

THE CHARTOPHYLAX: ARCHIVIST AND LIBRARIAN TO THE PATRIARCH IN CONSTANTINOPLE

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Chartophylax was the title given to the archivists/librarians who served in the administration of the Orthodox Church during the Byzantine Empire. By the ninth century, the position of chartophylax to the Patriarch in Constantinople had become one of the most important in the patriarchal administration. This article describes the duties of the chartophylax in Constantinople as they developed from the fifth through the fifteenth centuries; it also examines some of the reasons for the rise in prominence of this position.

The Orthodox Church exerted an enormous influence in the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine, Empire, so much so that the whole Byzantine outlook "was rooted and grounded in religion."¹ Because Christianity relies heavily on the written word, it is not surprising that the Byzantines recognized the importance of books and the preservation of written documents. They held the literature of the classical and Hellenistic Greeks, as well as the writings of the church fathers and the scriptures, in high esteem. They also preserved ancient manuscripts by making copies of them. It seems that books were taken seriously by the authorities in the Eastern Empire from the beginning. Among the first acts of the emperor, soon after the founding of Constantinople in 330 C.E., was the building of a public library in a portico of the palace.²

J. M. Hussey has noted that "Byzantine education and scholarship shows not so much originality as enjoyment of the accumulated intellectual wealth of centuries."³ A passage from the works of a theological doctor of the church, John of Damascus (ca. 675–749), illustrates this method of scholarship and its reliance on works of the past:

Like a bee, I shall gather all that conforms to the truth, even extracting help from the writings of our enemies. . . . So, as I would emphasize, I am not offering you my own conclusions, but those which were laboriously arrived at by the most eminent teachers, while I have only collected them, and summarized them, as far as was possible, into one treatise.⁴

In a society where books and written documents assumed such importance, it would seem only natural that the position of archivist or

librarian would be regarded as one of importance as well. This paper seeks to describe the role of one such position, the chartophylax, archivist/librarian to the patriarch at Constantinople, as it developed from the fifth through the fifteenth centuries.

The patriarchs of the Orthodox Church were surrounded by numerous ecclesiastical personnel who directed various aspects of the spiritual and temporal affairs in the regions making up their patriarchates. When the patriarchs of Constantinople assumed supremacy over the whole eastern church, the dignity and responsibilities of these offices increased accordingly.⁵ The office of the chartophylax was first mentioned in the acts of the synod of Constantinople held in 530.⁶ The chartophylax's chief responsibilities seem to have involved managing the patriarchal archives, which included such documents and records as copies of the Acts of councils, bishops' professions of faith, and letters from other patriarchs. Although first appearing as an archivist and not a librarian, the chartophylax's work involved the preservation and access of texts and books, such as the works of the fathers of the church, as well. A rigid distinction between documents and books appears to have been relatively unimportant in his activities.⁷

The role played by the chartophylax during the Sixth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 680 provides an illustration of the importance of his position at the time.⁸ The council fathers examined the authenticity of a large number of documents and texts during these sessions. Those seeking changes in Orthodox interpretation often cited non-standard versions of important church writings in support of their positions. In response, the defenders of orthodoxy needed to prove that these cited works had been changed, by additions or deletions, from the originals. The sources of verification were the archives and library of the patriarchate and the chartophylax himself.

During the proceedings, as questions arose over what had been said and done in previous sessions, the chartophylax provided the emperor and the fathers of the council with authentic copies of the acts of the councils. When legates from Rome wanted to compare texts cited by a potentially schismatic group to the presumably authentic copies held by the patriarch, it was the chartophylax who presented the texts, attested under oath to their authenticity, and declared that they were the only copies existing in the patriarchal library. At other sessions of this council, the chartophylax was charged with presenting the writings of suspected heretics. By following the actions of the chartophylax as reported in the acts of this Sixth Ecumenical Council, Beurlier was able to list twenty-five of the volumes present in the patriarchal library.⁹

During the Seventh Ecumenical Council that followed in 787, the chartophylax also introduced those who appeared before the council. This

duty was carried out previously by other officials.¹⁰ By the time of the Eighth Ecumenical Council in 869, the chartophylax had become one of the most important officials in the patriarchal administration.¹¹ In his notes on the Eighth Council, Anastasius Bibliothecarius provided a description of the office of the chartophylax. According to Anastasius, the chartophylax was the guardian of records and performed the duties in the church in Constantinople which were performed by the bibliothecarius in Rome. He conducted all the regular ecclesiastical offices, except those which were special priestly duties. He introduced prelates and clerics to the patriarch and presented people before the councils. The chartophylax received all letters sent to the patriarch, except those sent by other patriarchs, and he approved and commended candidates for clerical and monastic orders to the patriarch.¹² The role of the chartophylax as an official intermediary between the patriarch and the clergy is an indication of the power of this position in the ninth century.

Another of the duties of the chartophylax in Constantinople, that of representing the patriarch in his absence, provoked some bishops into a quarrel of precedence in the eleventh century. The emperor, defending the chartophylax, referred the question of precedence to the patriarch and issued ordinances which confirmed the dignity of the office. The rights of the chartophylax were upheld, and in addition, by the ordinance issued in 1049, his office became responsible for directing all the jurisdictions of the patriarch in his role as a bishop. The chartophylax was to be considered to the patriarch as Aaron was to Moses. He had precedence over the bishops in elective assemblies, general meetings outside of the patriarchal palace, and in public ceremonies.¹³ The chartophylax also held several honorific privileges which reflected the dignity and responsibilities of his office. As indicated above, he participated in public ceremonies and processions; he also possessed a traditional gold ring and the patriarchal seal which he wore around his neck.¹⁴

From the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, the chartophylax in Constantinople continued to be the right hand of the patriarch—his representative and his curate in the administration of his diocese. In the diocese of Constantinople, he supervised the discipline of the clergy and the laity, and granted episcopal permission for the celebration of marriage. In the administration of the larger patriarchate, a standing synod shared episcopal powers with the patriarch. Thus, in judicial and legislative matters, the chartophylax was a representative of the law, while members of the synod made up the court and the legislative assembly.¹⁵ The chartophylax remained in charge of conserving patriarchal documents. In addition, he now supervised a secretariat which handled patriarchal correspondence, drew up official documents, and kept the minutes and registered the acts of the synod.¹⁶ The position of the



Page from a synodal register maintained under the supervision of the chartophylax in Constantinople, dated 1401. (Courtesy of Wein, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, *Cod. hist. gr. 48*. Reproduced, with permission, from Jean Darrouzès, *Le registre synodal du patriarcat byzantin au XIV^e siècle*, Archives de l'Orient Chrétien 12 [Paris: Institut Français d'Etudes Byzantines, 1971], 460.)

chartophylax seems to have retained much of its importance in the patriarchal administration because it controlled the written documents of ecclesiastical law.

The duties and privileges described here pertain especially to the chartophylax who served the patriarch in Constantinople. He was sometimes known as the great chartophylax, or the chartophylax of the Great Church (Sancta Sophia). This office also existed in the provinces, where a chartophylax might perform analogous functions in the service of a metropolitan or bishop. The position of chartophylax in Constantinople became one of importance and power within the patriarchal administration as it evolved between the fifth and the fifteenth centuries. This archivist/librarian to the patriarch appears to have been in the right place to play a major role in a society where the written document regulated so many activities.¹⁷ With the final collapse of the Byzantine Empire in the fifteenth century, however, the administration of the Orthodox Church experienced tremendous and enduring changes. The number of ecclesiastical personnel in the patriarchate decreased greatly, and many of their offices eventually disappeared. The title of chartophylax, although surviving into the modern era, became purely honorific.¹⁸

Notes

1. J. M. Hussey, preface to *Church and Learning in the Byzantine Empire: 867–1185* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963).
2. Steven Runciman, "The Ancient Christian Libraries of the East," *Bulletin of the Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries* 11 (March 1978): 6.
3. Hussey, *Church and Learning*, 35.
4. John of Damascus, prologue to *Fons scientiae*, quoted in Hussey, *Church and Learning*, 22.
5. Léon Clugnet, "Les offices et les dignités ecclésiastiques dans l'Eglise grecque," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 3 (1898): 142–143.
6. E. Herman, "Chartophylax," in *Dictionnaire de droit canonique*, ed. R. Naz (Paris: Letouzey et Ane, 1935–1965), 3: 621.
7. Jean Darrouzès, *Recherches sur les offikia de l'Eglise byzantine*, Archives de l'Orient Chrétien 11 (Paris: Institut Français d'Etudes Byzantines, 1970), 429.
8. Adrien Fortescue, "Chartophylax," in *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, ed. Fernand Cabrol (Paris: Letouzey et Ane, 1907–1953), 3: 1014–1015. A more detailed look at the proceedings of this council is provided by E. Beurlier, "Le chartophylax de la grande église de Constantinople," in *Compte rendu du troisième congrès scientifique international des catholiques* (Brussels: Société Belge de Librairie, 1895), v: 253–256.
9. Beurlier, "Le chartophylax de la grande église," 256.
10. Herman, "Chartophylax," 621.
11. *Ibid.*, 622.
12. For this portion of Anastasius's notes, see Giovanni Domenico Mansi, *Conciliorum amplissima collectio*, vol. xvi, col. 38, quoted in Francis Dvornik, *Les légendes de Constantin et de Méthode vues de Byzance*, 2d ed. (Hattiesburg, Miss.: Academic

International, 1969), 52–53. I am indebted to Dr. Janice J. Gabbert for the translation of this passage.

13. Herman, “Chartophylax,” 622.

14. *Ibid.*, 625.

15. Darrouzès, *Recherches sur les offikia*, 340.

16. J. M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 317.

17. Darrouzès, *Recherches sur les offikia*, 20.

18. Herman, “Chartophylax,” 625.