

# Desire where it should not be: monks, love and sex



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## Abstract

From the beginning of monasticism to our days, monks were always exposed to sexual temptations, either provoked by women or men from outside, or by fellow monks and underage novices from inside the monasteries. A special problem in the Byzantine age was also posed by the presence of eunuchs. While early monastic rules try to suppress homosexual behavior by strict regulations and threats of punishment, intimate relationships among monks are later widely accepted and even institutionalised.

### Keywords

*Greek monasticism  
sexual relationships  
pederasty  
homosexuality  
eunuchs*

## Deseo donde no debería haber: monjes, amor y sexo

### Resumen

Desde el comienzo del monasticismo hasta nuestros días, los monjes estuvieron siempre expuestos a tentaciones sexuales, provocadas ya por hombres o mujeres de fuera, ya por monjes compañeros o por novicios jóvenes del interior de los monasterios. Un problema especial de la era bizantina surgió de la presencia de eunucos. Mientras que las reglas monásticas tempranas intentan suprimir la conducta homosexual mediante regulaciones estrictas y amenazas de castigos, las relaciones íntimas entre monjes fueron luego ampliamente aceptadas e incluso institucionalizadas.

### Palabras clave

*Monasticismo griego  
relaciones sexuales  
pederastia  
homosexualidad  
eunucos*

An essential constituent of monasticism and monastic life is, until our own days, the general rejection of sex and erotic relationships, while the fight against sexual temptation of all kinds is considered as one of the monks' greatest virtues. But this noble goal could not be so easily achieved by

everybody: from the first days of monasticism, we hear of sexual temptations to which the monks were exposed, and to which they either resisted or succumbed.

This kind of temptation could manifest itself to the monks in very different ways: it could be provoked by women, by men, often fellow monks, and it could also come from children or adolescent boys, or from eunuchs who preserved the tenderness of their body into their adult age. And of course sexual temptation could also be excited by demons in the guise of all these human beings.

As it appears, the most common problem on this sector were improper contacts between monks within the monasteries – which is easily explained by the fact that monks normally had only very limited opportunities for contacts to laymen, to women and children living outside. The suppression of sensual contacts, which could be construed as a desire for sexual activity, is a major concern already in the oldest monastic rules or *typika* of monasteries, both in the east and the west.<sup>1</sup>

1. On which see in general Thomas; Hero (2000:I, 21-41) and Diem (2005:33-46).

The fourth-century rule of Saint Pachomios, for example, prescribes that the monks should keep a distance of at least one arm's length from each other (Veilheux, 1982:c.88, 92-97, 109; *cfr.* also Diem, 2005:46-50.),<sup>2</sup> and the rule of Saint Benedict requests that monks should sleep in separate beds, either all in one dormitory or in groups under the supervision of older monks, and that a candle must be left burning at night in the room (Venarde, 2011:c.22; see also Diem, 2001:9-15).

2. On Pachomios and his community, see Brakke (2006:78-96).

In the *typikon* of the monastery on the island of Pantelleria, a document from the eighth century which has survived only in a translation into Old Slavonic, a remarkable portion of the text is devoted to such prescriptions (Mansvetov, 1885:441-445; translation by G. Fiaccadori: Thomas; Hero, 2000:I, 62-65). Pantelleria, which lies in the Mediterranean sea between North Africa and Sicily, played a major role in the seventh and eighth century as a centre of refugees on the way from the Holy Land to Italy (Thomas; Hero, 2000:I, 59-61); *cfr.* Sechi (2015:181-182). In this *typikon*, monks were not only advised to keep a distance to their brethren while praying and bowing in church; they were also not allowed to talk to each other alone in their cells, to sit or to sleep together, to ride a donkey in pairs, or to hold hands, to embrace and kiss each other when walking on a road (Thomas; Hero, 2000:I, 63 § 5-7). The punishment for transgressions was, in all cases, expulsion from the monastery; but at the same time, it was forbidden to the monks to refuse normal social contacts with the others at table, or to insist that they could stay alone in a cell (Thomas; Hero, 2000:I, 65 § 20).

Temptations by women or young males could not, as already said, befall the monks inside their monasteries, but only hermits in the desert. If women or boys appear in a monastery and try to seduce a monk, they are therefore mostly no human beings, but demons in disguise.<sup>3</sup> The so-called *Pratum spirituale*, a large corpus of monastic anecdotes collected in the early seventh century, contains the following story which illustrates this well (Migne, 1860:3028BC, c. 160; *cfr.* Wortley, 1992:132):

3. On demons appearing as women see Brakke (2006:199-212).

Father Paulos, the abbot of the monastery of Theognios, told us that an old ascetic had said to him:

Once, when I was sitting in my cell and did my handwork, plaiting baskets, and sang my verses, look, an Arab boy came in through the door carrying a

bread-basket, and when he stood before me he began to dance, and while I sang, he said to me: 'Old man, do I dance well?' But I gave him no answer. And again he said to me: 'Do you like how I dance, old man?' When I did not answer him at all, he said to me: 'Do you think, dirty old man, that you accomplish a great thing? I tell you that you made a mistake in the sixtieth, at the sixty-sixth and in the sixty-seventh psalm.' Then I stood up and made a bow before God, and immediately the boy became invisible.

The dancing boy is clearly an incarnation of the monk's pederastic desires. Similar stories are frequent in monastic literature, and it is remarkable that the boy is often described as a black Ethiopian (Brakke, 2006:157-181).

There was, however, another situation in which monks had regular contact to children, namely in cities and villages where they taught reading and writing to the children of the neighbourhood. In such an environment, many monasteries operated schools, also for the purpose of recruiting novices. It is often mentioned in the lives of saints that their parents had consigned them as children to a monastery for education, with the intention that they should stay there and later become monks (Ariantzi, 2012:168-181, 231-245, 271-298).

As a result, there was a fluent transition from children educated in monasteries to adolescent brethren. The presence of underage monks in monasteries, however, was seen by the ecclesiastical authorities with some reservation or sometimes even forbidden by the monastic *typika* throughout the whole Byzantine age (Morris, 2016:17-41; Brown, 1988:241-258; Talbot, 2018). The reason is clearly, although this is not often stated expressly, the danger that they could lead the monks into temptation by the tenderness of their bodies.

On the other hand, the attitude to male children and adolescents in monastic literature has often an obvious pederastic or homoerotic undertone, while it always pretends that the relationship in question is that of a teacher toward his disciple and has the only goal to ensure his education and spiritual progress. Homoerotic allusions also appear, though less frequently, when dealing with adult monks; this is especially the case in the works of Symeon the New Theologian who frequently uses an erotic and nuptial imagery to describe the relationship between the monk and God, while emphasizing, at the same time, the masculinity of the monk's body (Krueger, 2006).

A good example for the attitude to adolescents in hagiographical literature is provided by the *Life of Gregentios*, the imaginary hero of a tenth-century 'novel' playing in the sixth century, whose spiritual relationship to a pious boy in Rome is described with the following words (Berger, 2006:c.3.208-210, 213-218, 224-226, 246-248, 260-263):

A very beautiful and honourable boy of about fourteen years called Leon, who had heard about his reputation, came to him for the sake of spiritual conversation which helps the soul ...The youth was very sweet and honeyflowing and very dear, handsome and desired even by those that did not see him, or by those who only saw and heard about him and his virtuous conduct. For the delightfulness of his eyes and the sweetness of the sight of his face, his gentle, straight, mild and humble heart made him manifest to every wise man ... And the blessed Gregentios, opening his mouth, spoke to him about chastity, prayer and mercy, teaching, exhorting and inviting him to every good work. Nobody could be satiated every time he was speaking

about his sweetest conduct. And he loved the blessed one so much that, if possible, he was inseparable from him by day and night ... When some time had passed for them, their love multiplied like heavenly honey, their love increased like a worthy unguent that smelt more and more, their spiritual longing for each other burned like fire and their honour smelt virtuously like flowers, roses and lilies of the field.

The relationship of Gregentios and Leon, however, does not last long, for Leon is appointed as governor in a district of Rome, and soon murdered. Gregentios is deeply grieved and consoled only after he has seen him in a vision, waiting for the Last Judgement in a wonderful house, together with the other righteous (Berger, 2006:c. 3.276-492).

The tenderness of the body, which made adolescent boys an object of the monk's desire and temptation, was also a characteristic of the eunuchs whose presence in male monasteries had often similar undesired effects.

Although castration was rejected by the church and was forbidden by state legislation, eunuchs played an important role in the imperial court and administration since the fourth century.<sup>4</sup> In the beginning, they were mostly imported from Persia and Armenia, later also from Bulgaria; but over the centuries, the opposition against this institution decreased, and eunuchs now often came also from certain regions of the own territory, such as Paphlagonia (Tougher, 2008:60-66). Their influence sank only in the later eleventh century when a new system of governance was introduced in which personal relations to the emperor and kinship played a much greater role than before (Tougher, 2008:119-127).

4. See, in general, Ringrose (2003); Spadaro (2006); Tougher (2008).

Traditionally, eunuchs were regarded as asexual beings, and therefore sometimes even compared to angels, a perception which made them especially suitable for an ecclesiastical or a monastic career (Ringrose, 2003:142-162).<sup>5</sup> For a long time they were regularly admitted to male monasteries, where they could become priests and abbots. But there was always a strong opposition against their presence. Already in the early sixth century, Kyrillos of Skythopolis reports in his *Life of Saint Sabas* that when a group of eunuchs from Constantinople came to Jerusalem, he "decided not to admit an adolescent or eunuch into the Lavra, for he could not bear to see a female face in any of his monasteries and specially in any laura whatever", with the result the eunuchs were finally settled in an own monastery (Schwartz, 1939:171.6-25; trans. Price, 1991:180-181). Such monasteries exclusively for eunuchs are also attested later, such as the monastery of the *Katharoi* in late sixth-century Bithynia (Janin, 1975:58-60), or the monastery of Saint Lazaros in Constantinople, a foundation of Leon VI (886-912) (Tougher, 2006:242). In the middle Byzantine age, when eunuchs were sometimes even defined as a 'third sex' (Tougher, 2008:96-99), they were more and more excluded from male monasteries, as we see, for example, in the case of Mount Athos where they were banned by several imperial charters since 976 (976: Thomas; Hero, 2000:I, 238, n.16; 1045: Thomas; Hero, 2000:I, 285, n.1; see also Morris, 2009; Chitwood, 2017:168-170).

5. On eunuchs as objects of sexual desire, see also Kufler (2006:139-150).

On the other hand, there are also cases of holy women who disguised themselves as eunuchs to get access a monastery of monks, where they lived unrecognised until their death. One of them was Saint Matrona, a historical person from the sixth century, in whose biography we find the following passage (Delehaye, 1910:792D-793A):

There is a garden which belongs until today to the disciples of the blessed and holy Basianos. The blessed Matrona came there to do the work of digging the earth, as it is custom among the monks, and willingly laboured with the one who was working together with her; he was that admirable Barnabas who after some time became the abbot of this same monastery, who had first spent his life on the scene, but had at that time chosen a life similar to her's and was struggling for piety. However, he suffered something human, since he had renounced only a short time before from his vain and flashy life, and said to her jokingly: "Why, o brother, are both your earlobes perforated?" The blessed Matrona gave him a short answer, saying: "You have suffered something strange which does not fit to our vocation, for you should watch the ground and not me. But since it has come into you mind that you want to know it, listen: The lady which once owned me was so affectionate against me and kept me most friendly and luxuriously, putting even gold on my ears, so that many of those who saw me said I'm a girl." In this way the blessed Matrona diverted the holy and blessed Barnabas from his suspicion.

The expression by which the brother's look on the disguised saint is described is "he suffered something human" ("ἔπαθεν τι ἀνθρώπινον") – which suggests that looking on a beautiful eunuch was not regarded as a deadly sin, but rather as something pardonable.

This leads us to another, somewhat surprising aspect of the Byzantine attitude to sexual or erotic relationships which were, in principle, morally disapproved and illegal. The harsh rejection of the early monastic rules decreases over time, and is replaced by a certain tolerance towards fleshly offences, both in the monastical orbit and outside it. The strict ban of corporeal contacts between monks disappears from the monastic *typika* in the middle and late Byzantine age, and the sources suggest that, in fact, a certain amount of intimacy or sexual relationships was tolerated among the monks, or even institutionalised, as we shall presently see.

In the early centuries of Christianity same-sex relationships among men had been condemned by the church fathers as satanic and diabolic, often in the same breath and with the same words as remarriage (Morris, 2009). But over time the penances for both these insults were gradually reduced, beginning already in the sixth century and stimulated by the deep political and social crisis in the seventh and eighth centuries, from decades of excommunication "to little more than a slap on the wrist" (Morris, 2009:155). And it seems that this did not only concern relationships of this kind among laymen, but also among monks where homosexual practices often occurred, given their special situation, among non-homosexual men.

A basic construct of every Christian monastic community is that the monks form a spiritual family which replaces the real, bodily one, and which is held together by "brotherly love".<sup>6</sup> The habit that monks address each other, still today, as fathers and brethren, is only one result. In the Byzantine age, however, the accepted personal relationships between monks went far beyond these customs.

A very common phenomenon in the early Byzantine age was the living of monks in pairs, mostly with the elder of them as the teacher and spiritual father of the younger.<sup>7</sup> In many cases, however, we get the impression that they actually lived together rather like a married couple than in a father-son relationship. Derek Krueger has devoted a thorough study to this topic some years ago on which my following remarks will mainly be based (Krueger, 2011).

6. On which see Konstan (1997:156-158); Rapp (2017:47-48).

7. See, for instance, Gould (1993:26-87); Rapp (2017:48-50).

The nature of such relationships of monastic couples can best be understood by going through the relevant sources. We learn that their bonds were confirmed through prayers (Krueger, 2011:44); that the two partners were committed to a lifelong partnership in which they shared their complete personal life (Krueger, 2011:44-46); that they inherited their personal property to each other where this was allowed, as in early times in Egypt (Krueger, 2011:46-47); and that they were even often buried in one grave (Rapp, 2016:148-156), with the surviving partner putting to rest the other who had died first (Krueger, 2011:36-37). The partners bore together the responsibility for their common life, to a degree that even the biblical saying about the 'living in one flesh' is sometimes applied to such monks – a metaphor which, of course, refers in the Book of Genesis to the common life of a man and a woman (Krueger, 2011:37). They also shared the burden of their transgressions, even for sins they had committed with women (Krueger, 2011:38-39; see also Rapp, 2008:144-147).

The accusation that such a pair of monks was actually engaged in sexual activities is as old as the phenomenon itself, but it is mostly presented by the sources as an evil thought which the devil insinuated to another monk (Krueger, 2011:39-40).

The perhaps most prominent case of this kind of relationship were John Moschos, the author of the already mentioned *Pratum spirituale*, and Sophronios, also a well-known author and at the end of his life patriarch of Jerusalem, who travelled together for about forty years in the East and fled as far as Rome when the Persians invaded the region in the early seventh century (Chadwick, 1974; Krueger, 2011:28-31, 34-35). From the field of literary fiction, we may mention Saint Symeon and his companion John who spent a large part of their lives together, first in a monastery, and later in the desert, before Symeon returned to the world and decided to live as a holy fool (Rydén; Festugière, 1974; see also Krueger, 1996:38-39; Rapp, 2016:157-161).

What we know about these monks living in pairs and similar relationships, is strongly reminiscent to the phenomenon of *adelphopoesis* or brother-making, which has recently been thoroughly investigated by Claudia Rapp (Rapp, 2016; see also Morris, 2016:137-168). But this was a rite whose purpose was mainly to establish a fictive kinship among laymen; and although its origins may lie in the early Byzantine monastic environment and its monks living in pairs, the *adelphopoesis* was later actually forbidden to monks (Rapp, 2016:88-108, 163-164).

Finally, some words should be added about the double monasteries of men and women. Such institutions had been forbidden by the ecclesiastical authorities already in the sixth century, but persisted until the end of the Byzantine empire due to the general assumption that they had been approved by Basil the Great (Mitsiou, 2014:334-335). In fact, most double monasteries at all times were founded by the male and female members of one family, with the intention to allow contact to each other even after having become a monk or nun (Mitsiou, 2014:334). If such a monastery existed for a long time, the natural consequence was that persons from outside the family were admitted to it, and the suspicion quickly arose that the reason for entering it was actually the opportunity still to have contact to the other sex after taking the vow. The various attempts to abolish these double monasteries are more or less openly based on this allegation. The *Life* of Patriarch Nikephoros I by Ignatios the Deacon, for example, claims that often, in the time of iconoclasm, monks had established their monasteries near to nunneries under the pretext of being

related to their residents, thus “escaping unconcealed cohabitation, but being unable to ban the consent to sin from their thoughts” (De Boor, 1880:159).

To sum up: Although the renouncement to sexual and erotic relationships has been a constituent of monastic life from the beginnings to our day, the failure to comply strictly to this ideal has been treated in the Byzantine age with very varying – and in fact decreasing – strictness. Relationships between adult men or between men and adolescents were often tolerated, and were either tacitly accepted as a sign of human weakness, or declared as spiritual relationships, whatever their actual nature may have been.

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