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Gr. 821. The Metaphrastes text is the longest and perhaps the most influential of the three biographies. The later literary texts relevant to this study were called encomia (singular *ἐγκώμιον*, or plural *ἐγκώμια*), meaning works of praise. In Anglo–American and other European scholarship they are sometimes referred to as 'laudes'.

This literary form expressed devotion to saints and constructed sanctity in complex ways. The connection of the encomia to earlier theological thought and other literary genres has to be established in order to unravel those complexities. A discussion of the literary merit of the encomia cannot be separated from a discussion of how a very traditional and stylised genre could be used creatively to reflect the conditions of the time in which it was written. Although the late Byzantine devotion to St Demetrius can be said to be a fairly unique cultural phenomenon, one that took place at a specific place and time and which cannot be reproduced, what is learned from the study of his encomia can be compared in future studies to the encomia of other

saints. This essay seeks to stimulate such studies and such comparative approaches.

The group of the late Byzantine encomia to St Demetrius of Thessalonica as a source for cultural historians

The late Byzantine encomia to St Demetrius of Thessalonica are a body of texts that present us with an example of late medieval literature that is both conservative and pioneering. It is both rooted in tradition and sailing in the freedom of high emotion, both defined by formal perfection and by the intuitive performance that comes in the form of direct speech. In short, this is a genre that stimulates and surprises, that requires attentive reading and sensitivity to its intellectual and emotional range. The encomia to St Demetrius challenge our expectations of hagiography and of the development of Byzantine literature, which can be shown to be a dynamic process to the very end of the life of the empire. Their beauty of expression is timeless, and they can charm us today with their stunning metaphors in the same way that they impressed themselves upon the minds of the medieval pilgrims. In their layers of meaning we can see a reflection of Byzantine beliefs and values. In the craftsmanship and skill used by the authors to reveal and conceal their fears, we can sense the tensions of their time and society.

The encomia to St Demetrius are an important resource for cultural historians of the later Byzantine period for a number of other reasons. We are lucky that they survive in relatively large numbers, making them an abundant body of source material. They are so numerous in fact that they outnumber those written for any other saint of the Greek Orthodox Church. It is notable that not even a popular and well–loved saint like St George has as many encomia written in his honour (Laourdas 275). Moreover, because new encomia were dedicated to St Demetrius every year, we have to assume that many others have not survived to the present. By the same token we have to keep in mind that the ones that have come down to us, however polished they may appear, are not necessarily the finest to have been delivered. Yet plentiful though the encomia are, as a source of information about late Byzantine Thessalonica they can be difficult to use. In common with most Byzantine literature they are written in a highly formalised manner, following a strict pattern set by earlier authors. The intricacies of such creativity have been discussed by scholars in iconography and, to a lesser extent, in hymnography. Yet this is not the case when it comes to other literary works not set to music.

There is another reason why the encomia to St Demetrius need to be taken seriously. Some of the finest minds and most prominent individuals of the period wrote them and possibly delivered them publicly as sermons. As one would expect, many of the authors were clergymen. They include the last three metropolitans of Thessalonica under Byzantine rule, who were relatively obscure but influential at the time: Isidore Glavas (Metropolitan 1380–97) who wrote five encomia; Gabriel (Metropolitan 1397–c.1417) who wrote seven; and Symeon (Metropolitan c.1417–29), who wrote two. Makarios Choumnos (d.1380), abbot of the monastery of Nea Moni in Thessalonica (the name means 'New Monastery'), also wrote one encomium. Clergy of greater renown also wrote in praise of St Demetrius, such as the celebrated St Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), hesychast theologian and Metropolitan of Thessalonica (1347–59). Philotheos Kokkinos, patriarch of Constantinople (1354–55, 1364–76) and hymnographer, wrote both an encomium and a hymn to the saint. Even so, this was not an activity confined to clergymen and monks. The statesman Demetrius Chrysoloras and the lawyer Constantine Harmenopoulos contributed to this body of work. So did four of the greatest intellectuals of the later Byzantine period: the scholar and statesman Theodore Metochites (1270–1332) wrote two, while the polymath Nikephoros Gregoras (c.1293–c.1361) left one to St Demetrius and another dedicated jointly to the saints Theodore, George and Demetrius. Nicholas Kavasilas, author of the *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* wrote three, as did George Scholarios Kourtesis (d.1472), the future patriarch Gennadios II. It is true that some late Byzantine scholars, such as Maximos Planoudes and the brothers Demetrius and Prochoros Kydones, did not write any encomia to St Demetrius, at least as far as we know. Nevertheless, the list of authors of encomia reads like a Who's Who of late Byzantine intellectuals.

The encomia in scholarship

The importance of this body of work has been recognised in so far as many of the fourteenth– and fifteenth–century encomia have been edited and published, mostly during the first part of the twentieth century. All known encomia to St Demetrius that have survived are now available in printed editions, apart from four out of the twenty–nine, which remain unedited.[1] Among these unedited encomia is a text dedicated to three warrior saints, the 'Oratio in honour of Theodore, George and Demetrius Megalomartyres' by Nikephoros Gregoras. The work of editing the encomia was mainly carried out from the early 1950s onwards by Greek

scholars who made the most important of the encomia available in Modern Greek journals and periodicals. The text was presented without a translation, sometimes with a short introduction that comments on the text. The most prolific editor was Vassileios Laourdas (1912–71) who edited a great number of the encomia, including ones by Nikephoros Gregoras, Theodore Metochites, Demetrius Chrysoloras, Philotheos Kokkinos, Nicholas Kavasilas, by the Metropolitans Gabriel and Isidore Glavas, and by the Abbot Makarios Choumnos.

A number of other Greek scholars have complemented Laourdas's work. Demetrius Gines edited the encomium of Constantine Harmenopoulos, while the two encomia of Kavasilas that Laourdas had not done were edited by Vassileios Pseutongás and by Theophilos Joannou in nineteenth–century Venice. Demetrius Tsames re–edited the encomium of Philotheos Kokkinos originally published by Laourdas. Encomia have been also published by some scholars from other European countries. Christian Friedrich Matthaei (1744–1811) edited Gregory Palamas's encomium during the eighteenth century. Louis Petit's team edited Scholarios's for the edition of his collected works and David Balfour those of Symeon of Thessalonica. Of those published, only four have been translated into modern European languages. One of those of Symeon of Thessalonica has been translated into English (see Melville–Jones). Those of Gregory Palamas, Nikephoros Gregoras and Constantine Harmenopoulos have been recently translated into Modern Greek (Katsaros and Vlachakos). There is also a hymn of Philotheos Kokkinos to St Demetrius that contains many elements of the encomia. This text has not been edited or translated into English before.[2] Earlier encomia to St Demetrius include those by John, Metropolitan of Thessalonica (seventh century), Neophytos the Recluse (twelfth century), John Stavrakios (thirteenth century), and Constantine Akropolites (died c.1321), and earlier hymns to St Demetrius include those by Romanos Melodos in the sixth century and John Mauropous in the eleventh.

While the texts of the encomia to St Demetrius have been made available, very few scholars have taken advantage of them and the encomia as a genre still await more detailed study and interpretation. Brief general surveys about the encomia to St Demetrius have been produced. Laourdas has used them to engage with issues of religion and national identity (Laourdas, 'Εγκώμια εἰς τὸν Ἅγιον'). Likewise, Antonios Papadopoulos has approached them from a more theological viewpoint, while Herbert Hunger has looked at them from the viewpoint of literary criticism. The most systematic analysis of any of the encomiasts has to be that dedicated to Symeon of Thessalonica by David

Balfour. His analysis of Symeon's mindset and position is attentive and thorough, and he presents St Demetrius as central to the developments in Thessalonica and within the church. He also comments on the poetic beauty of St Symeon's hymns and reflects on possible reasons for his work being neglected by the majority of Western scholars (Balfour, *Politico–Historical Works* 19–21).

In general, however, very little has been written on the encomia to St Demetrius in late Byzantium and they have never been subjected to systematic examination as a group. When it comes to studies of some of the major figures who produced them, such as Theodore Metochites, Gregory Palamas or George Scholarios, emphasis is placed on works other than their encomia.[3] Nicholas Kavasilas is well known for his *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* and *Life in Christ* but his encomia are seldom cited.[4] An encomium which plays a prominent role in the history of Thessalonica for its *ekphrasis* of the church of the Acheiropoietos and its expressive depiction of the saint's festival, that by Constantine Harmenopoulos, is dismissed by one scholar as an encomium not worth publishing in its entirety. Andreas Xyngopoulos felt that the style of Harmenopoulos was dark and difficult to understand. He uses the encomium's information about the icons of the Acheiropoietos church and about the name of the church but apart from these things he believes that the encomium is not worthy of being read as a whole, as the last years of Byzantium are filled with such rhetorical creations (Xyngopoulos 25–26). I very much disagree with his view: I would argue that the encomium is beautiful and luminous. More generally, discussions of St Demetrius and his cult, such as the heated discussions of David Woods and Christopher Walter, both refer to a period earlier than that under discussion here and so the encomia have no place in it.

Another interesting aspect of the cult of St Demetrius, if a little out of the scope of this essay, is his veneration in the West. A Latin version of the Passion of St Demetrius was written by Anastasius Bibliothecarius in the ninth century (*PG* 116). Still, in the early Middle Ages the saint did not enjoy the same popularity in the West as he had in the East. The real change as far as his cult in the West is concerned came when the Crusaders came into contact with Byzantines in Antioch.[5] St Demetrius appears in Western sources such as the *Gesta Francorum*, where together with other military saints he is credited with the victory of the First Crusade at Antioch in June 1098 (*Gesta*, 69). Soldiers were said to have seen the saints fighting alongside them in battle. Modern scholars such as James B. MacGregor and more recently Elizabeth Lapina have made assessments of the influence of warrior saints in the collective memory of the Crusades. Researchers who would like to follow up the

cult of St Demetrius in the West will find enough information to get them started, including source material, in the work of MacGregor and Lapina. The opposite direction has been explored by Per–Arne Bodin, who has worked on Slavic spirituality with reference to historical and textual sources.

Literary hagiography as cultural history: looking to the future

My own doctoral thesis has attempted to fill the gap by presenting an analysis of this neglected material and an edition of a hitherto unedited text. It has placed these literary works in their historical, literary and religious context and focused on a number of particular aspects: the use of the athlete metaphor, the unusual encomia written by Nicholas Kavasilas, the information which these texts give us about St Demetrius's festival, the way in which contemporary concerns were explored through this literary form and, last but not least, the parallels between encomia and hymns.

Much more needs to be done in the field, with encomia to many other saints awaiting study. These encomia, edited or unedited, are rarely read or used by cultural historians. François Halkin in his invaluable *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca* lists them all. Many are akin to the cult of St Demetrius in their themes: the other myrrh–giving saint of Thessalonica, Theodora, to whom, amongst others, Nicholas Kavasilas dedicated an encomium, would make a good topic for a future study. St Theodora has no connection to the legend of St Demetrius as she was martyred much later, in the ninth century. Another good topic would be the study of St Demetrius's loyal companion, St Nestor, who also has encomia dedicated to him.[6] Unlike these two saints, St Loupos, another companion saint of St Demetrius, appears in early legends and pictorial representations but does not have full encomia written in his honour. Another cluster would be the encomia to the military saints as a whole, an undertaking that would match iconographical studies of them. St Loupos is classed as a military saint and could be included in this group. Of course the study of literary texts does not have to exclude works that cross over to art historical or hymnographical considerations.[7] Further comparative studies of encomia and hymns or icons would be indeed an exciting possibility for new researchers, or 'research sprouts' as they call them in Scandinavian countries. I hope that this essay will be of some value to them as a starting point. Many more topics in Byzantine hagiography await them.

NOTES

Abbreviations

EEBS	*Ἐπετηρὶς Ἑταιρείας Βυζαντινῶν Σπουδῶν*
M	*Μακεδονικά*
NE	*Νέος Ἑλληνομνήμων*
PG	J.–P. Migne, ed. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeco–Latina*. Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1857–66. 161 vols.

[1] The texts and manuscripts of these accounts are as follows: Anonymous, 'Homilia', in Marciana Library, Venice, Cod. II 98 (Nan. 120), ff. 193–195v and in Queriniana Library, Brescia, Cod. A III 3, ff. 112–114; Anonymous, 'Laudatio', in Vatopedi Monastery, Mount Athos, Cod. 427, ff. 1–20; Anonymous, 'Laudatio', in Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Coislin 110, ff. 176–180v; Nikephoros Gregoras, 'Oratio in honour of Theodore, George and Demetrius Megalomartyres', in Bodleian Library, Oxford, Holkham 25 (olim 91), ff. 512–517v.

[2] The hymn can be found in Marciana Library, Venice, Gr. 582 (olim 926). For the text see Russell, 'Encomia', which also gives a full bibliography on St Demetrius. Also see Russell, *St Demetrius*.

[3] See for example Wilson, Meyendorff, and Livanos, none of which mention the encomia.

[4] Among rare examples are Salaville n.164, where we find a comment regarding the folly of the love of Christ. Walther Völker singles out a passage from the encomia to St Demetrius to show that Kavasilas portrays a saint to be motivated only by his eros of Christ: 'τοῦ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἔρωτος ἕνεκα μόνον' (112).

[5] For the interaction between Byzantines and Crusaders in Antioch more generally see Harris 67–71, and Shepard 185–277.

[6] Halkin mentions three encomia to St Nestor of Thessalonica, entitled *Synaxarium; Laudatio*; *Laudatio* by Joseph, Archbishop of Thessalonica (BHG 2290–2). Of these, the second encomium has been edited by Kotsabassi ('Ein unediertes Enkomion'). See also her 'Ενα ανέκδοτο εγκώμιο στον αγ. Νέστορα'.

[7] Iconographical studies are reasonably well–known and too numerous to mention here. For an introduction to the hymns to St Demetrius see Angelatos, Eustratiades, Schirò, and Symeon of Thessalonica, *Τα Λειτουργικά Συγγράμματα.*

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