

Zeteies in Russia and Ukraine (Seventeenth to Early Twenty-First Century): Athonite Monks and Relics in Motion

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Abstract:

The article examines how Athonite monks conducted fund-raising campaigns known as zeteies (singular zeteia) in Russia and in Ukraine from the seventeenth to the early twenty-first century, as well as the permanent transfer of St John the Russian's right hand from Cappadocia to Mount Athos in May 1881. Zeteies are analysed as a system of poor relief, linked to ecclesiastical tradition and based upon the circulation of relics, manuscripts and icons. This religious practice reveals the establishment of systems of value surrounding religious objects, whether they were regularly transported or permanently displaced – as with the right hand of St John the Russian or with the Athonite manuscripts offered to the Russian monk Arsenios Suchanov in 1654. From this point of view, a zeteia seems to constitute the opposite of a pilgrimage: objects – and through them, places – come to the faithful, and not the other way around. Whereas pilgrimage allows traveling persons to receive benediction, a zeteia is about traveling to spread benediction to both people and places. During their missions, Athonite monks were both recipients of support and financial assistance, and givers of gifts and other forms of care. While the first position reveals the monks' subordination to the Russian tsar and his court, the second highlights their role as powerful intercessors and providers of prayers. A zeteia constitutes a complex and multi-phased process, characterised by successive long trips without which the accumulation of skills would not be possible. The main goals of a zeteia were to gain support and build alliances and enduring patronage networks. Zeteies were a testing ground for unfamiliar devotional forms that could be validated or, on the contrary, temporarily suppressed – as with the Gifts of the Magi that constitute an important relic of St Paul's Monastery.

Keywords: *post-Byzantine period, zeteies, pilgrimage, relics, manuscripts*