ERC Starting Grant for Zachary Chitwood on investigating the role of Mount Athos in the Middle Ages

A comprehensive database will include the inhabitants and visitors of the monastic federation of Mount Athos over a period of 700 years and paint a new picture of the monastic republic and its manifold connections

Mount Athos – a peninsula in northern Greece, inhabited for over 1,000 years only by monks, UNESCO World Heritage Site, and from time immemorial a melting pot of the peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean and Russia: in the Middle Ages this monastic republic was a place of retreat for Orthodox believers on the one hand, but on the other hand also connected with the medieval world in diverse ways beyond the walls of the monastery. The monks cultivated close relations with the Byzantine Empire, rulers in the Balkans, the Caucasus as well as in South Italy, and later also the Ottoman Empire. A new research project will investigate these connections and relations of the inhabitants and visitors of Athos and will transform the way the Holy Mountain is viewed. Dr. Zachary Chitwood, a researcher in Byzantine Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (JGU), has received a EUR 1.5 million ERC Starting Grant of the European Research Council for this project.

Mount Athos, as the entire peninsula is today called after its highest peak, is with an area of around 336 square kilometers somewhat larger than Munich. In this area are today found 20 monasteries of Orthodox monks and, in addition, numerous smaller monastic settlements. Here live around 2,300 monks; women and female animals are forbidden from entering. After the first settlements in the ninth century, this isolated region on the eastern finger of the Chalkidiki Peninsula experienced an influx of monks from the entire Byzantine Empire and beyond. Greeks from the European and Asian halves of the Byzantine Empire, Georgians from the Caucasus, Bulgarians and Serbs from the southern Balkans, Moldovans and Wallachians from the northern Balkans, inhabitants of Rus‘ in the east and even non-Orthodox Christians from southern Italy came to Athos, the "Balkans in Miniature", so it has been called.

Entries of perhaps 10,000 to 20,000 persons as a basis

"For the first time we will comprehensively analyze what role the monastic communities on Mount Athos played in the medieval society of the Eastern Mediterranean," explained Dr. Zachary Chitwood regarding the project. He and his team will first collect data for the period between roughly 850 and 1550, i.e., from the time of the first documents that have survived in the archives of Athos until the founding of the last significant Athos monastery, Stavronikita. For this period of 700 years, all monks who lived upon the Holy Mountain, every benefactor, and every visitor will be collected in a database.

"We would like to include in this database any person that had anything to do with the Holy Mountain," said Chitwood. According to rough initial estimates it might encompass between 10,000 and 20,000 persons attested by documents. "On the basis of these data we will be able to analyze how the monastic community of Athos was embedded within larger networks of economic interests, church leadership, intellectual exchange, and patronage."
The acts and documents of monastic archives, which to a large extent are already published, will serve as the basis for these inquiries. Especially innovative is the use of commemorative lists, which to date have hardly been noticed by scholars. These documents encompass the names of monks, church hierarchs, and benefactors, who after their death were mentioned regularly in commemorations. The database will later be accessible to other researchers, so that it can be used within all of humanities scholarship.

Thematic focus on wealth, ethnicity and gender

Chitwood is placing three aspects or leitmotifs at the front and center of his analysis: wealth, ethnicity, and gender. Despite some reservations regarding monastic wealth, the Athonite monasteries into the Late Middle Ages accumulated the largest amount of land in the Byzantine world, with possessions that were greater than those of the wealthiest aristocratic families. This property stretched not only across Greece, but over the entire Balkans. In scholarship there has even been talk of "Switzerland Syndrome": the monastic republic of Mount Athos was a sort of tax haven, where the wealthy could invest their money advantageously.

The second central leitmotif is the ethnicity of the communities. Almost every Orthodox church was represented on Mount Athos by a monastery – and even today one finds considerable ethnic variety. "But at present we have no means of statistically measuring this as precisely as possible and documenting it at certain points in time," said Chitwood, also mentioning that the database will provide future foundations for discussing ethnicity in Byzantium at a more profound level.

Finally, Chitwood’s team will also investigate the "absence of women" on Athos. To date it is not known in what context and why the prohibition arose that females are not allowed to tread the region. "Our goal is to understand the historical background and to recognize the concrete circumstances as well as the exceptional cases that actually occurred," Chitwood explained. In the context of the question of gender the political role of eunuchs, at times quite important for Byzantium, will also be analyzed. They as well from a certain point in time were no longer able to tread upon Athos.

First ERC Grant in the Humanities at JGU

Zachary Chitwood, born in 1983 in the USA, initially studied at Ripon College in Wisconsin. There followed a course of study of medieval and Byzantine history at the internationally-renowned Princeton University and finally a dissertation on Roman law under the Macedonian dynasty. In 2012, Zachary Chitwood came to Germany, first as a post-doc at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and from 2016 as a lecturer in Byzantine Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz under Professor Johannes Pahlitzsch. The five-year research project, "Mount Athos in Medieval Eastern Mediterranean Society: Contextualizing the History of a Monastic Republic (ca. 850-1550)", is the first ERC grant in the humanities at JGU. Besides Chitwood, who as a Byzantinist will focus on Greek sources, a Slavicist and a Kartvelologist, a specialist for Georgian language and culture, will also work on the project.

An ERC Starting Grant is the most generous form of financing of the EU given to young researchers. ERC Starting Grants support outstanding researchers at the start of their careers, when they are building their own research team or program. In addition to scholarly excellence, applicants must demonstrate that their projects possess a groundbreaking approach and are feasible in order to receive funding.

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Dr. Zachary Chitwood
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Sovereign patronage on Mount Athos (850-1550)
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