

Routledge Research in Byzantine Studies

BYZANTINE CHILDHOOD

**REPRESENTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF
CHILDREN IN MIDDLE BYZANTINE SOCIETY**

Oana-Maria Cojocaru



Byzantine Childhood

Byzantine Childhood examines the intricacies of growing up in medieval Byzantium, children's everyday experiences, and their agency. By piecing together a wide range of sources and utilising several methodological approaches inspired by intersectionality, history from below and microhistory, it analyses the life course of Byzantine boys and girls and how medieval Byzantine society perceived and treated them according to societal and cultural expectations surrounding age, gender, and status. Ultimately, it seeks to reconstruct a more plausible picture of the everyday life of children, one of the most vulnerable social groups throughout history and often a neglected subject in scholarship. Written in a lively and engaging manner, this book is necessary reading for scholars and students of Byzantine history, as well as those interested in the history of childhood and the family.

Oana-Maria Cojocaru is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Umeå, Sweden, where she is conducting a project on disabled children in Byzantium. She was awarded a PhD from the University of Oslo, where she was part of the international project 'Tiny Voices from the Past: New Perspectives on Childhood in Early Europe'. She has taught about perceptions and conceptions of childhood in the Middle Ages and shared her research on the everyday life experiences of Byzantine children in talks and publications. She is co-editor of *Childhood in History: Perceptions of Children in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (Routledge 2018).



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Byzantine Childhood

Representations and Experiences of
Children in Middle Byzantine Society

Oana-Maria Cojocaru

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Abbreviations

AASS	Acta Sanctorum
AB	Analecta Bollandiana
BF	Byzantinische Forschungen
BMFD	Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents. 5 vols, eds. J. Thomas and A. Constantinides Hero (Washington, 2000).
BMGS	Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies
Byz	Byzantion revue internationale des études byzantines
BZ	Byzantinische Zeitschrift
DOP	Dumbarton Oaks Papers
GRBS	Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies
JECS	Journal of Early Christian Studies
JMH	Journal of Modern Hellenism
JÖB	Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik
ODB	Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium, 3 vols., eds. A.P. Kazhdan et al. (New York, 1991)
PBW	Prosopography of the Byzantine World, 2016, eds. M Jeffreys et al. (King's College London, 2017).
PG	Patrologiae cursus completes. Series graeca, 161 vols, ed. J-P. Migne, (Paris, 1857–1866)
PMBZ	Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit Online
PO	Patrologia Orientalis
REB	Revue des études byzantines
ROC	Revue de l'Orient chrétien
SynaxCP	Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantino politanae Propylaeum ad Acta Sanctorum Novembris, ed. H. Delehaye (Brussels 1902, rprt. Louvain : [1954])
TM	Travaux et Mémoires



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Introduction

How is childhood conceptualized in Byzantine texts? What was it like to grow up in the medieval Byzantine world? How did a child experience life a thousand years ago in a village in Asia Minor, in a provincial town, or in Constantinople, the greatest city of the Mediterranean world? This book seeks to answer such questions by exploring a wide range of hagiographical and non-hagiographical texts spanning a period of two hundred years, from circa mid-ninth century to circa mid-eleventh century, which inform us about how children were perceived by adults and how they experienced childhood. The book focuses on two areas: on the one hand, it focuses on the ideology surrounding childhood, and on the other hand, it focuses on everyday experiences of children who once lived and breathed. Although these two levels might seem at first sight as opposing to one another, they are in fact inextricably linked. Ideas, ideologies, and discourses on children and childhood expressed in the written sources reflect, to a certain extent, the social realities in which children lived. Social realities and experiences of life are, in turn, shaped by discourses that give meaning to the rough facts of everyday existence by integrating them into a culturally determined linguistic and conceptual system of signification. In other words, there is no pure, unadulterated experience of children as separate from what people thought about children: Byzantine children and Byzantine people writing, speaking, and thinking of children were themselves all participating in the same order of discourse that pre-established the boundaries of what and how people would think, write, or speak. Accordingly, I view cultural attitudes to childhood in relation to the social aspects of children's lives. In this respect, the book deals with several important questions: how did Byzantine authors portray children and childhood in their texts? What typical characteristics did they ascribe to boys and girls, respectively? What were the prevailing social practices with respect to children's upbringing in various stages of their development? What roles and functions did children have in the family unit, depending on age, gender, and social status? How did parental practices differ depending on these factors? These questions ultimately lead to another important issue that has received little attention in scholarship: what was it like to be a child in Byzantine medieval society? By tackling these matters,

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my aim is to reconstruct a more plausible picture of everyday life of Byzantine children, one of the most vulnerable social groups throughout history and often a neglected subject in scholarship.

Hagiography is a rich source for recovering something of children's lives in the Middle Byzantine period, a time that was extremely active and rich in the production of *vitae*, which constitute one of the main sources for social history.¹ This is the era in which, after two centuries of literary and artistic eclipse, hagiography flourished under the auspices of the Macedonian dynasty that ruled the Byzantine Empire from 862 until 1056. A considerable number of *vitae* of new saints were produced during the ninth and the tenth centuries. The eleventh century marked the beginning of an era when the hagiographical production was organized in the form of *menologia* and *synaxaria*, whereas the composition of new and original hagiographies declined dramatically.²

However, albeit an essential source for social history, hagiographies should be used cautiously. These biographies dedicated to the lives and deeds of holy men and women, usually presented in a narrative line from birth to death, were written not only with the purpose of promoting the saints' cult, but also with the didactic aim of presenting the audience with a saintly way of life to emulate. From this point of view, hagiographical texts are both descriptive and prescriptive in that they do not only describe the lives of holy individuals but they act as ideal examples of how a life is supposed to be led. Hagiographers were not attempting to report what happened in objective reality in accordance with our modern sense of a journalistic account, but to present their heroes in the best possible light; in other words, they wanted to show what extraordinary figures the saints were. To do that, the authors of such texts could embellish their narratives with elements that would offer the readers spiritual edification.

As we have no source written by a child, or even by a woman, what we are left with in the end is a distorted image of childhood that comes through the lens of educated male adults who had their own assumptions about children and childhood.

Hagiographical narratives were written according to a fairly standardized template of rhetorical composition. Almost all of them, at least in what concerns the Middle Byzantine period, start with some information about the saints' parents, their social and geographical origins. They then continue with details about their childhood, usually with special attention to the moral formation they received at home and to their formal education.³ From details of this kind, we get an impression of the diversity of children's everyday life in villages and towns, the family dynamics, parental practices, interpersonal relationships between children, parents, and relatives, and the role of each of these individuals in a child's upbringing.

Therefore, when it comes to the early period of a saint's life, hagiography may be taken to contain some measure of reality about Byzantine children's lives, but at the same time, it presents certain stereotypes of holy childhood.

The core problem is to distinguish between the prescriptions of the texts and how children acted out in their real life. What is stressed in childhood narratives, for instance, is more what children's behaviour *ought* to be, rather than how it really was. This can be seen especially in the representation of the saints-to-be shaped according to features that are placed in antithesis to specific attributes that characterize ordinary children.⁴ For instance, when we read that a holy child, unlike others, behaved maturely (the *topos* of *puer senex*), it means that in the biographers' opinion, children in general did not display this kind of conduct. This literary cliché makes us aware of how children were expected to behave, but at a certain level, also how they acted out in contrast with these expectations. Moreover, we should be aware from the outset that when a hagiographer wrote about a particular saint's childhood, this does not mean that he or she reproduced the 'real' events from the saint's early life. Some may have been well informed about their protagonists, but many others may simply have 'invented' a particular event if it served their purpose.⁵ We know, for instance, that some authors belonged to the family of the saints. In this case, they were likely to have been familiar with various events from the saints' life, perhaps even from their childhood. This may also be the case when the hagiographers were the saints' disciples and may have had access to information provided by the saints themselves. In both these situations, however, the authors were likely to have embellished their stories with fictitious details to highlight a particular feature of the saints (e.g. their character or behaviour).

At the other end of the spectrum, there are *vitae* written long after the saints' death. The chronological distance indicates that the biographers could hardly have known anything about the early life of their protagonists. In this case, they may simply have introduced some formulaic piece of information about childhood, usually borrowed from other *vitae*. There are a number of clichés such as the astonishing qualities of a saintly child, or the description of the moral virtues that are very similar in many texts.⁶ These literary commonplaces, however, have their own potential insofar as they highlight what the audience was expected to hear about a child. If we read that a saintly child living in the ninth century was brought up in piety, this means that the moral and religious formation of children was a feature the Byzantines could recognize from their own everyday life even one or two centuries later. Byzantium was, after all, a society where religion throughout the centuries played a great role in the life of people, whether adults or children. We should not dismiss this kind of information only because we encounter it in so many *vitae* written at different points in time. Such literary devices can be seen as expressing certain ideas and ideals that were deeply embedded in Byzantine mentality. Thus, from this type of information, we can also extract valuable evidence about the mentalities, ideas, and customs of the time when the biography was composed. What was written about children and childhood may reflect not the time when the saint lived, but the period when the *vita* was composed. Some authors are also likely to have

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provided information about their own childhood, by projecting their experiences of their own times onto the characters depicted in the hagiographies.

Anthony Kaldellis has argued that hagiographers fashioned many stories, which, despite the abundance of unbelievable details for a modern reader, were based on social realities that were familiar to the audience.⁷ It is, for example, well known that many hagiographies, at the end of the narrative, contain a list of healing miracles performed through the relics of the saints. The beneficiaries of these miracles were both adults and children. The main reason for including the miracles was, of course, to highlight the holiness of the saints as manifested through their healing powers, and to promote their cult in a certain milieu. Nevertheless, one can extract from these stories elements that give evidence of social history: we learn about the milieus where children came from, their social background, or in what context their illness or accidents occurred. It is also worth noting that all social classes are represented in these narratives, from children of aristocratic individuals to those of poor families, and in this way, the scholar can unearth valuable information about the differences, as well as the common elements across the levels of social class.

In a nutshell, hagiographical narratives are especially disposed to serve as the carrier of ideology – that of Eastern Christianity, Byzantine society and culture, and the function of saints and miracles ascribed to them therein.⁸ The small glimpses from the lives of children that pepper the sources, while contributing to the ‘effect of reality’ as details enhancing the illusion of the narrative’s veracity, nevertheless would have had to be recognized by the audience as corresponding to what was expected and common in their everyday realities – otherwise, the use of completely fantastical descriptions of childhood or experiences thereof would have broken this illusion.⁹ Thus, while we can never be sure as to the ultimate truth of these accounts, they can be safely used to discern social realities recognized as such by Byzantine audiences of these hagiographies.

In hagiographies, the representation of children and childhood emerges on two main levels. On one level, there are the holy children whose ideal childhood may, to a certain extent, reflect the social realities of childhood; on another level, there are the ordinary children who appear as background figures, sometimes serving as a counter-paradigm to the saints-to-be, and sometimes described in a more neutral way in miracle stories as beneficiaries of the saints’ healing powers. From this point of view, Byzantine hagiographies provide the reader with a multifaceted image of children and childhood, which is based not only on attributes pertaining to holiness but also on attributes of children as human beings.

The sources, when corroborated with what we know about Byzantine society, also present us with another dimension: children as important members of society enmeshed in a variety of social and legal situations. Byzantium was a family-oriented society in which the institution of marriage was supported by the church and regulated and controlled by the state. Children’s central

position in the family unit can be seen not only in hagiographical texts, but also in the legislation which established norms meant to protect young members of society. Infanticide and abandonment were strictly condemned as murder, although in practice it is difficult to state to what extent the norms were followed. Parents were morally and legally responsible for providing care for their children. The *Ecloga* (eighth century) established women's right to act as legal guardians for their children when the head of the household died. Widowed mothers also had the right to manage the entire property of the family on their own, with the obligation to bring up their children and to provide for their marriage. One century later, the Novels of Leo VI allowed women to adopt children, even if they were unmarried or barren, so as they would benefit from children's support in old age.¹⁰ If both parents died, the legal guardianship passed to the relatives in the extended family. The state also established an ambitious programme of child protection in collaboration with religious institutions, local churches, and monasteries, which accommodated orphaned children who did not have any legal guardians.¹¹

All these aspects of law and life can be observed in our sources, which present children in the family context, the monastic milieu, and other settings. Consequently, my analysis will deal with several groups of children: children with one or both living parents who spent their childhood in nuclear families; orphan children who were entrusted to relatives; orphan children who were raised by monastic communities. In addition, a particular group of children mentioned in our sources were those with living parents who were entrusted to monastic communities with the aim of becoming monks and nuns later on.

Since the majority of children were raised within their own families, family dynamics, parental practices, and interpersonal relationships between children and parents and relatives will take a prominent place in my analysis. With regard to the last category, that of children entrusted to monasteries and who would take the monastic habit at a later date, their situation should be regarded as an exception. In general, children were expected to assure the perpetuation of the lineage, and many young Byzantines did get married and had their own offspring. Byzantine hagiographers, however, had an ambivalent view of the family: on the one hand, they stressed the importance of family values, and on the other hand, they advocated the rejection of family ties in favour of monastic life. Those children who were entrusted by their families to monastic communities constituted a minority, and their situation had its own particularities, depending very much on the family circumstances. Their life in monasteries obviously differed from those who lived with their own families, because the monastic world had its own rules and regulations, distinct from those in the family unit. The formation of children's social identity depended much on the norms of behaviour, values, and customs shared by the communities where they lived. Accordingly, life in a monastic setting represents in many ways a different pattern in terms of living conditions and social norms.

By analysing children in these settings, I aim to offer a fresh view of how children and childhood were perceived in Byzantine society, and contribute to previous scholarship through the new approaches I propose in assessing their everyday experiences.

A short overview of research on Byzantine childhood

The past few decades have witnessed a tremendous growth of interest in ancient and medieval children and childhood. Yet, the pace of research on Byzantine children and childhood has been generally slower compared with that of scholars working on different periods.¹² Even more, the topic of children in Middle Byzantine society has only recently started to receive due attention. The interest in Byzantine childhood emerged during the 1970s and 1980s particularly among French historians influenced by the structuralism of the *Annales* School. Much of the work in this first stage of research has been based mainly on the analysis of legal sources and it focused primarily on children's legal status and their role within the family. The first studies during these years have been done by Evelyne Patlagean (1973), Helene Antoniadis Bibicou (1973), and Joelle Beaucamp (1977) who were also pioneers in gender studies among Byzantinists. They touched upon aspects of childhood related to questions of family law (such as the position of legitimate and illegitimate children within the family, issues concerning minority, coming of age, and the age of marriage), but also the place of children in family strategies.

While hagiography was used more as an auxiliary source material, over the years, scholars have started to pay closer attention to how childhood is represented in these sources. However, historians have focused more on late antiquity and the early Byzantine period, and less on the following centuries that cover the Middle and Late Byzantine period. This is the case with the studies by Dorothy Abrahamse and Ann Moffatt at the end of the 1970s. Abrahamse (1979) analysed the representations of childhood in early Byzantine hagiography by looking especially at themes related to childhood that were incorporated by hagiographers in their accounts, and how child-rearing practices are depicted in the sources of the fourth to the seventh centuries. Ann Moffatt (1979) touched upon the subject of education portrayed in the hagiographical sources of the eighth and the ninth centuries. Several years later, Moffatt (1986) published a short, but insightful article on the conceptions of childhood in Byzantine thinking.

Hagiographical sources have been fruitfully exploited in relation to children's education, one of the most studied topics in the first decade of the new millennium, which marked a new phase in the study of medieval childhood in Byzantium. Some of Nikos Kalogeras's work explored the role played by parents and the extended family in children's education (2005), as well as the symbiosis between the secular and the religious education offered to Byzantine boys (2012). Nevertheless, his most comprehensive work on this

topic remains his unpublished doctoral dissertation (2000), which covers the period from the sixth to the ninth centuries and explores important aspects of the educational system in Byzantium, as well as how, when, and where children received formal training.

The interest in Byzantine children was singled out in the new millennium by studies that explored new sources and dealt with new topics. Thanks to Hummel (1999), we know more about childhood diseases that were described in the works of twenty-one Greek medical authors from the fourth to the fourteenth century. The pattern of childhood diseases has also been thoroughly explored by Bourbou (2010), where she has combined textual evidence with bioarchaeological data to provide a better picture of the living condition, dietary practices, and breastfeeding and weaning patterns of the population in Byzantine Crete. The archaeological data shows that childhood mortality, which in many cases exceeded infant mortality, was greatly influenced by the environmental factors (for instance, poor hygiene) but also by weaning practices. For instance, in medieval Byzantium, children were vulnerable to infectious diseases because of iron deficiency and malnutrition.

A valuable contribution to the study of childhood in Byzantium was made by Miller (2003), who examined a wide range of legal, monastic, and hagiographical sources to shed light on the life of orphan children. Byzantine society, as he has shown, preferred to leave orphans with relatives and thus, most state activity on behalf of orphans focused on reforming the laws that gave family members the rights to act as guardians. He traces the evolution of the philanthropic institutions throughout the centuries, demonstrating the important role played by the Church in the organization of children's welfare.

As part of the increasing interest in childhood history, Dumbarton Oaks organized in 2006 a symposium dedicated to the topic of children and childhood in Byzantium. Its proceedings were published three years later in a collective volume edited by Arietta Papaconstantinou and Alice-Mary Talbot (2009). The goal of the book, as is stated from the beginning, was to correct the imbalance caused by the paucity of studies of children and childhood in the Byzantine Empire and to give an impetus to scholars to continue the research in this field. The volume, which was the first major comprehensive collection focuses exclusively on children and childhood, contains eight essays that analyse childhood in Byzantium from various perspectives and in various contexts, and proposes new methodologies and strategies in interpreting the sources. Since then, the literature in the field has been enriched with two other monographs published by Cecily Hennessy and Despoina Ariantzi. Hennessy (2008) tackles a previously unexplored topic – children's representations in Byzantine art. She demonstrates that children were not only subjects but also recipients and possibly even involved in the production of visual imagery. The study by Ariantzi (2012) took a big step towards a more systematic analysis of children and childhood in Byzantium.

She based her research on a vast corpus spanning the sixth through the eleventh centuries, highlighting the most important aspects in children's lives: birth, baptism, breastfeeding practices, relationships in the family milieu, the period of training, fatal diseases, and death. After the publication of this monograph, only two other articles deal exclusively with childhood in the Middle Byzantine period, one of them addressing the issue of children's agency in the monastic context¹³ and the other one being a short overview of childhood in both the Middle and Late Byzantine periods.¹⁴

Despite the advance made by Byzantinists in the study of children and childhood, their work has been much more devoted to the social structures and institutions governing children's lives and less to children themselves. As such, there is still much to be done, as very little attention has been paid to the experiences of being a child and of growing up in different social settings, as well as to socialization in everyday life and children's agency in various contexts. This book aims to fill this gap in scholarship by providing a fresh perspective on discourses of childhood, and how children's everyday life experiences are narrated and reconstructed in the sources of the Middle Byzantine period, by means of an innovative methodological toolbox aimed at sketching a more nuanced picture of childhood as well as the diverse lived experiences of medieval children.

However, some important topics have had to be left aside: the book will not discuss the experiences of slave children, nor of those children with physical or mental impairments. I do not devote a separate chapter to children's illnesses and death, although I constantly refer throughout the book to these issues.

Theoretical and methodological toolbox

Traditionally, historical childhood has been largely framed from a perspective that tended to universalize the experiences of children. Taking a social constructionist approach, this book proposes a theoretical framework that links life course theory and intersectionality, which enables a more fine-grained analysis of children's diverse life contexts and conditions. Life course theory is based on a set of principles according to which the life of an individual from birth to death is a process defined by culturally constructed stages and transitions. While age is an important feature in constructing a life course, more important is the meaning attached by society to events and actions that occur at different stages of life.¹⁵ One of its basic tenets is that people's life course is shaped by their historical time and geographical setting. As an example, Byzantine children born in the second decade of the tenth century in Constantinople, which was hit by severe famine determined by the brutal winter of 927–8, experienced a historical time that was distinctive compared with children born later, as the severity of conditions in which they grew up differed. Another principle stipulates that the trajectory of a life with its transitions and rites of passage is fluid and is determined

by variables like age, gender, and status. Moreover, there is the principle of linked lives, which states that the life course is marked by family ties and social networks, therefore children's diverse experiences of life are greatly influenced by the social contexts in which they live and by their relationships with other people.¹⁶ For Byzantine children, the process of growing up was marked by a series of rites of passages, such as naming, churching, baptism, weaning, beginning of primary education, beard cutting, head covering, and betrothal, which represented major milestones through which they were gradually inducted into the adult world with its privileges and responsibilities. However, the way in which children experienced these transitions from one stage to another and how they were socialized during childhood depended to a great degree on age, gender, and status. In this sense, intersectionality can be a useful analytical framework in accounting for different experiences of life as a result of how categories such as age, class, gender, race, slavery, and dis(ability) intersect and overlap with one another in reproducing structural inequalities for certain groups. Coined by a scholar of critical race theory, Kimberle Crenshaw, intersectionality was introduced in feminist studies to raise awareness of the multidimensional forms of identities that give rise to the structural forms of subordination and privilege. Women as a gender category are also black, white, poor, rich, abled, or disabled, and so on, each of these dimensions interacting in shaping various forms of inequalities, and ultimately women's everyday experiences.¹⁷

Intersectionality has been applied in various fields of historical study dealing with marginal groups of society, such as women and slaves. Recently, the intersectional approach has also been recognized as a useful analytical tool in childhood studies through which one can ask how age, class, ethnicity, gender, and status operate together in shaping children's lives.¹⁸

A Byzantine child was born in a society of male domination in both the public and private sphere, thus in a hierarchal and patriarchal system of subordination. A child was first and foremost subject to adults' authority. In a patriarchal society like the Byzantine one, being a girl entailed certain prejudices she had to be confronted with throughout her life. Women were expected to be under the control of their fathers, then of their husbands. By and large, they were denied access to public life, therefore their opportunities in life differed greatly compared with those of boys, because of the different societal expectations and gender roles ascribed to them. Social status, on the other hand, added a new dimension in their life experiences. A girl from the elite class would have different opportunities and privileges from a girl or a boy from a lowly social background. In the same way, the state of orphanhood had a great influence on children's experiences of life. In this book, I deal with all these aspects, and I aim at showing how children's lives differed depending on these variables.

In studying the discourses of childhood as well as children's experiences of life, the combination of life course theory with intersectionality enables us to see how children's lives are constructed via a series of features that

determine the trajectory of their lives. For instance, the life of a Byzantine boy could be drastically different from that of a girl, not only because of the different gender roles but also because of the age at which they could start performing them (i.e. betrothal/marriage). Likewise, a different social and economic background can have a great impact on the life of a child, because of the presence or absence of opportunities that follow from it. While children belonging to rich families could attain better education because of the financial support of their families, poor children did not normally benefit from the same chances. Furthermore, the roles played by the parents or relatives in children's lives influenced their future. For instance, several hagiographical narratives of our period speak about girls and boys who entered the monasteries where their relatives had already taken vows. Their choice of a specific monastery was not accidental, since they could benefit from these relationships. Similarly, some parents forced their children into unwanted marriages, which sometimes led the child (usually a boy) to flee from the family setting. In the case of girls, the situation differed greatly because they usually obeyed their parents' decision. Hence, the life course of children was constructed differently and the transitions and rites of passage during childhood need to be understood in relation to gender, status, and age and within a society in which rituals and behavioural expectations would influence the ways in which children acted out.

The concepts of socialization and agency are crucial for the holistic account of the Byzantine childhood I propose in this book. Their usefulness for the study of social history, especially with regard to childhood, has been demonstrated by the recent work on children's everyday lives in late antiquity and the medieval world. Traditional accounts of socialization positioned the child as a passive object on which society left its mark. Recently, however, contemporary sociology sees children as social actors and as people with agency.¹⁹ Indeed, socialization does not mean that people are simply moulded into pre-existent shapes, like dough by a cookie-cutter. How else can one account for the paradox of any culture or society, namely the temporary durability of certain patterns of behaviour and thought and the constant mutability of all of them? People are not just socialized into the social beings that they are, but are also actors on the social scene, or as Tonkin has aptly put it, they are "agents, making society (and history) by acting out their lives, not simply fitting slots in a predetermined system", interacting with each other according to extant social scripts, even while the patterns guiding these interactions are constantly changing.²⁰ Understood together, then, the concepts of socialization and agency can constitute a powerful paradigm for understanding how people can meaningfully act upon their lives, even while this capacity is manifested within extant social networks and structures of power.

Bypassing the dichotomy of passive socialization vs. agency, I take the view that both of these processes are interlinked, taking place in the hundreds of daily interactions between humans, being constituted by both

individual actions and reactions to other people's words and deeds – most of which take place according to the norms of pre-existent systems of discourse and behaviour, which are themselves open to more or less gradual change, one socio-cultural negotiation at a time.

My book, thus, takes the position that in spite of the fact that we cannot access children's voices in Byzantine texts, children did have agency. For, as Vuolanto reminds us, identifying children's agency in historical contexts "need not mean finding 'great deeds' or heroism in the lives of children," since agency is manifested in the small occurrences of everyday life. One does not need to act rebelliously, in contrast to social expectations, to feel like an active social agent – agency is just as often involved in the reproduction of socio-cultural norms.²¹ In consonance with the approach taken by Vuolanto et al. in the volume on Roman childhood, I seek to reconstruct the social environment within which children of the Byzantine world could act. This represents the framework for their experiences, in which instances of family life with everything that entails – for example, education, play, work, religious practices – are arenas of socialization in which children's agency is manifested.

What would it mean, then, to uncover Byzantine children's experiences of life and their agency? Scholars fully acknowledged the fact that the sources of ancient and medieval worlds do not record any subjective experiences of children. This also holds true in what concerns the Byzantine children, who left no source written by them. Yet we can glean much valuable information on how children used their time, what they did, and with whom they interacted – all of this constituting their experiences – from sources written by authors who were not particularly interested in children's lives, but who nevertheless mentioned these aspects in their writings. Although here we are not dealing with direct experiences, in a historical context, as Vuolanto has rightly argued, "experience that can be studied is always something which is already told, spoken about, and thus constructed."²² Here is where the sources I explore prove their usefulness: hagiographies, funeral orations, and letters provide a kaleidoscope of such narrated experience, which record what living people in Byzantium thought, felt, and experienced. Through this multifaceted perspective, we can glimpse at processes and forces that may have been hidden to the people involved in them, thus uncovering different processes of socialization dependent on gender, social milieu, family group, and the human agency involved at every step. Thus, while it may seem that we are stuck with an outsider's perspective in the study of children, since they did not actually produce any of the sources we use, we might be able to look at the environment, activities, and the social setting that was experienced by these children.

While most of the book employs fairly conventional academic writing in which I analyse the sources via intersectionality to see how gender, age, status, and contextual factors are intersecting in various ways in shaping children's life course and experiences, the last chapter uses a more unconventional

approach that aims to provide a more direct and organic access to the lived experiences of Byzantine children. The approach is inspired by history from below and microhistory, both of them being concerned with the views and actions of ordinary people, their lives, and struggles, attempting to provide a bottom-up perspective on various historical events and social structures that governed people's lives.²³ Recently it has been argued that history from below should "move subaltern people from static synchronic analysis into narratives and to conceive them not only as objects of exploitation and domination, but also as active historical agents."²⁴ This principle goes hand in hand with systematic microhistory, which allows the historian to see the agency of individuals "at every level of society, but always within a specific, concrete network of social relationships."²⁵ It is out of the desire to make children's everyday life experiences more visible, less abstract, and less dry that I attempt to describe an ordinary day from children's standpoints. Therefore, the last chapter is made up of the interconnected narratives of one day in the lives of four fictional Byzantine children, rigorously pieced together from the evidence provided by the primary sources explored more traditionally in the previous chapters.

Sources

As it has become already clear, the main sources I draw upon in this book are the *Saints' Lives* produced between the ninth and the eleventh centuries. In this period, the Byzantine Empire comprised a vast geographical area, from the Balkans to Asia Minor and the South of Italy. Asia Minor was the land that produced by far the largest number of saints.²⁶ Accordingly, many children, whether holy or ordinary, have been identified as coming from this geographical area. Constantinople was the capital city of the empire and the largest urban centre, where many saints from wealthy families were born and others came to get an education. Our sources also mention some saints born to peasant families who lived in various villages across the empire. But, given the large number of saints born to aristocratic families living in large cities, urban elite children are overrepresented in this study. However, in spite of this, we also have sufficient information in the sources to get an idea of children's lives in the rural areas. In this study, I shall make use of fifty-four *vitae*. Only nine of them are about female saints; thus the quantitative data on girls' childhood is more limited than on boys. The material includes some specific groups of saints, which will be presented below, and whose biographies contain relevant details about children and childhood.

After the first iconoclastic period (730–87), and especially after the reinstatement of iconoclasm in 815, there emerged in Byzantine hagiography a new category of saints, the iconodules, whose biographies began to be produced in Constantinople and its vicinities. In addition to monastic hagiographies, *vitae* were also written about Constantinopolitan patriarchs who had distinguished themselves in doctrinal controversies. Many pious

biographies of the ninth century deal with the issue of the iconoclastic controversy and praise the deeds of the heroes who were active in defence of the icons.²⁷ However, despite the political and religious character that is displayed in the texts, one can find useful information both about the cultural attitudes to childhood and details related to the saints' early lives. These individuals belonged by and large to wealthy aristocratic families who were concerned with providing their children suitable education that would ensure a good career. Consequently, information about the stages of education pursued by these saints is of much value towards this study.

In the ninth and tenth centuries, there emerged a new trend in promoting the cults of contemporary saints, especially by the members of the saints' families. Theodore of Stoudite was the first to be interested in promoting his family cult.²⁸ His *encomia* for his uncle Plato and his mother Theoktiste are of particular interest because they highlight the interpersonal relationships between the family members and also contain autobiographical details from his own childhood.

In this period, a new type of female saint also appears: that of the married laywomen who achieved sanctity without adopting the monastic habit. Although this group is small, it has been argued that its occurrence in hagiography indicates changes in the criteria for canonization in the Middle Byzantine period.²⁹ The group consists of four saints, namely Theokleto (ninth century), Theophano, the first wife of the emperor Leo VI (886–912), Mary the Younger (875–903), and Thomaïs of Lesbos (900–50). Apart from these, I shall also use other female *vitae* produced between the ninth and the eleventh centuries; these fall into different categories of saints: defenders of Orthodoxy (Theodora the Empress), nuns and abbesses (Theodora of Thessalonike, Athanasia of Aegina, and Irene of Chrysobalanton), transvestite saints (Anna/Euphemia and Euphrosyne the Younger), and female hermits (Theoktiste of Lesbos).³⁰ All of these texts provide us with useful information about parental practices concerning the upbringing of girls.

The tenth century is also characterized by the predominance of the founders of monastic communities, such as Paul the Younger and Luke of Steiris, whose *vitae* contain information both about their early life as orphans within the family context, and about their period of novitiate in monastic communities.

The eleventh century marked the decline in the production of hagiographical texts. Compared with the previous two centuries, few new *vitae* were written in this period. Of particular importance for this study are the *vitae* of several politically active saints like Symeon the New Theologian, Lazarus of Galesion, and Cyril the Phileote, and the *vitae* of monastic saints, such as Nikon the Metanoite and Athanasios of Athos. The lives of Symeon the New Theologian and of Lazarus of Galesion are important for the present study with regard to the actions undertaken by parents from different social levels in assuring a future career for their offspring, while the *vitae* of Nikon the Metanoite and of Cyril the Phileote show the tensions between children

and their families with regard to the choice of a religious life. The *vita* of Athanasios provides significant details about his early life, as a child who lost his family.

The hagiographical corpus also contains saints of Italo-Greek origins. Here, I take into consideration three *vitae* of saintly monks who were born in Sicily (Elias the Younger) and Southern Italy (Neilos the Younger and Phantinos the Younger).

The list of saints whose *vitae* I use in this book is presented at the end of this chapter. The table is arranged chronologically according to the earliest possible date of composition of the *vitae*. As I have mentioned, the details we learn about a certain saint's childhood may reflect, not so much the period when the saint lived, as the time when the *vita* was composed. Yet, I have chosen to also look at one source that lies outside the period under investigation (*The Life and Encomium of Euphrosyne the Younger*) since it likely reflects realities that were not dramatically different from those in the time frame I focus on, as well as to include at least one more female-focused account in a corpus that heavily skews towards the masculine experience. In the chart, along with the name of the saint, I have included the period in which they lived, the birthplace and social location during their childhood, the approximate period of composition of their biographies, the author, and the reference number assigned to each saint in Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca (BHG).³¹

The final column, with capital letters, contains the main elements of childhood as described by the hagiographers in their texts. Each letter corresponds to a specific feature used in the hagiographical representation of children. When a *vita* provides details about the saints' family and relations between children and family members, F in the charter marks these aspects. Features pertaining to saints' infancy are signaled by the letter I, and include divine signs at birth, baptism, breastfeeding, and weaning. The saints' behaviour is marked by the letter B, their physical appearance by A, games by G, and work by W. Education is marked by the letter E when the *vita* does not specify the stage of instruction. E1 and E2 correspond to elementary and secondary education, respectively.

The inclusion of these features makes it easier to see what kind of information the biographers made use of in their description of the saints' childhood. Throughout the book, the reader will note that I use some texts more than others, depending on the higher number of details the biographers included in their narratives. The number of these features could reveal, for instance, the personal interest of the biographer in giving a sense of accuracy to his story, by providing sufficient information about a saint-to-be. Also, the number of elements related to childhood may indicate the value attached by the authors to this period of life in general, and to various aspects of the stages of childhood in particular. As an example, one can note that very few *vitae* contain information about infancy, which suggests a possible disinterest of the authors in this stage of life. Instead, the majority