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BENEFACCTIONS AND PERSECUTIONS OF THE
BYZANTINE EMPEROR MICHAEL VIII PALAIOLOGOS
AGAINST THE BULGARIAN ATHONITE
MONASTERY OF ZOGRAPHOU

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Abstract. The traditional position of the Athonite Monastery of Zographou towards the Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos is that, intending to impose a union with the Roman Catholic Church on the Athonite monasteries, the emperor and Patriarch John XI Vekkos initiated a persecution against the staunchly Orthodox monks of Zographou and burned 26 of them alive in the monastery tower. At the same time, however, the medieval archives of Zographou contain several documents issued by Michael VIII, which confirm and legalize the property of the Bulgarian Athonite Monastery. They make it clear that in 1266 – 1267, the monk Theodoulos from the Megiste Lavra of St. Athanasios the Athonite produced to the sebastokrator of Thessalonica, Constantine Tornikios, a forged document, by which Michael VIII allegedly ordered Tornikios to resolve a property dispute between Zographou and the Megiste Lavra in favor of the latter and to destroy all the documents of Zographou concerning the disputed property. The forgery in question probably gave rise to the unconcealed hostility of the monks of Zographou towards Michael VIII, which was later presented as resistance against his pro-Uniate policy towards the papacy.

Keywords: Mount Athos, Monastery of Zographou, Michael VIII Palaiologos, Papacy, Twenty-Six Martyrs of Zographou.

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The article intends to shed light on the relations between the Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos and the Bulgarian Athonite Monastery of Zographou as they attested in the Greek document of the period 1259 – 1282 which are preserved in the archives of Zographou. The only document accusing the Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos of having committed atrocities against the Bulgarian Athonite monastery of Zographou, is the hagiographical text about the martyrdom of the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Zographou. This text states that they were burnt alive in a defensive tower of Zographou by emissaries of the pro-catholic Emperor Michael VIII and his Patriarch John XI Bekkos (1275 – 1282), on October 10, 1275. The Slavic text describing this event was published in 1900 by V. Zlatarski and in 1931 by J. Ivanov¹. In 1996 I. Bozhilov and in 2012 D. Bulanin characterized the text as fully folkloric and historically unreliable. Bulanin only suggested that it might have been composed during the anti-Latin frenzy that followed the Council of Ferrara – Florence (1436 – 1439)². The text is part of one very specific group of Athonite Greek hagiographical texts which describes various persecutions of Athonite monks, presumably instigated by Michael VIII Palaiologos. Several texts of this type have been scrutinized by A. Rigo, who proved that most of them were written during the 16th century and belonged to a group of literary works known in the Athonite tradition as *Patria* of Mount Athos. Texts of this kind were collected and published by Sp. Lampros in 1912. However, the dominant literary element in the narrative about the martyrdom of the Twenty-Six Zographite Saints is the unconcealed hatred against Michael VIII. This literary element might have had various inspirations, and one of them might have been the destruction of the archives of the Monastery of Zographou

¹ ЗЛАТАРСКИ, Васил. *Исторія во кратицѣ о болгарскомъ народѣ словенскомъ, сочини ся и списа ся въ лѣто 1792 Спиридономъ ѱеросхимонахомъ. Повѣсть о Святой горѣ, како приидоша и плъниша латини: повѣсть о Зоуграфѣ монастырь болгарскомъ*. София, 1900, с. 78–85; АРГИРОВЪ, Стоянъ. Изъ находкитѣ ми въ манастиритѣ Хилендарѣ и Зографѣ. II. Повесть за съграждането на Зографския манастирь и за нахлуването на „латини“ въ Света гора. *Списание на Българската академия на наукитѣ и изкуствата*, 1942, 63/1, с. 2–22; ИВАНОВЪ, Йорданъ. Български старини изъ Македония. София, 1931 (препечатка София, 1970), с. 437–440, № LI; БОЖКОВ, Атанас; ВАСИЛИЕВ, Асен. *Художественото наследство на манастира Зограф*. София: Наука и изкуство, 1981, с. 51.

² БОЖИЛОВ, Иван. Мъчение на зографските монаси. Легенди и факти. В: *Светогорска обител Зограф*. Т. 2. София: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 1996, с. 175–189; БУЛАНИН, Дмитрий. Антилатинский цикл афонских легенд и болгарский Зограф. *Palaeobulgarica / Старобългаристика*, XXXVI, 2012, № 1, с. 3–23. ISSN 0204-4021. ISSN (Online) 2603-2899.

which was, allegedly, ordered by Michael VIII in 1266³. But what happened in reality?

Three documents which are presently kept in Zographou archives, describe the events that took place in 1266 – 1267, events full of forgery and fraud. Shortly before 1266 there was a conflict between the monasteries of Megiste Lavra and Zographou. It was connected with landed property near the town of Hierissos, to the northwest of Mount Athos, which a Byzantine aristocrat named Maria Tzousmene had donated to Zographou in the mid-12th century. The conflict was triggered by some new territorial acquisitions of Megiste Lavra in the same region. In 1259, the brother of the Emperor Michael VIII, John Komnenos Palaiologos, donated to Megiste Lavra the villages of Sellada, Metallin, and Gradista. These minor settlements were situated in the district of Siderokausia, to the north of Hierissos and in the vicinity of what is today the village of Stratonike (formerly Isvoros). In 1263 Michael VIII confirmed the donations made by his brother and issued a special chrysobull in favour of Megiste Lavra. By 1266 the conflict between Zographou and Megiste Lavra had already become very serious, so the local authorities assumed that the imperial court at Constantinople was the only institution that could solve it. The conflict pertained to the agricultural terrains of Chalkeos, Tympanares, Loukitzes, Kryos Kampos, and Armenon which were situated to the north of Hierissos. According to a document which the Byzantine officials, Basil Eparchon and Nicephoros Malleas, issued in 1267, at an earlier date the governor or kephale of Thessalonica, Constantine Tornikios, had solved a conflict between Megiste Lavra and Zographou over the aforementioned properties to the north of Hierissos in favour of Zographou. The witnesses who appeared in front of Tornikios declared that the landed property in question belonged to Zographou, and that the monks of the Megiste Lavra were claiming it because it was adjacent to their own property in the same region. At that point Tornikios announced that his decision was to hand over the land in question to Zographou, but due to the statement of the monks of Megiste Lavra that the witnesses of Zographou were attempting to deceive the lawcourt, he was compelled to send both opponents to the imperial court in Constantinople⁴. Nevertheless, the Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos solved the problem in favour of Zographou. However, when the representatives of the two monasteries were leaving Constantinople, a monk

³ ПАВЛИКЯНОВ, Кирил. *История на българския светогорски манастир Зограф от 980 до 1804 г.* София: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2005, с. 27–28 и 193–195. ISBN 954-07-2260-8; PAVLIKIANOV, Cyril. *The early years of the Bulgarian Athonite monastery of Zographou (980–1279) and its Byzantine archives*. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2011, pp. 99–104. ISBN 978-954-8536-02-8.

⁴ ПАВЛИКЯНОВ, Кирил. *История на българския светогорски манастир Зограф...*, с. 25–28, 194–196; PAVLIKIANOV, Cyril. *The early years of the Bulgarian Athonite monastery of Zographou (980–1279)*..., pp. 91–98.

of Megiste Lavra named Theodoulos proceeded to a premeditated falsification of an imperial document. He spent few more days in Constantinople and falsified an imitation of an imperial *horismos*, which he later presented to Constantine Tornikios. This forgery ordered the governor of Thessalonica to deliver the controversial agricultural terrains to Megiste Lavra and to destroy all the documents of Zographou which were connected with the conflict in question. Being misled by Theodoulos's forgery, Tornikios executed the so-called "imperial" order, delivered the property to Megiste Lavra and destroyed an unknown number of titles of property which were then kept in Zographou, inflicting in this way severe damage on Zographou archives. However, Constantine Tornikios soon realized that the allegedly "imperial" document which Theodoulos had presented to him was suspicious. He interrogated the monk and the latter confessed that he had intentionally falsified the *horismos* of Michael VIII. The governor of Thessalonica then decided that the controversial agricultural terrains must be immediately restored to Zographou, but it was not in his competence to repair the damage which he had inflicted on Zographou agricultural domain. This was an exclusive prerogative of the Byzantine emperor. For this reason, after Theodoulos's confession the monks of Zographou visited Constantinople for a second time, and received a new imperial *horismos*, which confirmed all their possession in the vicinity of Hierissos and declared void of any legal value all the documents that affirmed that the property in question belonged to the monastery of Megiste Lavra. The delegation Zographou was also given a second imperial charter addressed to the new governor of Thessalonica, the pinkernes Alexios Doukas Nestongos, who replaced Constantine Tornikios as kephale of the city in the summer of 1267. This charter instructed Nestongos to detach the problematic property from Megiste Lavra and to deliver it to Zographou⁵.

The conclusion is that the whole episode might have been truly rather unpleasant for Zographou, but it is clear that Michael VIII benevolently supported the Bulgarian Athonite monastery and finally solved the case in its favour.

There is one more document of Michael VIII preserved in the medieval archives of Zographou. According to it, prior to May 1276, or, let us say it otherwise: only half a year after the burning of the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Zographou in a tower inside the monastery, which was presumably ordered by Michael Palaiologos and took place on October 10, 1275, the monks of the Bulgarian Athonite monastery of St. George informed the Byzantine emperor that they already possessed a metochion

⁵ PAVLIKIANOV, Cyril. *The mediaeval Greek and Bulgarian documents of the Athonite monastery of Zographou 980–1600. Critical Edition and Commentary of the Texts*. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2014, pp. 38–39 and 129–152, acts nos. 6 and 7. ISBN 978-954-07-3882-6.

dedicated to Our Lady Kraniotissa, also known as Dreanovon, near the mouth of the Strymon River. The Bulgarian monks were requesting the emperor to promulgate for them an official confirmative charter authorising them to keep on possessing Kraniotissa in the same way as they possessed it until May 1276. Michael VIII Palaiologos satisfied the request of Zographou without any objection. His charter of 1276 is very important as far as the presence of Bulgarian monks in the monastery of Zographou is concerned. It is the first official Byzantine document describing Zographou as a monastery belonging to the Bulgarians⁶.

The conclusion could be only one: the official documents of the period 1266 – 1276 make it clear that Michael VIII had always been a benevolent supporter of Zographou. But why the monastery faced him as a destroyer and created the narrative about his 26 victims. The answer might be very simple: Zographou has only two saint monks, St. Kosmas, who died in 1424, and St. Poimen, who was active around 1616⁷. On the contrary, its neighbors, the monasteries of Vatopedi, Chilandar and Esphigmenou, are known to have been the residence of numerous saint monks, the most prominent of them being St. Sava of Serbia and St. Gregory Palamas⁸. Evidently, after the Council of Ferrara – Florence, which triggered an anti-Latin frenzy in Byzantium, ideologically Zographou needed a strong group of first rank saints, i.e. martyrs. Thus, Michael Palaiologos became the negative protagonist of the story about the martyrdom of the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Zographou only because he attempted to negotiate for the safety of the restored Byzantine Empire the Union of the Church with the papacy, and sent as his official envoy and ambassador to the Second Council of Lyons (7 May – 17 July 1274) the well-known historian George Akropolites. Moreover, the Byzantine clergy evidently disliked the first emperor of the Palaiologan dynasty because by deposing the Constantinopolitan Patriarch Arsenios Autoreianos he caused a serious schism in the Orthodox Church.

⁶ PAVLIKIANOV, Cyril. *The early years of the Bulgarian Athonite monastery of Zographou (980–1279)*..., pp. 107–108; PAVLIKIANOV, Cyril. *The mediaeval Greek and Bulgarian documents of the Athonite monastery of Zographou 980–1600*..., pp. 158–162, act no. 10.

⁷ PAVLIKIANOV, Cyril. *Cosma e il monastero athonita bulgaro di Zographou*. In: *Atanasio e il monachesimo del Monte Athos*. Torino: Qiqajon Publishing House, 2005, pp. 141–151. ISBN 978-88-8227-184-8; PAVLIKIANOV, Cyril. *Saint Kosmas the Zographite and his place in the history of the Bulgarian Athonite Monastery of Zographou*. *Göttinger Beiträge zur Byzantinischen und Neugriechischen Philologie*, 4/5, Göttingen 2004/2005, pp. 151–159. ISSN 1617-0423.

⁸ PAVLIKIANOV, Cyril. *The Medieval Aristocracy on Mount Athos*. University of Sofia “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Center for Slavo-Byzantine Studies “Prof. Ivan Dujčev”, Series Monumenta Slavico-Byzantina et Mediaevalia Europensia, vol. 15. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2001, pp. 93–95, 15–16, 105–106, 133–135. ISBN 954-07-1595-4.

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ИМПЕРАТОР МИХАИЛ VIII ПАЛЕОЛОГ СРЕЩУ
БЪЛГАРСКИЯ СВЕТОГОРСКИ МАНАСТИР „ЗОГРАФ“

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Резюме. Традиционната позиция на светогорския манастир „Зограф“ спрямо византийския император Михаил VIII Палеолог е, че, желайки да наложи на светогорските обители уния с Римокатолическата църква, той и патриарх Йоан XI Векос са предприели гонение срещу непоколебимо православните зографски монаси и са изгорили 26-има от тях в манастирската кула. Същевременно обаче, в зографския средновековен архив се пазят няколко документа на въпросния император, които потвърждават и узаконяват собствеността на българския светогорски манастир. Те разкриват, че през 1266 – 1267 г. монахът Теодул от „Великата Лавра“ на св. Атанасий Атонски е представил на севастократора на Солун, Константин Торникий, фалшив документ, с който Михаил VIII уж разпореждал на Торникий да реши един имотен спор между „Зограф“ и „Великата Лавра“ в полза на последната и да унищожи всички зографски документи, засягащи спорния имот. Въпросният фалшификат вероятно е дал начало на неприкритата неприязън на зографското братство спрямо Михаил VIII, която по-късно е била представена като съпротива срещу неговата проуниатска политика спрямо папите.

Ключови думи: Света гора Атон, Зографски манастир, Михаил VIII Палеолог, Папство, Двадесет и шестима зографски мъченици.