

The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 15 (2018)

The  istorical Review
La Revue  istorique



VOLUME XV (2018)

Section de Recherches Néohelléniques
Institut de Recherches Historiques / FNRS

Section of Neohellenic Research
Institute of Historical Research / NHRF

Review of: Ioannis P. Chouliaras (ed.), Ιερά Μονή Κοιμήσεως Θεοτόκου Γηρομερίου. Ιστορία-Τέχνη [The Holy Monastery of the Dormition of the Virgin in Giromeri: History–Art]

Nicholas Melvani

doi: [10.12681/hr.20454](https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.20454)

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To cite this article:

Melvani, N. (2019). Review of: Ioannis P. Chouliaras (ed.), Ιερά Μονή Κοιμήσεως Θεοτόκου Γηρομερίου. Ιστορία-Τέχνη [The Holy Monastery of the Dormition of the Virgin in Giromeri: History–Art]. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 15, 310–314. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.20454>

Ioannis P. Chouliaras (ed.),
IEPA MONH KOIMHSEΩΣ ΘΕΟΤΟΚΟΥ ΓΗΡΟΜΕΡΙΟΥ. ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑ-ΤΕΧΝΗ/
THE HOLY MONASTERY OF THE DORMITION OF
THE VIRGIN IN GIROMERI: HISTORY-ART,
Igoumenitsa: Mygdonia Publications: 2016, 192 pages.

This collective volume brings together various texts dealing with multiple aspects of the Monastery of the Dormition of the Virgin at Giromeri in the Thesprotia region, Epirus. The monastery was founded in the early fourteenth century by a hermit originally from Constantinople named Neilos and flourished during late Byzantine and Ottoman times. It has survived and is still functioning; therefore, it has a rich history of continuous presence in the area, making it one of the most important religious foundations of Epirus. The book in question approaches the monastery from the point of view of several disciplines. In fact, it follows the model set by similar publications dealing with other historic monasteries in modern Greece, especially those of the monastic communities of Mount Athos and Meteora.¹ In this model, several experts in various fields contribute high-quality texts on the history, art and other

aspects of a single monastery, producing attractive illustrated volumes, accessible both to the general public and the scholarly community.

The Giromeri volume is a welcome addition to the list: it includes seven essays by seven distinguished scholars specialised in the Byzantine and post-Byzantine history and art of Epirus, who have specifically worked on the monastery and its resources, accompanied by hundreds of excellent illustrations and detailed drawings. Thus, the book covers 700 years of history based on textual (narrative and archival) sources, material and visual evidence from the building complex, and artistic evidence from its monumental decoration, icons and other treasures preserved in it. Also important is the fact that this is a useful bilingual publication, with the Greek and English texts appearing side by side.

The book begins with a foreword and opening addresses by the editor, Ioannis P. Chouliaras, director of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Thesprotia; Titos, Metropolitan of Paramythia, Filiates, Giromeri and Parga; and Methodios Delis, abbot of the monastery. Naturally, the first essay, written by Christos Stavrakos, is a general historical

¹ The best example is the monumental Iaokeim Papangelos (ed.), *Iερά Μονή Κοιμήσεως Θεοτόκου Γηρομερίου. Ιστορία-Τέχνη* [Holy and Great Monastery of Vatopedi: tradition, history, art], Mount Athos: Holy and Great Monastery of Vatopedi, 1996.

introduction, which offers a summary outline of the monastery's course, starting with the foundation in the fourteenth century, based primarily on information in the testament of the founder, Neilos (d. 1336). This introduction defines the appropriate historical context by focusing on Neilos' activity and on his itineraries in Greece and Albania before settling in the Giromeri area. After analysing the evidence on the Byzantine phase and the relationships between the monastic community and the local elites, the author adds rich data on the Ottoman period, mainly the sixteenth century, by rightfully stressing the importance of the monastery's Epirote patrons' links with the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia. Stavrakos' text also covers the modern period up to the 1990s and the settlement of the community currently occupying the complex.

The second essay, written by historian Youli Evangelou, is also of a historical nature, this time focusing on primary material, namely on the documents and archives of the monastery. Evangelou has personally studied these archives and is a leading expert in the field of monasticism and its relationships with the Patriarchate of Constantinople after Byzantium; in the case of Giromeri, this is a crucial issue, since the monastery often held dual status as a stavropegion and an exarchate at the same time, which means that it combined monastic and administrative functions. Evangelou offers enlightening information on the nature of the available evidence, namely the numerous patriarchal letters from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries, followed by a detailed analysis of several types of documents

preserved in the monastery's archives with the appropriate evaluation of the relevant information contained in the documents. Even more interesting is the fact that she adds information regarding Giromeri contained in the patriarchal "Sacred Codex", thus producing a global view of the monastery's activity and status. The author rightly stresses the importance of this archival evidence for the study of the area's history and its contribution to our knowledge on the ecclesiastical history of Ottoman Greece. The high-quality photos of some sample documents, including their seals, certainly enhance the information in the chapter.

The next text, written by Grigorios Koutropoulos, is an analysis of the building complex and its site, beginning with a description of the surviving buildings (the sixteenth-century katholikon and three structures forming the enclosure from the north, west and south). Unfortunately, very little is known about the early phases of the monastic complex, since no early remains have been identified and there is no available archival evidence on the subject. Thus, it is not possible to reconstruct the evolutionary stages of the monastery and match them with events known from the sources. In any case, it is clear that the sixteenth-century katholikon occupied the centre of a courtyard surrounded by the other existing structures, which date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As the author clearly demonstrates, the structural and formal characteristics are in accordance with architecture in the region, especially in the area of the urban centre of Ioannina. The chapter concludes with the brief presentation of a fu-

nerary chapel to the east of the monastic enclosure, which housed the tomb of the founder, Neilos, and a group of caves to the southwest of the monastery, which is traditionally identified as the hermitage of the saint.

The following article also deals with the built environment, this time focusing on the main church. Written by Stavros Mamaloukos, the leading expert in Byzantine architecture in Greece, it provides an in-depth analysis of its plan, building techniques and façades. Fortunately, building phases can be distinguished in this case, offering additional information on the history of the monastery: the surviving church dates from the sixteenth century and can be connected with an inscription laid in brick in the south façade, dated 1567/68, and the patronage of the wealthy merchant Oxitos. Contrary to older views, Mamaloukos establishes that the naos and the bema are contemporary and that both date from this phase; the narthexes are nineteenth-century additions. There is no evidence that the late Byzantine katholikon was in the same location, although Mamaloukos attributes some plastered parts reused in the dome to an earlier building. The author successfully contextualises the building within the wider framework of Ottoman architecture, explaining the peculiar roofing for the arms of the cross of this unusual variation of the four-column church, by tracing its inspiration to the sixteenth-century quatrefoil mosques of Istanbul, the best example cited being the famous Şehzade. Also noteworthy is the emphasis on the south façade, which

is ornamented unlike the otherwise unarticulated surfaces of the other sides, which Mamaloukos suggests might point to a ceremonial significance.

The section on architecture is followed by two essays on the frescoes of the katholikon, both written by art historian Ioannis Tsouris. The first one deals with the sixteenth-century phase (1577–1590) and offers a concise but detailed presentation of all subjects depicted, supported by rich photographic documentation of each scene, as well as by informative drawings indicating the exact placement of each theme. The author convincingly demonstrates the affinities between this iconographic programme and the standard programmes of other sixteenth-century monuments, mainly from Athos and Meteora. He also points out the peculiarities of the style, characterised by a blend of elements from the Cretan school and that of northwestern Greece.

The second text dealing with the frescoes focuses on the seventeenth-century phase (1679), namely the lower registers of the naos. This includes a detailed description of the donor portrait and its accompanying inscription, as well as a general assessment of its place within contemporary monumental painting, mainly within the context of the local tradition of Epirus. This phase is an important chapter in the history of the monument and represents a continuation of patronage by local merchants with connections with the Danubian Principalities, since the patron Panos Ieromnemon is a well-known personage from a prominent

family; unfortunately, this phase is not dealt with at all in the historical introduction and is thus not properly contextualised.²

The final chapter of the book, written by Chouliaras and Athina Zogaki, deals with treasures from the sacristy and library of the monastery. A fourteenth-century icon of the Virgin Hodegetria is an important part of the monastery's heritage, since it may have been originally commissioned by the founder, Neilos, for his hermitage in Iericho in northern Epirus and later brought to Giromeri when the saint established his monastery there. Other icons offer interesting data and permit the reconstruction of the various phases of the sanctuary barrier, namely the sixteenth-century original templon and a seventeenth-century remodelling. A series of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century icons, textiles, vessels and minor objects (including a few Byzantine and Ottoman coins and lead seals) complete the picture of the monastery's various collections, as they were formed over time with various donations. The authors also include a list of some important manuscripts from the monastic library's holdings; the most interesting sample appears to be a fourteenth-century gospel book written on parchment. This chapter is

followed by a three-page bibliography, which includes titles in Greek and other languages regarding the monastery and related topics.

In short, the various chapters of the book complement each other, combining to offer a rich and multi-layered account of the monastery's history, focusing on its various phases based on varied types of evidence, including hagiographic sources, archival material, art and architecture, inscriptions, visual evidence, etc. Thanks to the high quality of the essays covering diverse subjects, the volume succeeds in offering a comprehensive, informative and complete account of the history and art of Giromeri.

It would have been preferable to support the texts with references in footnotes; a minimum amount of footnotes would have provided fuller documentation without compromising the character of a book addressed to both specialists and laypeople. Since the images, especially older ones, are treated as an important medium for studying the monastery, it would have been ideal to include a chapter on historic photos, especially those taken and published by Spyros Meletzis, one of the most important photographers of twentieth-century Greece, also known for his photos of other Byzantine monuments, especially Hosios Loukas.³ This would have provided further insight into the visual aspects discussed in the chapters dealing with the art and architecture of Giromeri.

² On Panos Ieromnemon and his family, see Lidia Cotovanu, "Autour des attaches épirotes du futur prince de Moldavie Constantin Duca (XVIIe siècle)", *Studia Varia in Honorem Professoris Ștefan Ștefănescu Octogenarii*, ed. Cristian Luca and Ștefan Ștefănescu, Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 2009, pp. 475–480.

³ See Theodoros Papadakis and Spyros Meletzis, *Hosios Lukas and its Byzantine Mosaics*, Munich: Schnell & Steiner, 1972.

Studying Byzantine and post-Byzantine monasteries from multiple points of view is an important tool for enhancing our knowledge of the history of Byzantine and Ottoman institutions. Volumes such as this one dealing with the monastery of Giromeri certainly enrich the list of available books on the art and history of monasteries in Greece; hopefully this example will be followed

by scholars studying similar monastic foundations throughout the Balkans, in order to place more monuments and institutions on the map of Byzantine and post-Byzantine monasticism.

Nicholas Melvani

Institute of Historical Research / NHRF