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WAR, BYZANTIUM, AND MILITARY SAINTS

In an absorbing interview, Dr. James Skedros, Cantonis Professor of Byzantine Studies and Professor of Early Christianity at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Massachusetts, leads us into the tumultuous world of Byzantine warfare to examine Orthodox views on war and peace, the veneration of military saints in the Christian Roman Empire, and what the Byzantine experience can teach our own turbulent times.

RTE: Dr. Skedros, before we discuss the veneration of Byzantine military saints, would you begin by describing how military activity was viewed in the Christian Roman Empire?

DR. SKEDROS: Military activity was a dominant and constant aspect of the East Roman Empire. Not that Byzantine society was militaristic in the way that ancient Spartan culture was, but rather, as an imperial power with enemies on all of its borders, the Byzantines were constantly at war. The Byzantine State was very large—at its height it covered nearly as much territory as that of the imperial Roman Empire. Its borders were vulnerable and the Byzantines always seemed to be prosecuting some sort of war—whether for defensive purposes, for retaliation, trying to regain land, or all of the above. War was a recurring event.

Byzantium emerged from the late Roman world where an organized professional military was part and parcel of society. Further, like their ancient predecessors and medieval contemporaries, the Byzantines took advantage of any means possible to defend themselves—not only direct military action, but also through political and economic means, the creation of alliances, hiring of mercenaries, the paying of tribute to keep enemies at bay, and arranging of inter-dynastic marriages. Then there was this incredible secret weapon—so secret that we still don't know exactly what it was made of—Greek

Opposite: Detail of icon of St. George, 15th-century, Cretan, Benaki Museum, Athens.

fire. The Byzantines also had great tactical minds. They produced treatises and handbooks on warfare and military tactics and they had an incredible foundation of Roman soldiery that stays with them throughout all of their eleven-hundred-year history. They also have a well-organized bureaucracy of negotiation: sending diplomats here, marrying a member of the imperial family off to create an alliance, paying 30,000 gold coins a year, for example, to enemies such as the Bulgarians to obtain a thirty-year truce, particularly when they are defending multiple borders at the same time. They are always thinking, planning, dealing with, and guarding their borders.

The question is, to what extent does war trickle down into the provinces or the hinterland? If you are living in Asia Minor, in Cappadocia for example, it may very well be that from the third century to the Arab raids of the seventh century, you have three or four hundred years of relative peace. Do people in the center of such peaceful areas have a kind of *Pax Romana* period? I don't have a sense that the experience of war is trickling down to everyone, but as a state apparatus, Byzantines are always, if not actively at war, certainly aware that war is on the horizon. The borders, however, were always vulnerable.

RTE: I wonder if this period of Cappadocian peace is similar to our situation in North America, where over the past century we have participated in distant wars, but not at home on our own soil. For them, like us, there were probably intermittent drafts, and certainly taxes for defense.

DR. SKEDROS: Yes, particularly during the Macedonian Dynasty, roughly the 9th, 10th, and early 11th centuries, it is estimated that nearly three quarters of the budget was spent on military activity. This is a rebirth, the attempt of Byzantium to regain territory, and a period where you have a succession of military rulers who themselves went out and fought in battle.

RTE: To modern ears, paying invaders such as the Bulgarians a yearly retainer to maintain a thirty-year truce seems almost dishonorable, but in context it was extremely shrewd because they saved both lives and money and could concentrate their military endeavors on other borders, such as during the Persian or Arab invasions. Geographically, they were extremely vulnerable.

DR. SKEDROS: It also speaks to the wealth of an empire that has the resources to fight on one front while paying off the other.

RTE: As a Christian empire, how would the Byzantines have looked at war?

We hear of pacifist writings in early centuries. Did that change after the Roman Empire became Christian?

DR. SKEDROS: Already in early Christianity there seems to be a tension between those who support war and those who reject it wholesale. When you look outside of the New Testament texts, you hear pacifist voices at the end of the second century. By the beginning or middle of the third century, you find statements like, "Christians shouldn't be involved in the military," which suggests that they were in the military. It seems that the biggest challenge for Christians who served in the Roman army before Constantine, as seen also in the lives of military saints, is not so much the concern over killing in battle, but the question of whether or not a Christian can or should participate in the various pagan rituals associated with being a member of the military. Having said that, I think you can find post-New Testament Christian authors who, if not 100% pacifist, are pacifistic voices. By the fourth century you have a Christian emperor, and a slow shift towards a Christian empire that still needs to be defended.



Dr. James Skedros.

The New Testament reads very much as if Christ and the early Church are against violence, so why haven't Christians become out-and-out pacifists? Is it because they are realists and see that evil in the world needs to be confronted, or have they somehow sold out?

RTE: Sadly, real pacifist communities, such as those of Buddhist or Christian monks, often don't survive invasion, and those that do survive for any length of time are either isolated or under the protection of a larger country or empire.

DR. SKEDROS: Yes, it may have been a matter of *realpolitik*. But the Church was very cautious in this regard, and they had to be, because in the end, neither the New Testament nor the Church is aggressive with regard to war.

Byzantium is a continuation of the Roman Empire, and although the bureaucratic and leadership apparatus begin to become Christian over time,



the entity of the Roman state never goes away. In the early 20th century, the historian Adolf Harnack published an important book where he asked if early Christians of the second and third centuries fought in the military? His widely-accepted answer was yes, and it is also clear that there was never a blanket statement by the Church against killing in war. This is certain.

RTE: Would you say, though, that there has been a sense that any killing, even in defense, is not a moral good?

DR. SKEDROS: Yes, and yet the Byzantines are also realists. They are acting out of Roman pragmatism: societies, unfortunately, have enemies, and thus societies have to protect themselves. Even with the Church's qualifications, such as canons forbidding communion for some years for troops that have killed in battle, the Church does attempt to bring church to the battlefield. We have lots of evidence for liturgies before battles, of soldiers receiving Holy Communion before battle. There are prayers such as *troparia* and canons that were to be chanted before a battle which call down protection and heavenly blessings—the things you would normally call on God for in a medieval society.

RTE: Will you introduce us now to the subject of military saints?

DR. SKEDROS: As a Byzantine society where there are external enemies on all sides, people rely on both God and the army to protect the state. This is nothing new. The Byzantines read the Old and New Testaments and they believed that as God protected his people in the past, he will do so in the present. So to ask God's help in moments of personal or collective crises makes perfect sense. The Byzantines called upon God and upon his saints to intercede for them, in both daily life and in time of military need. When they had to defend the empire, the Christians turned to a particular group of saints who were believed to have served in the Roman army, and who had a connection to God because they had died, not on the battlefield, but as martyrs for the Christian faith. As the Byzantines would have expressed it, these saints had *parrhesia*, a boldness before God. They could stand before God and intercede for the faithful.

Christians are doing this from the beginning of Christianity, but by the early fourth century we see them publicly remembering those great heroes, the martyrs of the first three centuries of Christianity. They lift them up, say-

Opposite: Holy Forty Soldier-Martyrs of Sebaste, 17th-century Bulgarian, Petit Palais, Paris.

ing “Here are men and women who stood up for what they believed, to the point of losing their lives.” This veneration of martyrs for the faith occurs in many religious traditions, and certainly within Christianity.

Once it became legal to practice their faith, Christians in the first half of the fourth century began to construct chapels and funerary shrines, what scholars usually called *martyria*, to house the remains of a martyred Christian and provide a point or place of gathering for the commemoration of these heroes. To show how real and close these fourth-century Christians were to the age of the early martyrs, one needs only to recall that the Cappadocian Church Fathers had relatives who suffered martyrdom during the great persecution under Diocletian in the first decade of the fourth century.

RTE: For the Cappadocian Fathers, recalling the Diocletian persecution would involve the same time span as our distance from World War II. You don’t usually think of the age of the martyrs as being that close to Sts. Basil the Great or John Chrysostom.

DR. SKEDROS: Yes, and they also thought of their martyrs as their “greatest generation”. They remembered their sacrifices and they remembered where they were buried. They built churches and chapels to house their remains, and they held services at least once a year to commemorate their martyrdoms. This is what we often call the cult or the veneration of the martyrs. The veneration of the saints in the Christian tradition begins in earnest in the fourth century by remembering the heroic sacrifices of the martyrs. Those who gave their lives for the Christian faith received the first commemoration.

This veneration explodes in the fourth and fifth centuries, and not only among what you and I might think of as run-of-the-mill Christians—perhaps uneducated and illiterate, who would be expected to turn to “popular” religion and believe that the relics of the martyrs were imbued with God’s power—but it also included the great intellectuals of the fourth century who venerated the martyrs: St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Gregory the Theologian, St. Basil the Great, St. John Chrysostom, among many others. They deliver sermons on the feast days of these martyrs, and, in fact, St. Gregory Nazianzen provides us with one of the most dramatic depictions of piety directed towards the memory of the martyrs in his sermon on St. Theodore the Recruit (Teron). Here he describes how the faithful who visit the tomb of St. Theodore ought to run up and embrace the coffin of the martyr and the bones contained therein, as if one were embracing the martyr himself. He prays to

the saint, he asks the saint to protect the homeland where his relics are enshrined, he encourages his listeners to ask the saint for protection. These are the brightest of the brightest of the intellectuals, these are the theologically sophisticated spokesmen of the Christian community who are doing this.

St. Basil also delivers several sermons on early Christian martyrs, one of them being Gordios, whom he tells us was a Roman soldier. He doesn’t say much about Gordios’ life as a soldier, only that he was a good centurion, which means that he led a troop of one hundred men. We’re told that Gordios had a strong healthy body like any good soldier, but he doesn’t tell us about his military exploits, or whether it was good for a Christian to be in the army or not. What St. Basil does commemorate is his martyrdom. Gordios is clearly a Christian in the Roman army under Diocletian and Basil recounts how, when his military commanders find out that he is a Christian, they order him to sacrifice to the Roman gods. He refuses, so he is beheaded. The martyrdom is what St. Basil lifts up. You might expect St. Basil to continue on and take on the moral issue of whether it was good for a Christian to be in the army or not, but he doesn’t.

RTE: Particularly because he took on so much in his sermons and letters.

DR. SKEDROS: Exactly, which makes it so interesting why he didn’t take it up here. Nevertheless, it is the elite of the Church in the fourth century who led the way in the veneration of the martyrs.

RTE: For these early Fathers of the Church, would the martyrs’ military status simply be the background of their lives, like the early life and occupation of any martyr. “He was a wonderful blacksmith, so strong and capable that people came to him from miles around...”

DR. SKEDROS: Yes, I think it is like that. The Church Fathers aren’t getting into the details of military service, what they are really interested in is the Christian life, and the military is the context of this particular story of Gordios. Basil does mention that there were other Christian centurions, and he holds up three from the New Testament: men who served in the military and accepted Christ, although they were not necessarily martyrs.

RTE: I have to say that I am uneasy when American Orthodox writers such as Frankie Schaefer and Fr. Alexander Webster hold up these military saints as an endorsement of military might. It goes without saying that soldiers need



to be ministered to like anyone else, but this feels like a new use of these saints' *Lives* as a justification for war.

DR. SKEDROS: I share that concern. I've read what Fr. Alexander Webster has written on this issue and I disagree with his conclusion that there is a notion of just war in Orthodoxy. Basically, he has adopted the western view of a just war theory, and one of the ways in which he tries to support such a just war theory in Orthodoxy is by highlighting the cult of military saints. Why would military saints be commemorated by the Church, he asks, if war was always to be seen as an evil that must be avoided. But this argument isn't valid when you read the sources.

There is no doubt that the Byzantines incorporated a variety of saints into the liturgical and popular religious consciousness of the church including saints who served in the military. Yet it wasn't because of their service in the military that the Church recognized them as belonging to the "communion of the saints," to borrow a common western Christian phrase. Rather, they are saints because they died as martyrs; it was their confession of Christ that placed them among the recognized saints of the church. The Byzantines chose to venerate these soldier-martyrs because they had stood up and said, "enough is enough"—not in an aggressive way, but in a pacifistic way. Nor did the soldier-martyrs go out and seek martyrdom. Never has the Church encouraged anyone to seek martyrdom: martyrdom comes to you.

The eighth-century St. Ioannikios is one of the few military saints who didn't die as a martyr, but neither did he die in battle. He was in the army for twenty years and finally left because, as his *Life* says, "he did not like to see his brothers die". He took up the ascetic life and is commemorated as a saint because of his asceticism, not because of his military background. So here is an example of someone in the Byzantine world who fought in the army, but the Church didn't lift him up because of that. They lifted him up because he cleansed his heart, he committed his life to Christ, he took on a martyrdom of asceticism.

RTE: So, the Church recognized heroism and death in battle, but it was not a reason for canonization?

DR. SKEDROS: The Byzantines will most definitely portray these martyric heroes of the third and fourth centuries (such as St. Theodore, St. George,

Opposite: Stone relief from church at Amaseia, Pontus. (11-12th c.) Sts. Demetrios and Theodoros slaying the Bulgar tsar Skyloyannis.

St. Demetrios, etc.) on their military banners, they will pray to these military saints for protection, and they will write hymns and paint icons depicting them as warriors who are armed to defend Christ's people. Yet this is not why they are saints. They are saints because of their Christian conviction, their personal conversion to Christ, and not because they are soldiers. All this says is that Byzantine society asked saints to defend their homeland from enemy attack. This doesn't mean that the Church had a just war theory.

RTE: There is an ongoing discussion about this among the Orthodox in Russia. In 1996 a young soldier named Yevgeny Rodionov was captured while serving on the Chechen border, held captive for several months, and then reportedly decapitated when he refused to take off his cross and convert to Islam. Some Russian soldiers carry unofficial icon cards and pray to him for intercession, although the Russian Orthodox Church is not considering canonization. It is my understanding that the Church does not canonize battlefield deaths, no matter how sacrificial.

DR. SKEDROS: That must have happened a lot in Byzantium as well, under Islam and the Turkocrazia. The Church's reluctance to canonize soldiers who fall in battle is not at all to denigrate heroism on the battlefield, but to say that the Church knows that war is part of the fallen world. This is why, when the tenth-century Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas approached Patriarch Polyeuktos saying, "I want my soldiers who die on the battlefield recognized as saints," the patriarch replied, "I can't do that." There was no tradition for doing so, and secondly, a military action is different than a martyrdom. The Church did not canonize soldiers because they were soldiers. The Church has always said, "If death comes, you can protect yourself, but don't go out and kill." This doesn't mean that the Byzantines didn't kill, they did. They had defensive wars, proactive wars, and wars of aggression, but the Church recognized the martyr, the ascetic, or the virtuous hierarch or layperson as a saint, not the soldier as a saint simply because he died in his role as a soldier defending his homeland, as noble as such an act is.

My sense is that Fr. Webster and Frankie Schaeffer are concerned that pacifist voices within the Orthodox Church have dominated recent discourse on war and peace suggesting that the Orthodox Church somehow looks negatively upon the military and, in particular, the military profession. They are correct in noting that the Church has never said that the life of a soldier is bad, wrong, or evil. We pray for our military in the liturgy; and a strong

military has been an important part of Orthodox societies from Byzantium forward. However, in the end, as I read the evidence, the Church sees war as evil. A forthcoming book, *Orthodox Christian Perspectives on War*, with contributions by a number of Orthodox historians and theologians, and even an army chaplain, challenge the idea that war should be glorified or is somehow blessed, even though we do bless individuals involved in war.

RTE: Wasn't there also a military saint who refused to be drafted?

DR. SKEDROS: Yes. St. Hieron, one of the 33 Martyrs of Melitene, was a farmer, and we are told that he refused to serve in the Roman military under the emperor Galerius because he feared the loose morals of his would-be fellow soldiers. He had such bodily strength that he singlehandedly drove away the Roman soldiers who came to conscript him with a simple wooden digging tool. Later he declared himself a Christian and was martyred. Yet it needs to be noted that his refusal to enlist was based not on any "conscientious objection" that the military profession as such was evil, but rather because he refused to participate in the lifestyle that a Roman soldier was subjected to in a predominantly pagan Roman army.

This goes back to the bigger picture. Military service is not inherently evil, but I would not say, therefore, that the veneration of military saints in Byzantium suggests that the Byzantines glorified war and glorified killing, or that the Orthodox Church had a notion of just war. The Byzantines didn't occupy themselves with such questions. They were pragmatists, they were realists. War was a part of their reality and they had to deal with it accordingly. It didn't mean it was right to kill people, but in some contexts it was appropriate.

RTE: They would have said that it was a terrible necessity of the fallen world?

DR. SKEDROS: I think that's true. People like Fr. Alexander Webster may say that we are reading our own pacifism into the texts, but as an historian, I don't see his view in the sources. You can stand back and say, "Byzantines engaged in war, they depicted certain saints as warriors in their icons, so therefore they must have been pro-war and this justifies war," but it is much more nuanced than that. It was really about the reality of medieval life. If you are going to survive you have to fight.

RTE: Will you name the Byzantine military saints for us?

DR. SKEDROS: Christopher Walter has written a very good book, *The Warrior Saints in Byzantine Art and Tradition*, on military saints in Byzantium. He has scoured the sources (art historical, textual, archaeological, etc.) in search of Byzantine saints who had some sort of military affiliation, and has identified about seventy of them. This doesn't mean that the Byzantines remembered and prayed to them all, nor that they thought of them as "military saints" in the modern sense. Out of these seventy is a small cadre whom the Byzantines commonly venerated that includes: Sts. George, Demetrios, Prokopios, Menas, Merkourios, Sergios and Bakchos, Artemios, Arethas, and the two Theodores—Theodore Teron (the Recruit), and Theodore Stratelates (the Commander or General).

For St. George and St. Menas of Alexandria, it isn't as clear why they are lifted up as military saints. St. Menas, for instance, had a large center of pilgrimage and healing outside Alexandria, but as his tradition later develops, he is depicted as a soldier. Perhaps both George and Menas were indeed soldiers and the remembrance of their profession stays with them, but we don't have textual evidence for this.

The Great-martyr Artemios was slain under Julian the Apostate, and although he is included with the military saints, he probably wasn't a military person—there are references to his having a bureaucratic appointment. Arethus was martyred in the Arabian Desert in Najran, and was probably a governor with some military responsibilities, so he was closer to the military. Merkourios is difficult to place because we cannot locate his cult, but he also becomes an important military saint.

Procopius is particularly interesting because he is the one military saint that we are quite certain was not a soldier, but was nevertheless depicted in military dress at a later date. According to Eusebius, who tells us about his martyrdom, Procopius was an exorcist and a reader in the Church.

St. Theodore the Recruit (Teron) is interesting because early on he is positively identified as a soldier. He is canonized as a martyr, performs miracles of healing, but his military identification probably lifted him up as someone to appeal to for defense. Even his name calls attention to his military status.

RTE: And St. Theodore Stratelates?

DR. SKEDROS: Most historians believe that the two Theodores are actually one person. Theodore Teron was the early original saint, and Stratelates ("the General"), supposedly from the same period, shows up only in the

ninth or tenth century. The usual argument is that the scribes became confused and that the Stratelates tradition grew out of that of Theodore Teron, which is why by the tenth century there are two Theodores, and they are being commemorated as such. They may indeed be two distinct people as tradition says; we just don't have the historical evidence to confirm this.

RTE: Whether historically distinct or not, they are almost always portrayed together in icons.

DR. SKEDROS: Yes, which is interesting in and of itself.

RTE: How then did we come to venerate these martyrs as military saints?

DR. SKEDROS: My sense of what is going on here is that these early Christian martyrs, whether those whom we know were soldiers, such as Sergios and Bakchos and Theodore Teron, or others who do not seem to have been associated with the military in their lifetimes, were eventually called upon for aid and defense, and over time are identified as military saints because they offer protection at significant moments.

St. Demetrios is a perfect example. Although we really don't know much about him historically, the eleventh-century *Life* by Symeon Metaphrastes says that he was not just a soldier, but that he was actually a Roman general of some repute in Macedonia, who professed his Christianity and eventually was martyred. Earlier sources were lost, so we can't say whether or not he actually served in the military. The trajectory here is that you have a martyr, and for Thessaloniki a local martyr. His bones are enshrined within the city and at some point people begin to come to the site to pray to him as a martyr, usually for healing. Some of these people are healed, and when an enemy besieges Thessaloniki, people rather naturally turn to the saints of the city (and not just Demetrios, although he is the most prominent). Demetrios eventually eclipses other local saints in this role of protector, and with his help the city survives an attack by the Slavs in the 580s. He not only heals, but he defends the city.

RTE: Doesn't he also appear on the city walls?

DR. SKEDROS: Yes, he does. During the siege of the city by the Slavs, there are three miracles that deal specifically with the siege and in one of them he appears on the walls defending the city. A century later when the city is again



attacked by the Slavs—this time in concert with the Bulgars—St. Demetrios is seen riding a horse and leading the Byzantine troops into battle. So, here you have a local martyr who is known for his ability to heal those who are sick, and then in a moment of crisis people also turn to him for defense of the city. St. Demetrios is just one example; there are others also, such as St. George. There are a huge number of healing miracles associated with St. George from early centuries, and later he also becomes one of the great military saints.

The Virgin Mary is another example of a saint emerging as a protector. By the seventh century, and perhaps much earlier, she is appealed to as a defender of the city of Constantinople. The Akathist Hymn to the Mother of God has these beautiful stanzas about her protection and her ability to defend. Although tradition says this Akathist was written by Patriarch Sergios, and we know that he did write the proemion, “To thee the Champion-Leader...”, the prelude to the Akathist, most historians feel that the Akathist itself is much earlier. Some attribute it to Romanos the Melodist, which would be the early 500’s, while a recent book argues for the second half of the fifth century, after the Ecumenical Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon affirmed Mary’s title as the Mother of God. There were also highly-revered relics of the Virgin in Constantinople—her robe and cincture, as well as the miracle-working Hodegetria icon.

By the sixth century there are several saints who are being recognized as protectors of certain areas: Demetrios in Thessaloniki; the Virgin Mary in Constantinople; Sergios and Bakchos in Syria. Tradition says that Sergios and Bakchos were Christian officers under Galerius who were put to death when they refused to sacrifice to the imperial gods. St. Sergios’ relics were in today’s Resafa, which then was called Sergiopolis and grew to be one of the great pilgrimage and healing shrines of the Christian East before the coming of the Arab Muslims.

It is clear that the Byzantines are lifting up these military saints for protection as well as for healing, but in Orthodox iconography these saints only begin to be depicted wearing military uniforms around the tenth century. You would be hard-pressed to find a single example of what we commonly refer to as a “Byzantine military saint” dressed in military attire before early eighth-century iconoclasm. Post-iconoclastic depictions make sense because later Byzantine emperors become very aggressive at reclaiming Byzantine territory seized by Bulgarians in the Balkans and by Arabs in Eastern Asia

Opposite: 14th-century Moravian icon of St. Demetrios. Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade.

Minor and Syria. It is only in this period that we begin to see images depicting saints such as Demetrios and George in typical Byzantine military dress with sword in hand. Before this, they are simply portrayed as martyrs.

RTE: Isn't St. Demetrios also portrayed as a martyr with his hands extended in prayer on the early pillar mosaics that were discovered in St. Demetrios Church in Thessaloniki after the 1902 earthquake?

DR. SKEDROS: Yes, this is interesting. All of the surviving pre-iconoclastic mosaics in the basilica of St. Demetrios depict the saint in civic attire. One of these seventh-century pier mosaics that you reference was recently cleaned revealing a previously undetected inscription which identifies the saint in the mosaic as St. George and not St. Demetrios as had been previously assumed. This new identification places St. George alongside St. Demetrios and St. Sergios, all three of whom are considered military saints but dressed in civilian clothes (Sergios does have a torque (*maniakion*) around his neck that might have military significance). Thus, these images on the piers of the basilica of St. Demetrios in Thessaloniki represent the earliest iconographic collection of military saints that I know of—dating to the first half of the seventh century, which would have coincided with the period of the Persian-Avar siege of Constantinople, the Slavic invasions of the Balkans of the late sixth and early seventh century, and the Bulgarian incursions of the 640's and 650's.

RTE: Then people would have been very conscious of their need of divine help.

DR. SKEDROS: Yes. George clearly has military associations by now, and Demetrios and Sergios are absolutely seen as defenders as well.

RTE: The popular tradition of St. Demetrios in Thessaloniki is still very strong, isn't it? When Thessaloniki was liberated from the Turks in 1912 on St. Demetrios Day, there were reports of people saying that they had seen St. Demetrios appear in the city. Likewise, during the 1978 earthquake, people around St. Demetrios' Church saw a young man in an old-fashioned white robe standing on top of the roof. Thinking it was one of the priests or an acolyte, they called to him to come down before the roof collapsed, but he suddenly disappeared. They ran inside the church and up the stairs to the roof, but there was no one there. None of the clergy or church workers had been on the staircase or the roof and a belief arose that it was the saint.

DR. SKEDROS: One of the more remarkable aspects of Christianity in Thessaloniki is the uninterrupted veneration of St. Demetrios from the fourth century down to the present.

RTE: I wonder if, instead of portraying their actual state, our icons are portraying their heavenly roles. In other words, martyrs like Sts. George, Menas, and Demetrios are dressed as warriors to symbolize the grace they have been given to protect Christians since the time of their martyrdoms. Whether or not they actually had military backgrounds makes little difference. We depict St. Michael the Archangel in armor, though he never served as an earthly soldier. He is the leader of the heavenly hosts.

DR. SKEDROS: Or the Panagia. We may not portray her as a soldier or warrior, but she certainly is a protectress, and for the Byzantines a military protectress. Not having been a soldier in life doesn't denigrate the heavenly role of the military saints.

Then should we call them warrior saints, or military saints? In an article that appeared several years ago, Christopher Walter attempted to connect the imagery of the ancient Macedonian-Thracian horseman holding a spear with the Byzantine iconographic type of the military saint mounted on a horse (most especially St. George and St. Demetrios). In so doing, Walter used the term "warrior saint" to refer to the Christian examples he cites. A warrior on a horse is a rather universal image, but should we therefore describe St. George and St. Demetrios as "warriors" or are they soldiers? Are the two distinct? The Byzantines didn't use either term to refer to such saints as a collective. Rather, scholars have invented the terms to help describe the phenomenon of saints depicted as soldiers who form a sort of collective heavenly power of protection and intercession. I prefer to use the term "military saints" since this better reflects the Roman and Byzantine military establishment which informed the creation of military saints in order to address Byzantine religio-political needs.

RTE: Yes. Also, if we don't use the term "warrior saint" because most were not historically from a military background, then we probably shouldn't call them "soldier saints" for the same reason.

DR. SKEDROS: No, they aren't soldier saints, they are protectors and defenders. It is we who have collectivized them into a military category. The Byzantines sometimes portrayed them together, but it doesn't seem that they had



a title for them. In looking at how groups of saints are organized by type, in a twelfth-century *Euchologion*, the book of prayers for different needs, we see invoked, “...the Holy and Heavenly Powers, the Holy and Spotless Cross, the Holy Forerunner and Baptist John, the Holy and All-Glorious Apostles, Prophets, Hierarchs, Hieromartyrs, Martyrs, Ascetics, and the Choirs of the Saintly Women,” etc. There is no collective referred to as military or warrior saints. Some of the military saints might be commemorated together, for example the prayer “Save O God your people...” which follows the 50th Psalm in Orthros where the great-martyrs Demetrios, George, the two Theodores and Menas are mentioned as a group but they are called “great martyrs” and not “military saints.”

However, even if there wasn’t a class for them, the Byzantines did put them together on icons. There is the well-known image from the early eleventh-century Psalter of Emperor Basil II where Basil is depicted in the center of the folio page in his imperial garb with Christ overhead. Surrounding the emperor are six medallions, each depicting a military saint. Another common medium where military saints show up are on letter and document seals, which could be made of gold, silver, lead, or wax.

RTE: Would you say something about the imperial saints? They are often closely linked to military endeavors.

DR. SKEDROS: An imperial saint is different from a military saint. Military saints in Byzantium may have led an army, such as St. Demetrios in Macedonia, but they didn’t lead a nation. The Byzantine emperor or the saintly political leader of an Orthodox land was a leader of an empire or a nation. Emperor Constantine I and the Russian St. Alexander Nevsky are good examples that raise interesting questions about what are the criteria for sainthood, who is a saint, and to what extent does sainthood simply mean a moral, ethical, ascetical, martyric lifestyle, particularly when this is juxtaposed with the very earthly and sometimes unethical activities of the leaders of a state.

I think that the Byzantines understood this quite well. In the tenth-century *Synaxarion of Constantinople* imperial saints are identified with the adjective “pious” (*eusebēs*) and not with the word for “saint” (*hagios*). I haven’t examined this exhaustively, but it appears that the Byzantine Church did not use the word *hagios* to refer to imperial saints. The Byzantine Church cer-

Opposite: St. Constantine the Great, mosaic, Haghia Sophia, Constantinople.

tainly dedicated certain days during the liturgical year to remember some of their emperors and they did so by referring to them as “pious” emperors and not “holy”. I wonder how significant this is, and what it meant to the Byzantines to be pious, as differentiated from being a saint. Also, what does it mean to be in the Church calendar? Fires and earthquakes are also in Church calendars. The earthquake which rocked Constantinople in 740 AD and did major damage to the Church of Hagia Irene is commemorated on October 26 in the *Synaxarion* of Constantinople. If non-miraculous events such as earthquakes are remembered in the Church’s calendar why not remember emperors who contributed to the growth of the Church even though their lives may not reflect the sanctity that we would expect from someone whose name appears on the liturgical calendar. The Church calendar is also about memory and not solely an acknowledgement of sanctity. We often think of saints as being superior in virtue, and because we can’t see into the hearts of Constantine the Great and Alexander Nevsky, it is more difficult to interpret. What do you think?

RTE: My sense of St. Constantine is that, for Orthodox, salvation is a mystery that unfolds, rather than a one-time conversion, and that he was acclaimed “Equal to the Apostles” not only because he legalized Christianity, but also because he gave it a central place in the Roman Empire that ushered in the age of the Cappadocian Fathers and the imperial-sponsored Ecumenical Councils. The Church simply wouldn’t have developed in the same way without imperial support. Although St. Constantine did things in his life that weren’t saintly, he considered himself a Christian and was baptized on his deathbed. St. Vladimir and his mother St. Olga are “Equal-to-the-Apostles” for the same reason as Sts. Constantine and Helen are. They brought Christianity to Russia.

DR. SKEDROS: I wonder if there are Byzantine miracles associated with Constantine after his death? For example, at the canonization of the fourteenth-century St. Gregory Palamas, who was both a virtuous monk and theologian, there was already a record of miracles after his death. What do the Russians do, particularly about Tsar Nicholas II?

RTE: The Russian imperial saints, such as the Princes Boris and Gleb, Vladimir’s sons, Great Prince Dmitry, and Tsar Nicholas II and his family, including his sister-in-law Grand Duchess Elizabeth, are a little easier to navigate

because the Russians have a category called “Passion-Bearers”, in which a pious member of the royal family is put to death, not as a martyr asked to deny Christ, but because of their position as an anointed Orthodox Christian ruler, as the heir, or as family. They wouldn’t be called a passion-bearer unless they also demonstrated personal piety and a conscious struggle for virtue, as in the case of Boris and Gleb, who did not want to betray the peaceful principles of Christianity by fighting their brother for the throne.

DR. SKEDROS: Then my next question is, are there liturgical texts for all the emperors that are commemorated in the *Synaxarion of Constantinople*? Or are some of them on the calendar simply to be remembered as having helped the Church? If they are on our church calendar, we tend to treat them all the same.

RTE: I’ve seen liturgical services for Constantine and Helen, Vladimir and Olga, for Empress St. Theodora who overturned iconoclasm, also for Tsar Nicholas II and his family, though that is very recent. Others, such as Justinian and Theodora, and Theodosius II, I’m not sure of. As you say, it’s confusing that we have only the English word “saint” and rarely, “blessed” to describe those commemorated in the calendar.

DR. SKEDROS: If I may, I’d like to return to the role of military saints in Byzantium and reemphasize that the hagiographic and iconographic witnesses to the military saints in Byzantium actually say very little about war. The *Lives* are not concerned about whether war is morally or ethically appropriate or not. They are concerned that these saints stood up for their Christian faith and were martyred. Once the story is told of their martyrdom, then miracles begin to be associated with them and then these saints are called upon to help not only individuals but cities and the empire as a whole.

RTE: Also, when you look at instances of miraculous intervention on the part of the Mother of God, or St. Michael, or the military saints, they don’t leap down from heaven to slay the enemy. They generally appear on the walls, or on a horse on the battlefield, and frighten the enemy so badly that they flee. That was the result of St. Demetrios’ appearances in Thessaloniki, and the same with the World War II story of the appearance of St. Menas at El Alamein, when he appeared in the Nazi camp leading a string of camels. Whether the story is true or not, he wasn’t portrayed as killing the Germans;

his appearance simply filled them with confusion and dread. They were so dispirited that they lost El Alamein, which stopped their advance in Northern Africa.

DR. SKEDROS: Yes, the saints' help is usually defensive and protective. And we know that there were saints' images on military banners by the tenth and eleventh centuries. Would that have been for defensive purposes or for inspiration?

RTE: I wonder if it is both? I remember seeing a huge monumental Russian army icon of the Mother of God that Tsar Nicholas II had commissioned in WWI to be seen from a hilltop by troops fighting below. Interestingly, she isn't portrayed as an abbess or a leader, but in a very motherly pose, full of tenderness and compassion, with her face pressed close to her infant Son. There was nothing warlike about it.

DR. SKEDROS: I am also intrigued by this image of Basil II of which we spoke earlier. Basil is depicted in his imperial military attire, surrounded by medallions with the busts of military saints. Here is an example of a combination of imperial authority calling on the protection or assistance of saints. These texts and the veneration of saints tell us about how the Byzantines viewed their world, how they lived their lives, and the role the saints played in their lives. However, you cannot argue that because the Byzantines venerated a group of saints that they depict in military attire, and called upon them in moments of need, that there was either a just war theory or some sort of philosophical or moral justification of war that the Church supported. You simply can't argue it from these texts.

The Byzantines did not produce any sustained theological discourse on the moral or ethical role of war. For them, killing was wrong, though necessary at times. What is interesting is that for Byzantine society, which rarely saw any prolonged period of peace, war, instead of being glorified, was seen as a necessity that, if possible, the state should try to avoid. The recent book by Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, demonstrates the lengths to which the Byzantines went to utilize other resources (especially statecraft) to avoid wars. So, when people try to come up with a just war theory, it just doesn't fit with the historical tradition of these Lives.

RTE: It strikes me though, that there is an unspoken thread that runs through Orthodox literature about the darkness and unnaturalness of violence. Not

only are these military saints not striking the enemy dead with thunderbolts from heaven, but when you get the stories of occasional monks who use physical violence to defend themselves against invading barbarians who are bent on destroying the monastery, it feels wrong and jarring somehow. You are glad when the monk-defenders manage to survive, but they are never held up as saints. It's like the Old Testament prohibition of boiling a kid in its mother's milk, a mixing of two distinct states and an unnaturalness that can't be gotten around.

DR. SKEDROS: I also can't think of any example in Byzantium where there is a collective recognition by the Church that "these so-and-so soldiers who died in battle must be remembered or recognized as saints". The larger groups such as the 40 Martyrs of Sebaste or the 42 Martyrs of Amorion that may have included soldiers are remembered collectively, but as martyrs. I cannot recall any offensive military battles that are commemorated on the Byzantine church calendar. Miraculous protection of a city or deliverance from the attack of an enemy, yes, but offensive battles for the recapture of lost territory, no.

RTE: And as you've pointed out, Patriarch Polyuktos did not include the slain soldiers of Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas (963-969) in the calendar as martyrs. For Christian Byzantium, death in defense of the homeland did not result in sainthood.

DR. SKEDROS: That's true. For the Byzantines it was about protection and survival, and we can't co-opt that tradition to defend our own position, whether pro-war or pacifist. It simply isn't historically honest to do so. You can argue whether the Church has a just-war theory or not, but you can't use the military saints as evidence. ✦