

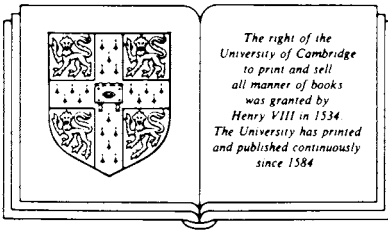
# The making of a Saint

*The life, times and sanctification of Neophytos the Recluse*

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# Contents

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<i>List of plates</i>	<i>page</i> xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xv
Introduction: aims and methods	1
<b>Part 1 The life and times of Neophytos the Recluse</b>	
1 The life of Neophytos	13
2 The literary and wider cultural context of Neophytos' writings	19
3 Cyprus in the eleventh, twelfth and early thirteenth centuries	40
<b>Part 2 The process of self-sanctification</b>	
Introduction	71
4 Neophytos' conception of sanctity	75
5 The self-proclaimed holy man	95
<b>Part 3 The social context of sanctity</b>	
6 Education	153
7 Neophytos' public	168
8 Social commentary	185
9 Secular politics	205
10 Ecclesiastical politics	226
	ix

**Part 4 Saint Neophytos the Recluse**

11 Sanctification	247
<i>Appendix</i> The writings of Neophytos: a guide	261
<i>Bibliography</i>	282
<i>Index</i>	305

## Plates

---

1	The monastery of St Neophytos	<i>page</i> 15
2	The cliff of the Enkleistra	16
3	The cell of Neophytos	17
4	Neophytos' desk	20
5	Painting of the <i>Deēsis</i>	129
6	Detail of the <i>Deēsis</i>	130
7	Painting of Neophytos between the archangels Michael and Gabriel	131
8	Detail of Neophytos between the archangels Michael and Gabriel	132
9	Portrait of Neophytos	133
10	Painting of the <i>Ascension</i> , and shaft	136
11	Detail of the <i>Ascension</i> and shaft	137
12	Tomb chamber	142
13	Detail of tomb chamber	143

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## Introduction: aims and methods

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The holy man was a feature of the Byzantine universe as indispensable as its emperor and its patriarchs. For centuries now the holy men and women of Byzantium have received the attention of generations of scholars who undertook the monumental task of editing and publishing the narrative accounts of Saints' *Lives* and *Miracles*. For far too long, however, no sustained effort was made to understand the links between the holy man and society, to comprehend the process of sanctification and to place it within a social context. It was only relatively recently, with the emergence of a serious interest in Byzantium's social and cultural history, that the importance of such an undertaking began to be appreciated. The seminal work of scholars such as Evelyne Patlagean and especially Peter Brown made it clear that we cannot hope adequately to comprehend Byzantine civilisation if we fail to take into account the interrelationship between Byzantine society and those of its members who ostensibly rejected it – its holy men and women.<sup>1</sup>

This study represents an attempt to comprehend this interrelationship. It presents an analysis of a Byzantine holy man within the society of his time, with specific reference to that most delicate of processes, the process of sanctification. In its analysis this study rests entirely on the premise that the process of becoming a Saint is one which – perhaps above all other social processes – underlies the inseparability of the individual from society: there is no Saint except for the one whom society has invested with sanctity. And since sanctification is a social process, human-made rather than God-sent, it is possible to chart out its various phases, to deconstruct it, to examine its constituent elements, to isolate the written and unwritten rules which define it in a given culture. In short, it is possible to analyse and understand sanctification – if sufficient information is at hand.

The last point is of crucial importance. Because the process of sanctification is an extremely complex one, even to begin to understand it we need to possess a great amount of information. And because this is a two-way, interactive process between a specific individual and the society in which he lived, our information must refer in detail both to the holy man and to the society in which he lived as a man and died as a Saint. Now, the second of

<sup>1</sup> E.g., Brown (1971b, 1976, 1981, 1982); Patlagean (1968, 1976, 1981b).

these requirements (information on the holy man's society) can be satisfied, in varying degrees, in the case of only relatively few Byzantine holy men – information on provincial life in particular being notoriously absent from Byzantine sources. Our first requirement is even more difficult to meet, for there is usually a complete absence of information of a detailed and personal nature concerning the holy man himself.

All of which leads us by contrast to the holy man at the centre of this study, Saint Neophytos the Recluse; and to the society of the island of Cyprus, where he lived and died (from 1134 until after 1214). Even though our knowledge of Neophytos' contemporary Cyprus remains tantalisingly incomplete, when the available historical information is pieced together it provides not only an outline of the general picture but also numerous and illuminating details. Equally important and much more rare is the nature of the information we have concerning the holy man himself. This is expressed through two different media: written texts, and painted images. Neophytos wrote extensively, and a very substantial part of his writings survives in manuscripts now resting on the shelves of various libraries in Europe and Jerusalem. What makes these writings extremely valuable for our present purposes is the great amount and the very personal nature of the information which Neophytos gives us about himself: it allows us to get to know him from very close quarters indeed. Further, a very substantial part of Neophytos' physical surroundings is still with us today, in the form of the painted caves of the troglodytic monastery which he founded. They too contain extremely valuable information concerning both Neophytos and his contemporary Cyprus. The written word and the painted image combine, in Neophytos' case, to form a bridge across the forbidding flow of time that separates us from him. They allow us a rare insight into the material and symbolic universe of a Byzantine man and his society; they permit us to retrace the long and complex interaction between this man and society – an interaction which was transformed into a process of sanctification.

By studying one specific example we can hope to deepen our understanding of sanctification as a general socio-historical process. This is not to claim that the present study presents in all its aspects a universally applicable 'model' for the process of sanctification in Byzantium. For one thing, Neophytos lived in an age which, within the confines and contradictions of its culture, permitted the expression of individualism to a remarkable extent.<sup>2</sup> Neophytos' individualism coloured everything about him, and this

<sup>2</sup> Kazhdan and Constable (1982: *passim*, esp. 34) ('individualism without freedom'); Kazhdan and Franklin (1984: *passim*); Kazhdan and Wharton Epstein (1985: *passim*, esp. 210ff.). The relevant findings of Kazhdan have been supported by those of other scholars. See, e.g., Magdalino (1984: esp. 62) ('the chronic individualism of Byzantine society'); Magdalino (1987); Mullett (1984: 173–4); Cormack (1984: 164). More recently, see the approach of Obolensky (1988: 45–82).

applies particularly to the process of sanctification evidenced in his case. But at any rate, it is, generally speaking, fruitless to search for a 'blueprint' for sanctification in Byzantium. First, because since the myth of a monolithic Byzantine culture has been, mercifully, well and truly buried (thanks – with respect especially to the eleventh and twelfth centuries – above all to the pioneering work of Alexander Kazhdan),<sup>3</sup> we have begun to perceive how many varied and widely divergent strands went into the cloth of the civilisation which we now call 'Byzantine'. It is true that to a certain extent this was a unified civilisation; but it is equally true that at any given time different classes and different groups within the empire manifested attitudes which were not just divergent but opposed and at times violently hostile to each other. It would therefore be naive to presume that what made a man holy for the Cypriots at a given point in time would necessarily equally satisfy the Constantinopolitan aristocrats, the common people of Athens, the Slav pastoralists or the Anatolian peasants. Indeed, one of the findings of this study is that even within the same small society of Orthodox Cyprus, the notion of having a local, living holy man underwent a dramatic transformation over a period of only a few years, changing from – at best – a vague desire, to an urgent need.

However, sanctification, in common with any other social process, contains an essential paradox. Each and every case of sanctification is as unique as the holy man or woman at its centre; as unique as the precise conjuncture of historical circumstances that shaped the society which acknowledged that man or woman as holy. But at the same time, the *problematic* which a case of sanctification poses is a general one. In this sense no case of sanctification, within the same or similar culture, is unique; and indeed parallels can be drawn from cultures otherwise quite divergent from each other. The characters, the settings, the costumes, are always different; the action does, always, vary; but the essential dynamic behind it does not. Every single case of sanctification presents us with an example which is both unique – in its specificities – *and* general, in that it is invariably the outcome of a continuous interaction between the holy man or woman and society. Thus it is that the specificity of Neophytos' case does not diminish its general relevance.

I have dealt with questions of methodological approach and definition in the main body of the text, whenever these were of specific, limited relevance. However, most of the theoretical and methodological concepts used are constantly present throughout this study, most frequently implicitly rather

<sup>3</sup> Especially through two fine books: Kazhdan and Franklin (1984) and Kazhdan and Wharton Epstein (1985). See also Kazhdan and Constable (1982).



than explicitly. In order to avoid repetition of references and definitions I decided to provide at this early stage a working definition of the terms and concepts used. The following paragraphs are intended to be of use not only in introductory terms but also in providing a specific point of reference for the reader to come back to later, should he or she feel unsure as to the meaning which a certain concept or term carries in this book. I hope that in return the reader may forgive me for the perhaps rather taxing conceptual and theoretical 'account' that follows immediately below, and which may well at this stage appear to be 'no more than theory'.

In understanding social processes – including sanctification – I found an extremely useful tool in Pierre Bourdieu's extended notion of the economic.<sup>4</sup> He understands symbolism to be as important as materialism in any given culture, and uses the term 'economic' to denote a series of calculations which encompass all goods, material *and* symbolic, which are considered to be rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular society. We usually have no problem in comprehending material capital. It is physically tangible, easily measurable, and we can quickly learn enough about a society to establish the relative value of a material commodity in it: a handful of golden coins held by a member of one society, a handful of eagle's feathers held by a member of another, will denote that each individual is wealthy in his or her respective community if what he or she possesses is considered to be precious and rare in that community. As such, possession of that commodity clearly confers material as well as symbolic power on its owner.

Symbolic capital is, by contrast, much more elusive. Symbolism works through evocation rather than (as a pure semiological approach would have it) through expressing specific 'meanings'.<sup>5</sup> Symbolism addresses emotions and thoughts by a process of associations whose topology of operation also encompasses the individual and collective unconscious. By its very nature it is therefore resistant to full and conscious articulation. It mocks especially our most commonly used, yet necessarily reductionist, means of communication: words, whether spoken or written, can only describe emotions and thoughts by approximation, since they themselves are symbols, ideograms representing commonly agreed upon – and therefore imprecise and generalised – notions. Yet we cannot cease from trying to understand symbolism, for even though its precise nature and dynamics appear to escape us, its effects cannot: daily we are startled by the power of its formative influence on human behaviour, individual and collective.

Our efforts to understand aspects at least of symbolism are mercifully not doomed to total failure: symbolic capital gives us a clue as to its nature

<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu (1977: esp. 177ff., and *passim*).

<sup>5</sup> Sperber (1975).

through the way it relates to material capital. As Pierre Bourdieu points out, despite their apparently totally different natures, material and symbolic capital relate to each other through being interconvertible.<sup>6</sup> This admits a limited 'translation' of symbolism into words, for it is precisely at the point of interconvertibility of symbolic into material capital that symbolism becomes 'speakable' and subject to a measure of conscious understanding and articulation. It is by taking into account this interconvertibility that we can appreciate both the extent of the power of symbolism and the rationality of the overall economic transaction involved in all social practices. For instance, it is partly because of this interconvertibility that Byzantine aristocrats spent vast amounts of material capital in founding and endowing monasteries; it is because of it that even the poorest peasant would offer a *tama* to a Saint,<sup>7</sup> or light a candle before an icon; it is because of it that people would turn their movable and immovable properties into testamentary gifts to their local church or monastery in order for their names to be commemorated and in the hope that their sins will be absolved after their deaths; it is because of it that ritual, that most glaring example of the perfect interconvertibility of material and symbolic capital, is always present, in all cultures, of all times.

The totality of the material and symbolic capital of a society comprises its 'culture'. Out of this totality, a society constructs a set of control mechanisms – plans, recipes, rules, instructions. These are used for the governing of its members' behaviour, and in order to bind them together in one coherent unit and to impart that unit with a collectively shared sense of identity. In using the term 'culture' I am thus also following Clifford Geertz in referring implicitly to these control mechanisms, rather than to complexes of behaviour patterns such as are expressed through customs, usages, traditions.<sup>8</sup>

I use 'ideology' in the sense of a set of conscious beliefs and practices, generated through the contradictions within the specific culture, part of which that ideology is; the latter's function being to mask those very contradictions that produce it.<sup>9</sup> Ideology is frequently – and perhaps most powerfully – expressed through symbolism, though the latter is in its turn convertible to material capital. I understand culture, ideology and symbolism as being inseparably interrelated, each reflecting and reproducing the other and each being affected by changes in one or more of the constituent elements of the other.

<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu (1977: esp. 178ff., and *passim*).

<sup>7</sup> A *tama* is a votive offering.

<sup>8</sup> Geertz (1975: 3–54, esp. 44).

<sup>9</sup> Generally, Larrain (1979, 1983); also Lovell (1980); and especially within the Byzantine context, Haldon (1986).

I use the term ‘factual reality’ with reference to events whose physical occurrence is indisputable and subject to independent verification: the act of Neophytos’ settlement at the *enkleistra*, for instance; the fact that a battle took place between the Byzantines and the Turks in Myriokephalon in 1176; or that Richard I of England conquered Cyprus in 1191. Within any given culture ‘factual reality’ is processed, as it were, through the system of ideologies in that culture, and what re-emerges after this largely unconscious process is a perceived ‘reality’ which is no longer ‘factual reality’ pure and simple, but a collectively held interpretation of it. In this sense the term ‘reality’ (as opposed to ‘factual reality’) describes essentially a product of culture.<sup>10</sup>

Further, of the many forms reality is capable of assuming, we shall also be concerned with the shape it might take on a purely individual level. At that subjective level, reality is a product both of culture and of the individual’s personal idiom. This last term, ‘personal idiom’, I use to refer to that core of one’s individuality which is totally personal to him or her. Constructed out of innate tendencies and moulded by subsequent early interactive experiences between the individual and his or her immediate environment, the personal idiom is as unique to that individual as his or her fingerprints. It forms the earliest part of an individual’s psychological make-up, and it is responsible for those ‘traits of character’, as we commonly call them, which are unchangeable, intractable and which more than anything else make each individual a unique being. It would, however, be wrong to see the personal idiom as existing independently of cultural influences. The relationship between the two is subject to endless debate, but what remains indisputable is that the total personality of each individual (of which the personal idiom is only a part) also bears indelibly the added, very powerful formative effects of acculturation. These may not define the personal idiom, but they certainly influence in varying degrees the development of the rest of one’s personality and provide the individual with the means of expression and communication which are essential if he or she is to become and remain a socialised being.<sup>11</sup>

Personal idiomatic expression, material and symbolic capital, culture, ideology, factual and perceived reality; the relationship between them: we must take account of all these factors to begin to comprehend the inherent economic rationality of individual acts and social processes. This is directly relevant to the subject of this book, since at its very core lies a particular type of social process, whose end results are commonly manifested in most – if not all – societies we know about. This is the process which culminates in a group of people (the whole of society or a group within it) investing one of its

<sup>10</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1967).

<sup>11</sup> Bollas (1989).

members with a status of positive difference, over and above the rest: he or she may be acknowledged as an exceptional leader, an extraordinarily wise person, a genius, a hero, a holy man or woman, a Saint. All such statuses tend – in very different degrees – to invest the acclaimed individual with what social anthropologists call ‘interstitiality’:<sup>12</sup> the individual is perceived as human, but has also been invested with some extraordinary, non-human or super-human powers and qualities, which in essence represent idealised and absolute versions of particularly highly considered moral qualities. The Saint is found at the pinnacle of such a scale of acclamations, since the Saint’s interstitiality more directly than any other involves the divine: the Saint retains elements of his or her humanity, but has also come to partake of the divine. The process of achieving a status of positive difference involves continuous economic bargaining and exchange between an individual and society, continuous investment of material and symbolic capital between the two, which culminates in society granting to the individual a status (in the case under discussion here, that of sanctity) in return for something that individual offers it. That ‘something’ is a ‘commodity’ which is considered to be sufficiently precious and necessary for society to receive it and to bestow in return a comparably precious status on this one of its members.

Within this context, this study attempts to answer a twofold question: what was the ‘commodity’ which Neophytos offered to the Orthodox society of Cyprus; and why was it considered by the members of that society to be so precious and so necessary that they should receive it with an appreciation deep enough to be expressed in their investiture of Neophytos with sanctity?

As is probably already apparent from the preceding paragraphs, in attempting to answer this question I have followed no ‘given’ theoretical credo. In working through Neophytos’ writings I preferred to allow myself to be led by the source material, to follow the course which it, through the information it yielded, appeared to be charting, rather than to follow any predetermined theoretical framework. I have thus pursued a study which, though firmly based on Neophytos’ writings and other – mainly Byzantine –

<sup>12</sup> Social anthropologists describe as ‘interstitial beings’ those partaking of more than one cultural category or state, and who are declared by society to be dangerous, powerful, holy. According to Mary Douglas, who first discussed the concept, interstitiality or ambiguity is based on a system of binary opposites created between the natural and the human-made. Subsequent social anthropological work, however, points out that all types of ambiguity are culturally constructed, human-made opposites creating an abnormality in order that it should fulfil a certain function. See Douglas (1969, 1973); Tambiah (1969); Bulmer (1967); and for an application of interstitiality in a social-historical context see Beard (1980).

sources, is also interdisciplinary in character, using theoretical and non-theoretical material from disciplines other than history (as this has been delineated by traditional scholarship) whenever these appeared to provide valid insight into the available source material.

If I have behaved in my methodological approach in an 'eclectic' way, it is not because I am unaware of the dangers of eclecticism. It is simply because I find its dangers avoidable at best, and at worst potentially much less harmful than those involved in the total commitment to either one given theoretical formulation, or to the so-called 'non-theoretical' approach.<sup>13</sup> Each of these two approaches tends to present itself not as an interpretation of history (which is what every work of historiography inevitably is) but as the Truth. The great danger of the former approach is that it lures its follower to dogmatism, and to the pursuit thereafter not of historical understanding but of validation of a given set of theoretical propositions through the editing of historical information. In this lies also its main redeeming feature: because it reveals its theoretical basis, it allows at least the critical reader to know where the bias lies in the particular interpretation of history he or she is reading. No such margin exists in works of historiography that declare themselves to be 'non-theoretical' (itself a fiction, since no individual reacts to entirely 'objective' conditions, but only to practical and subjective interpretations he or she produces out of these conditions). The great danger of this approach is that by remaining silent as to its premises, it pretends that they do not exist; it envelops itself in the fallacy of its 'objectivity' and thus remains unaware that it is as interpretative, as editorial and as subjective as any other approach. The bias of the unspoken theoretical framework may thus more easily elude both the writer and the reader.

Even though I find a theoretical approach preferable to a 'non-theoretical' one, I chose not to work within one single theoretical framework of the many already in existence, but to use instead aspects of a number of theories, from a number of fields. This was because I have searched but found no single theoretical formulation that successfully and fully accounts for the individual, society and the relationship between the two. If one such all-encompassing theoretical formula existed, I would have instantly embraced it with pleasure, gratitude and an enormous sense of relief. However, the genius capable of such total and absolute understanding has not yet appeared amongst us. Nor do I have any great hope that such a

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of theoretical and 'non-theoretical' approaches with specific reference to Byzantine historiography, see Haldon (1984-5); within a wider theoretical and social anthropological context see Bourdieu's attacks on the more rigid forms of functionalism, structuralism, objectivism, Marxist economism and semiology: Bourdieu (1977: esp. 115, 177, 179, 188, and *passim* by implication).

Messiah will appear in truth (as opposed to his or her own phantasy, and that of his or her adherents). Individuals, societies and relationships are far too complicated and far too fluid for any single theory to explain fully any one of the three, let alone all three together. However, general patterns of the forces at work both on the individual and on the collective level do emerge; and our theories are based on the observation and analysis of these patterns. Occasionally, the results of research in different fields of enquiry clearly show that *some* researchers have gained a measure of understanding of *some aspects* of the total picture. We can – indeed, perhaps I should say ‘we must’ – use such relevant insights to try and gain a better, fuller understanding of history. At the same time, we must never forget the limitations of theory: at best, our theories are only a means of understanding by comparison and approximation. I can think of few things more sterile and narcissistic than to believe in them totally; and of few things more dishonest and dangerous than to cut our evidence to suit our theories rather than to test the latter against the former.

My understanding of sanctification as a two-way process is reflected in the way the material in this book has been organised. Part 1 introduces Neophytos and eleventh- to thirteenth-century Cyprus. Part 2 focuses on the holy man himself. It presents expressions of Neophytos’ personal idiom, as evidenced in his surviving manuscripts and the paintings of his caves; it seeks to establish his conception of sanctity and his pursuit of it through a complicated – and not necessarily always consciously deliberate – process of self-sanctification. Part 3 attempts to examine the relationship between the Recluse and the Orthodox society of Cyprus which invested him with sanctity. At the same time I have tried to place both Neophytos and Cyprus within the wider context of contemporary Byzantium by drawing parallels where parallels could be drawn, and by pointing out contrasts where these were in evidence. Part 4 recapitulates and interprets the evidence presented earlier, and presents the conclusions of this study.

The source material for this book consists basically of Neophytos’ surviving manuscripts – some 1,000 folios, still mostly unpublished, which appear to represent about half of Neophytos’ literary output. The Appendix provides a ‘guide’ to the Recluse’s writings, as well as an essential tool for tracing the citations to his works in this book. The general literary and wider cultural influences on Neophytos’ work as a writer are examined in Part 1, to be compared later in the book with the further, highly individualistic uses to which Neophytos put his sources.

I have translated and paraphrased Neophytic passages extensively, but refrained from editing as yet unpublished passages to which reference is made in this book: a number of scholars have already undertaken the

edition and publication of Neophytos' unpublished manuscripts, and it now appears that it will not be too long before their efforts bear tangible fruit.<sup>14</sup>

Transliteration was, as always, a nearly insoluble problem. In common with other Byzantinists I had to devise my own 'system' in the end. By and large I have preferred direct transliteration of Greek names rather than use of their Latin or any other equivalent (Neophytos and not Neophytus; Eustathios and not Eustathius or Eustace; Alexios Komnēnos and not Alexius Comnenus); even though I found it almost always preferable to change, for example, Ioannis to John and Kyrillos to Cyril, since the latter is in common English usage.

My attempt to reach an understanding of Neophytos' case of sanctification took the form of an exploration of three different but interconnected levels of reality: the factual, the cultural and the personal. At the first level, the aim of this study was to establish elements of factual reality; at the second, to understand relevant aspects of the thoughts, mentalities and cultural processes at work in the society of which Neophytos was a member; at the third, to reconstruct expressions of the personal idiom of the holy man at the centre of this study. The challenge was to try and investigate each level without losing sight of the other two. Compartmentalisation, however, was of course inevitable: frequently, the interconnections had to remain implicit, in suspension until the concluding Part 4, where I attempted to bring them all explicitly together. Whether with the final page this journey of exploration reached its end, or whether it was worth making at all, is, as always, a matter for the reader to decide.

<sup>14</sup> Mr B. Egglezakes is working on an edition of Neophytos' *Interpretation of the Commandments* (*Cod. Coisl. Gr. 287*); Mr S. Chatzistilles is working on the *Book of Fifty Chapters* (*Cod. Athen. 522*) and on the *Homilies* contained in *Cod. Lesb. Leim. 2*; and Mr G. Christodoulou intends to edit the *Catecheseis* (personal communications of Mr Egglezakes, Mr Chatzistilles and Mr Christodoulou).