THE “AUTOBIOGRAPHY”
OF NIKEPHOROS BLEMMYDES.
ON THE ISSUE OF RELATIONS BETWEEN
MONASTICISM AND SCHOLARSHIP
IN BYZANTIUM

The relations between monasticism and scholarship in Byzantium are usually characterized as being in conflict. Alexander Kazhdan noted that Byzantine monasteries, as opposed to Western ones, did not come to be “centers of cultural heritage preservation” and in the majority of cases rather took a hostile stance towards antique learning¹ — which in fact formed the basis for all medieval science. Preservation of intellectual wealth in Byzantium used to be a worldly matter.

On the whole, Byzantium knew two kinds of “love of wisdom,” that is, two kinds of philosophy, and, in accordance with them, two kinds of scholarship and science. The first kind — the “inner,” that is, church philosophy — denoted theology, ascetics, Christian ethics and morality, and sometimes also a virtuous monastic way of life in general. The second kind — the “outer,” that is, secular philosophy — applied to the septem artes liberales: grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.² The teaching of the Seven Liberal Arts, based for the most part on achievements of ancient scholarship, formed the cornerstone of Byzantine education through all its history. Furthermore, the scholarly heritage of Antiquity always attracted the attention of Byzantine intellectuals. Some personalities even won the name of “Christian humanists” for their striving to combine Christian ideals with those of ancient learning.

¹ А. П. КАЖДАН, Книга и писатель в Византии, Москва, 1973, с. 136.
Still, although the Orthodox Church in general reconciled itself with the usage of pagan learning for educational purposes and in most cases closed its eyes to the intellectuals’ great interest in antique literature and science, Byzantine monasticism, being as it was the most radical and conservative wing of the Church, disapproved of the ideas called nowadays “Christian humanism.”

Certainly, some of those Christian humanists were themselves monks (for example, the well-known Michael Psellos or Patriarch Gregory of Cyprus), but their monasticism was either nominal (as in the case of Psellos) or rather an exception (as in the case of Joseph Rhakendytes).

Byzantine monasticism is thus characterized as a community which thought a complete renunciation of the “outer” learning to be possible. Even theology, in many respects having its foundation in the Aristotelian-Platonic philosophical tradition, could do, as the rigorists tended to believe, without any studies of pagan writings — since all the necessary borrowings had already been made by the Church Fathers.

Against such a background the figure of Nikephoros Blemmydes, a thirteenth century Byzantine writer and scholar, provokes reflection. On the one hand, Blemmydes definitely was not a “nominal” monk — and what is more, he was not a “black sheep” either, as he was widely considered a role model of proper monasticism. On the other hand, his keen engagement in secular disciplines cannot be questioned. Under these circumstances, a study of Blemmydes’ views on combining monasticism and scholarly activities appears rather attractive, and exactly for that reason this author has decided to analyze the so-called Autobiography of the writer.

(3) See O’Meara, “Philosophy,” p. 1661; Hunger, Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur, S. 9, 50–51.
