
NINA SIETIS, *Alle origini della minuscola libraria greca. Vol I: Pratiche di scrittura e produzione libraria nel monachesimo studita. Vol II: Catalogo dei manoscritti (Temi e Testi 231).* Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura 2024. 247+300pp. – ISBN 978-8-893-59800-2 [open access](#)

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It is not very often that one has occasion to review a work that disrupts, challenges, and refutes one's own earlier research and suppositions. Neither is it often that such disruption is well-received. NINA SIETIS's recent monograph on the origin of the 'Studite Minuscule' has provided me with both opportunities. In this thoroughgoing and well-written book, SIETIS offers readers an outline of the institution of the Studios Monastery and the biography of its most influential abbot, Theodore, as well as a comprehensive analysis of the research related to the development of the literary minuscule script often associated with the same monastery and abbot. The historical and paleographical details of the first volume are accompanied and amplified by a catalogue of Studite manuscripts in the second one. Because most researchers will probably engage with Volume I, I will devote most of my review to it but reserve some comments for the catalogue of Volume II.

Volume I is divided into five chapters, the first of which offers a brief summary of the background related to the Studios Monastery, the network of Studite monks, and their exile because of the use and promotion of icons in the era of the Second Iconoclasm (814–842). Here SIETIS outlines the problematic relationship between the overarching claims made about the Studite Monastery and its relationship to the minuscule bookhand and the actual data available. In short, due to the unstable situation of the Studites and the religious conflicts in which they were engaged, there is little reason to believe that they alone were responsible for the elevation of the Greek minuscule to a literary status or even that they had a scriptorium after the manner of Latin monasteries, as has often been suggested.

Having laid the groundwork in Chapter 1, SIETIS begins Chapter 2 at the 'Dawn of the Minuscule Bookhand'. This necessarily involves a discussion of the famed 'Uspensky Gospels' (St. Petersburg, National Library of Russia, Gr. 219): the discovery and analysis of this manuscript created the

impetus for much of the narrative surrounding the influence of the Studite Monastery and the scribal prowess of its iconodule abbots. SIETIS provides a detailed survey of the research related to the manuscript, beginning with its scribe, traditionally identified with Nicholas the Studite (PmbZ 5576), based both on a colophon found within the manuscript and a βίος of the same individual. From this vantage point, SIETIS engages in a codicological, historical, and literary examination of all available evidence related to the Studite Monastery, its influential abbot Theodore, and the existing research on them.

SIETIS rightly says that attributions of the ‘creation’ of the minuscule bookhand are often overstated. The existence of different forms of literary minuscule in the regions of Palestine during the same era testifies to a broader shift away from the majuscule script beyond the boundaries of Byzantium. However, it is valid to assert that the Studite Monastery played a central role in the promotion and valorization of a minuscule bookhand, possibly (perhaps likely) due to the need for copying texts more rapidly in the midst of the iconoclastic controversies. An extended portion of the second chapter is devoted to discussing the proper translation of the term *συρμαιογραφία* found in Theodore the Studite’s funeral oration for his uncle Plato, used to describe their shared style of writing. The term has long been interpreted as a reference to the newly-formed minuscule script developed by the monastery, though its actual interpretation is ambiguous at best. Just as in each section of the second chapter, SIETIS offers her readers a complete and extensive survey of the *status quaestionis*, beginning with FRANÇOIS COMBEFIS in the seventeenth century and ending with GUIDO CORTASSA in 2003. SIETIS’s balanced approach to the material legitimately problematizes the various conclusions made – the addition of *μουσικώτερον* to the term elsewhere and its connection with hymnography, and more problematically the connection of the seeming antonym *σπουδαιογραφία* elsewhere in Theodore’s writing – acknowledging that even if the earlier conclusions that this refers to the Studite minuscule are correct, variables exist that might overturn this interpretation. Agreeing in part with ROBERT DEVREESE and JULIEN LEROY, SIETIS argues that, instead of assuming Studite primacy in the development of the minuscule script, it is better to think in terms of parallel development, even if the imperial center of Constantinople allowed for greater promotion of the formerly bureaucratic script.

In Chapter 3, following the contention that Constantinople formed the propagation center for the minuscule bookhand, SIETIS focuses on the ques-

tion of the existence of a Studite library. The peripatetic life of the Studite monks during the exile of iconodules has necessarily limited the data pertaining to the nature and extent of the works available within their cenobitic environment. SIETIS devotes her chapter to what can be learned from extant Studite sources. The *Hypotyposis* and the *Poenae monasteriales* witness the discernible presence of καλλιγράφοι and the role of Theodore in the education of both the scribes and the monks more broadly. Based on the works of the abbot himself (e.g. the *Great Catechesis*), SIETIS recognizes that Theodore was concerned about the proper execution of letters and punctuation in the manuscripts produced within the monastery, but he expresses little interest in the work of scribes, codicology, or even general literacy. While texts such the βίος of Nicholas (BHG 1365) indicate that some monks were trained in reading and writing, the abbot's main concern was proper asceticism. Instructions to the calligraphers regarding the binding of books presuppose the existence of a monastic library of sorts, and possibly a scriptorium, but perhaps not on the scale previously assumed. Based on Theodore's encomium for Plato (PmbZ 6285), SIETIS suggests that it would have been common for the monks to copy patristic anthologies rather than complete texts. This is evidenced further in the Studite writings themselves, which draw meagerly from patristic sources, suggesting limited access to full works and potentially reliance on excerpts. The lack of specific information regarding a formal scriptorium, SIETIS argues, calls for caution in the re-creation of the monastic environment, relying more on what is known of the larger Byzantine monastic world and its lack of formal scriptoria than on notions of a dedicated building akin to those found in Western monasteries.

SIETIS devotes Chapter 4 specifically to the activity befitting a scriptorium and asks whether sufficient evidence exists for such within the walls of the Studios. To answer this question, she examines the existing Studite manuscripts, though excluding several whose association to the Studite Monastery appears to be more tangential – these are detailed more fully in Volume II. The codices studied in this chapter are those identified originally by JULIEN LEROY, BORIS FONKIČ, and LIDIA PERRIA. SIETIS's examination reassesses the criterion by which manuscripts have been associated with the Studios in light of broader practices within Byzantine manuscript production. It is in this renewed examination that SIETIS's contribution lies. When discussing the types of skin used and the general size of the codices, both factors used previously to determine Studite origin, SIETIS demonstrates that neither feature is as uniform as previously

asserted. Regarding the ruling patterns employed, SIETIS notes that patterns illustrated by LEROY are observable in the first-generation Studite codices prior to the tenth century, but greater variety sets in later on. This change in ruling patterns is often determined by the page layout rather than a slavish devotion to a specifically ‘Studite’ *modus operandi*. This variation, according to SIETIS, also works against the theory of a formal Studite scriptorium. She rightly agrees with MARILENA MANIACI on the need for more detailed codicological analysis of Studite manuscripts in relation to broader Byzantine practices.

Additionally, SIETIS challenges the long-held notion that the crosses placed in the upper margins of the page in Studite manuscripts are distinctly Studite. It is important to recognize that marks of this sort occur in manuscripts as early as the fourth century. Thus, SIETIS’s inquiry reveals less homogeneity than has often been presented, and such diversity in book production only furthers the conclusion that a scriptorium could not have existed within the monastery. Furthermore, the characteristics of what continues to be referred to in some areas as the ‘Studite minuscule’ can actually be found in other minuscule forms outside the monastery. Therefore, future research might well abandon terminology of ‘Studite minuscule forms’ in favor of what ENRICA FOLLIERI called ‘ancient round minuscule’.

Chapter 5 concludes SIETIS’s sweeping overview of the minuscule script often associated with Studius and the historical assumptions derived from it. She has decided that while the famous abbot Theodore was most certainly well-read and encouraged education within the monastery, it is unclear how many monks after his time continued this endeavor. The available evidence suggests a relatively low level of learning among later generations of Studite monks, more in line with what was common to other Byzantine monasteries. The variation in writing forms, codicology, ornament, and the like cannot be explained merely through living in exile, as sharing information would have been possible even away from Constantinople. Rather, SIETIS recommends that it is better to think of the Studite monks as operating with some degree of autonomy, making individual decisions regarding the decoration, styling, and writing of their books. The advancement of the ‘ancient round minuscule’ should be understood in light of its origins in a lay bureaucratic milieu, where earlier cursive forms of the same script already existed, than as the creation of a single monastery or its abbot.

Volume II is a manuscript catalogue. It is divided into three chapters: manuscripts of certain Studite origin; those with a dubious connection to the

Studios; all others. Each entry follows the standard categorization developed by DANIELE BIANCONI and PASQUALE ORSINI. There are details shared in relation to the binding of the book, its provenance, and (where possible) philological features. SIETIS helpfully distinguishes between the writing used in the body of the manuscripts and that used in titles or rubrics, where it differs from the script of the main text. Those manuscripts which SIETIS could not directly inspect herself are only given brief codicological descriptions without further discussion and placed in Chapter 3.

There is much to praise about these two volumes. While SIETIS does not present groundbreaking discoveries or new facts, her consolidation of older research systematizes the material in a way that makes it readily digestible. For those who have spent years reading the works of CYRIL MANGO, LIDIA PERRIA, GIUSEPPE DE GREGORIO, GUGLIELMO CAVALLO, BORIS FONKIČ, and others, it has been at times difficult to engage with the larger picture due to the detailed discussion of individual problems. It may be that SIETIS's greatest contribution to the study of the literary minuscule and the Studite Monastery is that she provides a single resource which encapsulates all of the work that came before it. In so doing, SIETIS allows readers to see, as it were, the forest rather than the trees. When one looks at her data in its entirety, her conclusions become all but certain. When compared, even briefly in this work, with broader scribal practices of Byzantine monasteries, much of what has historically identified a manuscript as 'Studite' becomes less idiosyncratic. This realization ultimately casts doubt on many of the other assertions that have followed the initial discovery of the Uspensky Gospels, creating a cascading effect that compels researchers to reassess the existence of a Studite scriptorium, an extensive patristic library, and even the impact of an abbot such as Theodore over the formalization of the cursive minuscule. SIETIS is to be commended for her rigorous analysis of the sources and her cautious approach to their data, which works against making unwarranted, sweeping claims either in favor of, or against, the role of the Studite Monastery and its minuscule script in relation to broader developments in the Byzantine world.

It is unfortunate that SIETIS was unable to examine and discuss the former Gruber manuscript Drama, *Μοῦνη Κοσινίτσης 3* (Diktyon 13410 / GA 1424). This manuscript, associated with the Studite Monastery by NADEZHDA KAVRUS-HOFFMAN in 2015, does not display the 'ancient round minuscule' expected of the Studites and carries a colophon by a scribe named Sabbas. The only known Sabbas associated with the monastery is a ninth-century abbot (PmbZ 6442), which happens to correspond with the dating

of the manuscript. It is the earliest complete New Testament in minuscule and contains patristic extracts in the margins of the Pauline and Catholic epistles, written in the hand of the scribe. The existence of these sparse scholia could in fact have furthered SIETIS's contention that the Studios library only contained patristic anthologies, though more work is necessary to verify its legitimate connection with the Studites in general. SIETIS acknowledges in Volume II that images of the manuscript are available online – and these images are of the highest quality. It seems odd that this would be insufficient for an analysis of the manuscript. While it is recognized that the author's methodology demanded she engage physically with each codex, in instances like this – particularly in our digital age – this seems unnecessarily restrictive.

Notwithstanding this minor criticism, it is certain that SIETIS's two volumes will serve researchers for many years to come. Volume I especially must take its place as the primary resource for the study of the Studite Monastery's relationship to the minuscule script. Its conclusions demand engagement, and its open-access availability leaves researchers no excuse for overlooking them. One cannot imagine the future study or teaching of Greek paleography and codicology without this monograph. SIETIS has accomplished something many scholars aspire to but often fail to achieve – she has produced a work that will outlive her and benefit generations to come.

Keywords

Greek palaeography; Byzantine manuscripts