



ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ATHONIAN MONASTERIES AND BYZANTIUM EMPERORS: THE BEGINNING OF MODERN CORPORATE BUSINESS MODELS AND STRATEGIES

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***Abstract:** This article provides an analysis of the connections between monasteries and Byzantium emperors during the existence of the Byzantine Empire. It specifically focuses on how institutions the monasteries on Mount Athos interacted with the imperial authorities. The study investigates the methods through which these relationships were formed and explores their influence on the environment of that era. Also, the article draws an analogy between the business model used by the Athonian monasteries and modern corporations and shows that it has not changed regardless of the different social systems that humanity has passed through in the last thousand years.*

***Keywords:** (Athonian Monasteries, corporate business model, strategies)*

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Introduction

The Byzantine Empire, a vast and enduring civilization that spanned over a millennium, witnessed complex and multifaceted economic relationships between monasteries and the imperial authorities. Monasteries, as religious institutions, were not only centers of spiritual devotion but also key players in the empire's economic landscape. The Byzantine Empire's history is marked by the intricate interplay of religious, political, and economic forces, and understanding the business model of monasteries and their relationship with Byzantium emperors is crucial for comprehending this multifaceted era.

The Byzantine Empire was a thriving hub of civilization from the 4th to the 15th centuries. It bridged the gap between the ancient and medieval worlds, inheriting the legacy of the Roman Empire while developing its own distinctive culture and institutions. At the heart of this civilization were the monasteries, which played a pivotal role in shaping not only the spiritual life of the empire but also its economic dynamics.



Monasticism, a religious movement that emphasized asceticism, communal living, and devotion to God, led to the establishment of monasteries across the Byzantine Empire. These monastic communities varied in size and influence, with some monasteries located in remote desert regions and others situated in urban centers. Regardless of their location, monasteries developed unique economic models that enabled them to thrive while simultaneously contributing to the empire's economic stability.

This analysis explores the economic relationships between monasteries and Byzantium emperors during the Byzantine Empire's existence. It delves into the mechanisms by which these relationships were established, the economic activities of monasteries, and their impact on the empire's economic landscape. The study also scrutinizes the legal instruments, such as chrysobulls, that formalized these relationships and examines the delicate balance between the autonomy of monasteries and imperial control.

The economic activities of monasteries were diverse and included agriculture, trade, craftsmanship, and financial operations. These activities not only sustained the monastic way of life but also contributed significantly to the empire's economic prosperity. Furthermore, monasteries, as centers of culture and learning, played a crucial role in preserving and disseminating knowledge.

While monasteries benefited from their economic activities and the privileges granted by emperors through chrysobulls, this relationship was not without tensions. The autonomy of monasteries, including their right to elect leaders and manage their assets, sometimes challenged imperial authority. Therefore, this analysis also examines the complex dynamics between monastic independence and loyalty to the imperial throne.

In essence, the economic relationships between monasteries and Byzantium emperors represent a microcosm of the Byzantine Empire's intricate social, political, and economic structure. By exploring the business model of monasteries and their interactions with secular authorities, we gain insights into the symbiotic relationship that underpinned the empire's enduring legacy.

Establishment of Economic Relations

The economic relationships between monasteries and Byzantium emperors were often formalized through legal documents, such as chrysobulls, which granted the monasteries various privileges, exemptions, and ownership rights. The issuance of these documents symbolized the emperors' recognition of the monastic role in the empire's economic activities. Specific examples, such as:

Chrysobull of Emperor Basil II (976-1025): This chrysobull granted The Great Lavra Monastery various exemptions from taxes and customs duties, as well as the right to elect its own abbot.



Chrysobull of Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas (963-969): This chrysobull confirmed The Great Lavra Monastery's ownership of its estates and granted it various privileges, including exemption from taxation and the right to maintain its own courts.

Chrysobull of Emperor Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1118): This chrysobull confirmed The Great Lavra Monastery's ownership of its estates and granted it various privileges, including exemption from taxes and the right to elect its own abbot.

Chrysobull of Emperor John II Komnenos (1118-1143): This chrysobull confirmed The Great Lavra Monastery's ownership of its estates and granted it various privileges, including exemption from taxes and the right to maintain its own courts.

Chrysobull of Emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1143-1180): This chrysobull confirmed The Great Lavra Monastery's ownership of its estates and granted it various privileges, including exemption from taxes and the right to maintain its own courts.

The Monastery of Vatopedi: This monastery had a chrysobull, issued by Emperor Alexios III Angelos in the 12th century, which confirmed the monastery's ownership of its estates and granted it various privileges and exemptions. The monastery also had a charter, known as the Typikon of Vatopedi, which regulated the internal organization and governance of the monastery.

The Monastery of Iviron: This monastery had a chrysobull, issued by Emperor Manuel I Komnenos in the 12th century, which confirmed the monastery's ownership of its estates and granted it various privileges and exemptions. The monastery also had a charter, known as the Typikon of Iviron, which regulated the internal organization and governance of the monastery.

The Monastery of Hilandar: This monastery had a chrysobull, issued by Emperor Stefan Uroš IV Dušan in the 14th century, which confirmed the monastery's ownership of its estates and granted it various privileges and exemptions. The monastery also had a charter, known as the Typikon of Hilandar, which regulated the internal organization and governance of the monastery.

The Monastery of Dionysiou: This monastery had a chrysobull, issued by Emperor John VI Kantakouzenos in the 14th century, which confirmed the monastery's ownership of its estates and granted it various privileges and exemptions. The monastery also had a charter, known as the Typikon of Dionysiou, which regulated the internal organization and governance of the monastery.

The Chrysobull of Tsar Ivan Asen II was a document issued by the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Asen II in 1230, which granted the Bulgarian Orthodox Church significant privileges and exemptions, including exemption from taxes and the right to collect tithes from its adherents. The chrysobull also confirmed the ownership of several monasteries and estates that belonged to the Bulgarian Church.

The Chrysobull of Tsar Ivan Asen II is significant because it helped to establish the independence and autonomy of the Bulgarian Church, which had previously been under the control of the Byzantine Empire. The chrysobull also helped to consolidate the power of Tsar Ivan Asen II, who was able to use the support of the Church to strengthen his rule and expand his territory. In addition to its political and religious significance, the Chrysobull of Tsar Ivan Asen II is also an important historical document that provides insight into the political and social conditions of medieval Bulgaria. The chrysobull confirms the existence of several important monasteries, including the Monastery of Rila, which is still one of the most important religious and cultural institutions in Bulgaria today.

Economic Contributions of Monasteries:

Monasteries on Mount Athos, like The Great Lavra, Vatopedi, Zographoy and others, engaged in diverse economic activities, including agriculture, trade, and craft production. They managed large estates that produced essential commodities such as olive oil, wine, and textiles, contributing to the empire's economic prosperity. For example, they comprised a church, residences for the monks and the workers, a kitchen, storehouses, and stables, possibly a tower and other secondary buildings. Often without fortification, they resembled smaller, more basic monasteries. Other metochia were originally independent monasteries that became dependencies of more powerful houses.¹ The monks made efforts to group their properties to form integral estates, which would be managed by the metochion. Most acquisitions documented in the monastic archives concern lands adjacent to or very near existing estates.² The monasteries also served as financial institutions, lending money to both the imperial government and private individuals.

They owned vast agricultural estates that produced essential goods such as grains, wine, olive oil, and honey. Monastic workshops produced textiles, icons, manuscripts, and other valuable items that were traded or sold. The sale of these products contributed to their financial stability. Collectively, it was the monasteries that were the largest landlord in this period. The monastery of Lavra, the richest monastery of Mt Athos, is a good example. In 1321, the monastery possessed 185,000 modioi (c.18,500 hectares) of land in the “themes” of Thessaloniki and Strymon and the island of Lemnos. Its annual fiscal revenues, consisting of the dues of the paroikoi and various tax exemptions (which are not real revenues but, rather, savings on expenses), amounted to 4,000 gold coins. Its economic revenues would be in the order of magnitude of 4,300–4,900 gold coins.³

¹ *Actes de Lavra, vol. 4, Archives de l'Athos II, ed. P. Lemerle, A. Guillou, N. Svoronos, and D. Papachryssanthou (Paris, 1982).*

² *P. Meyer, Die Haupturkunden für die Geschichte der Athosklöster (Leipzig, 1894), 102–40*

³ *Laiou, “The Agrarian Economy,” pp. 349–50.*

Monasteries, especially those located in strategic regions like Mount Athos, often benefited from their geographical location, facilitating trade routes and exchanges with neighboring regions. They participated in trading networks that allowed them to acquire necessary resources and expand their influence beyond religious circles. They sought to buy or acquire through donations lands that were contiguous to their existent holdings. The economic benefits are obvious, since transportation costs between various parts of the domain are minimized, and the costs of management are reduced. A prime example of such rationalization of property ownership is the monastery of the Great Lavra, whose arable and vineyards increased considerably between 1300 and 1321, and which sought to acquire continuous parcels of land.¹⁸ Similar was the case of the monastery of Iviron, and other monasteries.⁴

Monasteries served as financial institutions, lending money to both individuals and governments. They accumulated wealth through donations, legacies, and income generated from their economic activities. This accumulation allowed them to support various religious, cultural, and charitable endeavors. An Act of 1329 from Chilandar illustrates yet another banking function of the large monastery, as a safe place for the deposit of money. This document describes the sale of property to Chilandar by a certain Theodora for 260 hyperpers, with the proviso, however, that the monks should retain half the sale price in safekeeping until such time as her daughter should marry and receive the money as her dowry.⁵ Another case involves the nun, Eulogia, whose family borrowed 50 hyperpers from Chilandar in 1325, offering as collateral three houses which Eulogia had inherited from her father. The contract states that, if the family failed to pay off the mortgage loan within one year, the monastery could purchase the houses outright for an additional payment of 90 hyperpers⁶. When Maria Tzousmene gave a metochionat Hierissos to Zographou, the hegoumenos of Zographou visited her to discuss the terms of her gift.⁷

Some monasteries, particularly those with significant relics or religious significance, attracted pilgrims and visitors. These pilgrims often provided donations and offerings, contributing to the economic well-being of the monastery. The presence of these pilgrims also contributed to the development of local economies around monastic communities.

Examining the evidence from the typika shows the existence of a basic model for the management of the monastery properties. Despite the inconsistency of information, this model appears to have

⁴ Svoronos, "Le domaine de Lavra," in P. Lemerle, A. Guillou, N. Svoronos and D. Papachryssanthou (eds.), *Actes de Lavra*, 4 vols. (Paris, Paris, 1970–82), IV, p. 170., Laiou, "The Agrarian Economy," p. 351.

⁵ L. Petit and B. Korablev, eds, *Actes de Chilandar, Actes de l'Athos V; VV 19, (1911) suppl. 1 (repr. Amsterdam, 1975) p. 118.*

⁶ L. Petit and B. Korablev, eds, *Actes de Chilandar, Actes de l'Athos V; VV 19, (1911) suppl. 1 (repr. Amsterdam, 1975) p. 112.*

⁷ W. Regel, E. Kurtz and B. Korablev, *Actes de Zographou, Actes de l'Athos IV; VV 13(1907) suppl. 1 (repr. Amsterdam, 1969)*

had a very wide application, albeit with individual variations. The *typika* also shows a close connection between the administration of the lay and imperial estates and that of the monastic estates. The distinction was not always clear, as many monasteries used lay government, a system that appears to have remained in use even into the Ottoman period. However, there is a visible tendency for monasteries to replace lay governors with monks. The latter refers to the refinement and sophistication of management techniques attested in the *typika* from the eleventh century onwards. The *typika* gives guidelines more and more often for the managers not only to guarantee but also to increase the income of the properties. The clear division of duties between officials and the strict regulation of management and production registration aimed not only at securing the supplies needed to feed the monks, but also at creating and commercializing a surplus.

Imperial Support

One of the central pillars of the economic relationship between monasteries and Byzantium emperors was the issuance of legal documents known as *chrysobulls*. These *chrysobulls* held profound significance as they formalized and solidified the mutually beneficial partnership between monastic institutions and the imperial authorities. This section explores the role of *chrysobulls* in fostering imperial support for monasteries and the privileges they conferred upon these religious communities.

The monasteries of Mt. Athos accumulated wealth through various means, including donations, requests, purchases, and the absorption of other monasteries. However, the most significant factor contributing to their wealth was their close ties to the aristocracy and, particularly, to the imperial court. This connection is most clearly seen in the case of two well-documented monasteries, Lavra and Iviron. Iviron benefited from its political relationship with Georgia during Basil II's reign. In 979-80, Iviron absorbed the monastery of Kolovos through an imperial decree known as a *Chrysobull*. Kolovos had previously absorbed other monasteries and had become a substantial landowner, located in the eastern Chalkidiki region. One of its dependent monasteries, Leontia, was situated in Thessalonike. As a result of the *Chrysobull*, Iviron suddenly became the largest landowner on Mt. Athos, with an estimated landholding of 80,000 *modioi*, roughly equivalent to 8,000 hectares⁸. The extent to which this land was actively cultivated during this time is not well-documented. Just before 1029, Iviron also acquired a significant property known as *Dovrovikeia* from the state. The monastery's connection to Constantinople was vital, as demonstrated by the confiscation of five of Iviron's properties following the treason of its abbot, George, in 1029. Some opportunistic landowners took advantage of Iviron's difficulties to seize other monastery estates. While these confiscated properties were eventually restored by Michael IV around 1035, regaining

⁸ J. Lefort, N. Oikonomides and D. Papachryssanthou, eds, *Actes d'Iviron, Archives de l'Athose XIV, XVI* (Paris, 1985, 1990)

usurped lands proved to be a lengthy process. One such property in Ezova was not recovered until 1062. By 1079, a Chrysobull listed twenty-three major properties belonging to Iviron, showcasing the monastery's significant land holdings and its enduring influence in the region.

Lavra, one of the monasteries on Mount Athos, significantly expanded its land holdings by absorbing other monasteries. Much of its property in the western Chalkidiki region was acquired through the monastery of St. Andrew at Peristerai, which had received special fiscal privileges from Constantine VII. In 989, Lavra also took over the monastery of Gomatou, which had suffered during Bulgar raids. One of the reasons Lavra could assimilate other monasteries was its substantial resources, allowing it to restore prosperity to these institutions and bring neglected lands back into cultivation. Imperial support played a pivotal role in this expansion. Both Nikephoros Phokas and John Tzimiskes had granted Lavra "solemnia," which were annual payments from fiscal revenues. In 1057, Michael VI confirmed Lavra's previous grants from emperors, totaling eight pounds and twenty nomismata, and added an additional three pounds.⁹

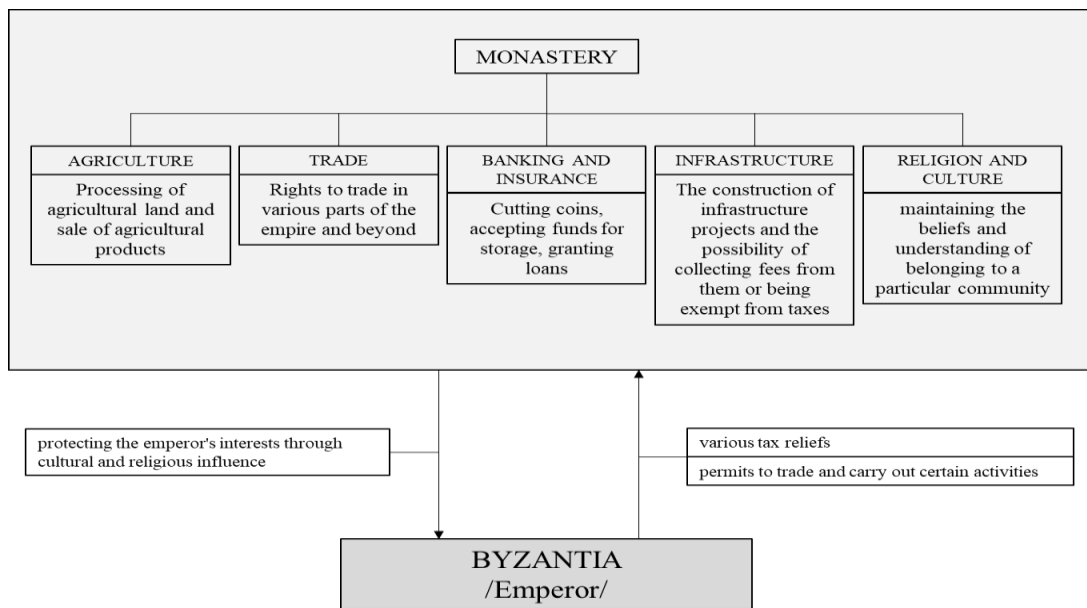
While the Athonite archives do record some land purchases by monasteries, these transactions did not make up most of their land acquisitions. Occasionally, exceptional purchases occurred, such as when the Amalfitan monastery acquired the estate of Platanos in eastern Macedonia for twenty-four pounds in 1081. However, most purchases were smaller in scale and typically took place in areas where the monastery already had property. Donations from influential benefactors were a much more significant source of wealth for the monasteries. In the late eleventh century, for example, Leo Kephalas received four properties through imperial grants, with three of them granted complete fiscal exemptions, meaning he received all the revenues from these estates. When his son transferred most of these properties to Lavra, the monastery also obtained the Chrysobulls that allowed it to claim the same privileges for these properties.

In the context of agricultural improvements during the Byzantine period, there is substantial evidence that landowners, including the monasteries on Mount Athos, invested money in enhancing their properties. While there were no significant technological advancements in Byzantine agriculture, financial resources could still be effectively utilized within the existing technological constraints. A critical factor in these improvements was ensuring a reliable supply of water to the properties. One notable irrigation project was initiated on Mount Athos by a figure named Athanasios. In this endeavor, water was diverted from the higher regions of the mountain to Lavra, where it was used to irrigate gardens and fruit trees. While there may have been some exaggeration in the accounts written by hagiographers, several key elements contributed to the success of this project. Athanasios had established rights to the water, controlled the land through which the water was channeled, and possessed the financial means to carry out the irrigation

⁹ P. Lemerle, N. Svoronos, A. Guillou and D. Papchryssanthou, eds, *Actes de Lavra, Archives de l'Athos V, VIII, X, XI* (Paris, 1970, 1977, 1979, 1982)

scheme. Most of the documented agricultural expenditures in the Mount Athos archives were related to vineyards, fruit trees, and gardens. These crops were relatively easy to transport to markets. For instance, Lavra allocated a significant sum of 500 nomismata to the monastery of Bouleuteria, part of which was used to establish new vineyards. When the monastery of Xenophon was being restored by Symeon, new vineyards and gardens were also planted. Records from the Chilandar monastery reveal that in 1193, Sabas purchased unexploited land on Mount Athos for 300 hyperpyra with the intention of cultivating vineyards. This newly acquired land was situated next to a vineyard that Sabas had previously planted, emphasizing the importance of viticulture in the region.¹⁰

Figure 1. The structure of the Athonian monasteries and their relationship with the Byzantine emperor



Source: author figure.

The Athonites, like the Byzantines, were skilled diplomats. They had anticipated the collapse of the empire and ensured their own survival by making overtures to the Ottomans, both in 1383 before the fall of Thessaloniki and again in 1424 before the fall of Constantinople. By so doing they saved not only their lives but their property, their political autonomy, and their religious freedom. They had to pay tribute; but then they had been taxed by the Byzantines too, and we have seen that their estates were not immune from confiscation by the tottering imperial regime. The

¹⁰ Noret, *Vitae dune*, 37,152. For agricultural production during this period see M. Kaplan, *Les Hommes et la terre a Byzance du VIe au XIe siecle. Propriete et exploitation due sol* (Paris, 1992); Harvey, *Economic Expansion*, 120-62. For the administration of monastic properties, see M. Kaplan, 'The Evergetis Hypotyposis and the management of monastic estates in the eleventh century', in M. Mullett, A. Kirby, eds, *The Theotokos Evergetis and Eleventh-Century Monasticism*, *BBTT* 6.1 (Belfast, 1994),103-23.

very year the city fell to the Ottomans, the Athonites sent a delegation to Sultan Mehmet II, who agreed to protect their rights and safeguard their independence.¹¹

Imperial favor was not only crucial for acquiring land but also for safeguarding it from tax collectors and other imperial officials. Influential monasteries enjoyed extensive privileges, although they were not absolute. They generally had to pay the "demosion," the basic land tax, albeit at a more favorable rate than regular taxpayers. Additionally, the state waived various other obligations, as detailed in the Chrysobulls of the eleventh century. These obligations included cash payments, labor services from the paroikoi (dependent villagers), and payments in kind, often intended to support officials while they performed their duties. Irregular demands, such as when high-ranking officials with large retinues were in the region, and the billeting of soldiers presented the most significant challenges for landowners in maintaining their properties.

Conclusion

Chrysobulls played a strategic role in consolidating the relationship between monastic communities and the Byzantine emperors. By issuing these documents, emperors demonstrated their commitment to protecting and supporting the monasteries, which were seen as bastions of religious piety and cultural preservation. In a realm characterized by political intrigues and frequent changes of leadership, the stability of monastic communities was highly valued. Chrysobulls served as a testament to the enduring protection and favor bestowed upon these religious institutions. Imperial support through chrysobulls often engendered loyalty among monastic communities toward the reigning emperor. The monasteries, in turn, prayed for the emperor's well-being and the prosperity of the Byzantine state, contributing to the spiritual and political cohesion of the empire. Beyond the economic and political implications, chrysobulls provided a legal framework that protected the rights and privileges of monastic communities. They became essential tools for navigating the Byzantine legal system and defending their interests. Chrysobulls are invaluable historical records that shed light on the social, political, and economic dynamics of the Byzantine Empire. They offer insights into the cultural and intellectual milieu of the time, as well as the imperial attitudes toward religious institutions.

In conclusion, chrysobulls were not mere bureaucratic decrees; they represented a powerful testament to the intricate relationship between monastic institutions and the Byzantine emperors. Through these documents, emperors formalized their support for monasteries, granting them privileges that were vital for their economic sustenance and autonomy. The chrysobulls stand as

¹¹ C. G. Papadopoulos, *Les Privileges du patriarcat oecumnique dans l'empire ottoman* (Paris, 1924), pp. 27-41. 'S. Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity* (Cambridge, 1968), p. 182.

enduring historical artifacts that illuminate the profound influence of religion and economics on the Byzantine Empire's intricate tapestry.

From everything said so far, we can draw the following conclusions:

- The monasteries of Mount Athos acted as modern holding structures trying to control all economic life at the time covering agriculture, banking, trade, coinage, religion, and culture of vast areas of the Byzantine Empire.
- It makes a strong impression that, in practice, mergers and takeovers of monasteries, which are smaller or have fallen into financial difficulties for various reasons, have taken place. In some cases, strategic takeovers have been carried out in order to establish control over strategic resources or routes. Typical behavior of a modern corporation.
- The monasteries also carried out major infrastructure projects on behalf of the emperor. In fact, we are observing typical behavior of a modern international corporation.
- The economic power and political influence of the monasteries was so strong that even the Ottomans did not break the pattern but made it work to their advantage.
- Traces of this type of corporate structure can still be found today in the Administrative Organization of the Athos Monasteries.

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