This book is a social and cultural history about the evolution of Christian philanthropy, the rise of sacred wealth, and the motives for religious giving in the late Roman Empire of the East, circa 350–650 CE. Also known as Early Byzantium, this time and place produced history’s first truly affluent, multifaceted Christian society. As the Pax Romana broke down in Western Europe during the fifth century, the core of long-term stability and prosperity moved decisively eastward: in years traditionally known for “decline and fall,” the Mediterranean Near East rose to unprecedented heights under the aegis of New Rome. By the sixth century it was the biggest polity in western Eurasia. Centered in Constantinople (a.k.a. ancient Byzantium or modern Istanbul), its administrative and ecclesiastical superstructures connected cities and countrysides ranging from Greece and the Balkans to Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Libya. The approximately twenty-four million people living in this vast expanse, now all ruled as Roman citizens, were as diverse as the landscape itself. One way that imperial and church leaders sought to unify them from the fourth century onward was under a Christianized ideology of philanthrôpia, “love of humanity.”

The monotheist version of that ancient ideal espoused the extension of at least some form of aid to all human beings, no matter what their origin, status or lack of demonstrable merit. It therefore provided an unusually inclusive basis for promoting what might be called the Common Good. Yet it arose in a society marked by sharp gradations of aristocratic rank and privilege, which, following the conversion of Constantine, the first Christian emperor (r. 306–337), were gradually extended to professional Christians—that is, clerics and monks. The latter also enjoyed unprecedented prosperity in this period, thanks to their perceived
sanctity, subsidies from the state, and a surge of lay gifts. This raises intriguing historical and ethical questions: How did church and monastic leaders propose to put a universal extension of philanthropy into practice? How did they reconcile their newfound wealth with an older ideology of Christian leadership and holiness based on material renunciations? How, in particular, did they negotiate the potentially corrupting influence of gifts in the “oily, present-giving world” of Early Byzantium?1

I argue that the idea of universal philanthropy was taken seriously enough in Early Byzantium to force Christian authorities—not only, but especially monastic authorities—to think hard about the manner, methods, and materials by which they gave, as well as about their relationships and responsibilities toward other people. One result was that, by the sixth century, philanthropy came to be articulated in the Roman East by five distinct modes of religious giving: alms, charity, blessings, fruitbearing offerings (e.g., firstfruits), and liturgical offerings. Each of these gift ideals reflected different purposes, practices, resources, and relationships; the last three also came to be identified with the creation of sacred wealth. By exploring how each was promoted and depicted in contemporary sermons, letters, and literature, my purpose is to clarify what each meant and how each differed from the others. I also seek to explain how these ideals evolved in relation to concerns of holy people or laypeople and shaped their interactions. If a basic purpose of any gift is to establish or symbolize a relationship, what relationships were established, symbolized, or transcended by these different modes of gift giving? How, in other words, were religious gifts used to shape an ideal social order in a newly Christian world?

We will see that all these gifts were interrelated. Indeed, inasmuch as offerings could be used to generate blessings, and blessings could provide resources to give alms, all facilitated the practice of universal philanthropy espoused by Christian professionals. Nonetheless, we will see that each came to be identified with different types of material resources (e.g., superfluous resources, essential resources, justly or unjustly acquired resources) and was thought to foster a different relationship—different in terms of duration, or giver or recipient involved, or type of services and responsibilities implied. We will furthermore find that these ideals, like that of Christian philanthropy itself, were shaped not only by religious concerns but by imperial and secular norms. Studying them therefore enables us to explore how people interacted and how ideas were generated at different levels: from top to bottom, bottom to top, and among peers. I aim to provide a composite description of how the “macro” and “micro” layers of this society were linked, and how these social linkages influenced the formation of some of its ethics and ideals.

One purpose of this project is to raise the visibility of an ideologically important, if numerically marginal, new social layer within the Roman Empire—namely, its monastic population. Because most of my sources originated in monasteries and were written about monks or related Christian “holy people,” it is crucial that my readers know about them and what was expected of them. But I have also chosen to
focus on this group because their contribution to Early Byzantine society and Christian ideas is largely absent from modern histories of this era. “A cruel unfeeling temper has distinguished the monks of every age,” Edward Gibbon opined, to quote just one of the many caricatures he used to introduce the phenomenon of Christian monasticism in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.* Few would express such contempt today, yet monasticism, despite being the last great social experiment in the ancient world (as well as the most successful, and the one we know most about), still remains largely neglected in modern explorations of the challenges that accompanied the promotion of Christian ideals in the Roman Empire, even as a foil. This neglect is detrimental not only to understanding this Christian society itself but also to appreciating a key aspect of the transformation of the classical heritage. For, as Judith Herrin observes, “The gradual establishment of a social order devoted to those who pray . . . completed the Christianisation of the ancient world.”

In the Roman East, this new social order became especially focused on monks—considered “those who pray” par excellence—and gained great momentum in the fifth and sixth centuries. During this period Christian monasticism became a recognized lifestyle and viable professional choice, with accompanying rewards and demands. It also grew alongside mainstream society and responded to some of its basic concerns, if often in new and unusual ways. Following the lead of Évelyne Patlagean and her landmark 1977 study, *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance, 4e–7e siècles,* I hope to make particularly clear the importance of monasteries (as opposed to churches) as nodes for the circulation of material and spiritual wealth from the fifth century onward. This offers a counterpoint to the emphasis that is often placed exclusively on urban bishops as inventors of a Christian response to the civic traditions of public benefactions that had been such a hallmark of the classical age. Regrettably, I have not been able to give ancient Jewish traditions the attention they deserve, although it is clear that rabbinic notions of almsgiving and “righteousness” provide parallels or antecedents to certain early Christian traditions, and that Jewish authorities were equally concerned to find alternatives to the civic traditions of patronal gift giving found in Greek and Roman societies. Nonetheless, my aim is to look as broadly as possible beyond the usual urban aristocrats, toward more “middling” Christian sites and actors—including those people who, in this era for the first time, started to adopt monasticism, fire imaginations, and attract aristocratic patronage in sizeable numbers. Ultimately, this book is about people and their religious aspirations as much as about philanthropic gifts and their religious meanings.

Finally, it is crucial to understand the imperial ecology and environment that nurtured the Christian ideals studied here. “Early Byzantium” is a convenient modern shorthand for describing both the territorial polity established in the Mediterranean Near East by the division of the Roman Empire into eastern and
western halves at the death of Emperor Theodosius in 395 (a polity that would survive, in various forms, well into the medieval “Byzantine” period) and the cultural synthesis of Roman imperial government, classical forms, and Christian ideals that arose within it from the fourth to the seventh centuries. One of its defining, underlying features was a new emphasis on religion as a basis for social unity. This was rooted in the Antonine Constitution of 212, when Emperor Caracalla bestowed citizenship on all the empire’s free provincial subjects, extending it to virtually everyone, well beyond the army veterans and urban elites previously favored. The consequences of this decision can be hard to detect outside the religious and legal spheres. Nonetheless, it appears that rulers increasingly recognized their responsibility to explain how their policies benefitted all the empire’s free population, most of whom now lived outside the traditional centers of imperial benefactions. Constantine’s adoption of monotheism aside, this need to universalize the benefits of Roman rule was arguably a factor behind the Early Byzantine promotion of philanthropy as a unifying imperial ideal.

But it was the imperial adoption and promotion of Christian monotheism that most clearly defined the distinctive political and cultural entity we call Early Byzantium. One of its hallmarks was an increasingly close integration of church and state. The resulting mixture of sacred and profane was often problematic and never complete. I call Early Byzantium history’s first complex Christian society, not because other early Christian communities existed without complications (one only need look at the situation of Christians at the time in the “pagan” Persian Empire next door), nor because it sought to promote Christianity among all its citizens, from top to bottom (the late Roman Empire of the West and its successor kingdoms did so too). I call it “complex” because throughout this period it featured an imperial superstructure that existed on top of traditional aristocracies, urban councils, and provincial governorships, as well as the new ecclesiastical and monastic institutions. This overarching superstructure and its attendant aristocracy had its own patterns of public giving that weighed on Christian imaginations and stimulated notions of religious gift giving. It is true that Early Byzantium changed over time—some would say that it became simpler due to Justinianic administrative streamlining and other factors during the sixth century. Yet, because no major political crisis interrupted its development until the seventh century, we can trace the evolution of Christian ideals within this imperial framework for some three hundred and fifty years, from the conversion of Constantine to the Arab Conquests. Of course, no attempt to explore any complex society can hope to be comprehensive, especially one marked by competing Christianities as well as lingering Jewish and pagan ideals. Nonetheless, I have sought to portray Early Byzantine society as much as possible “in the round.” Apart from being necessary for the subject, I hope to set this distant era, its people, and utility for historical inquiry more fully in the minds of modern readers.
SURVIVING SOURCES AND HISTORICAL DISCOURSES

Who were those people? We get a glimpse of the social and economic complexity that could be found even in minor Early Byzantine towns from the fifth- and sixth-century tombstones at Korykos, an unspectacular fishing port along the coast of southern Asia Minor. Besides the imperial, civic, and ecclesiastical officials who make up a quarter of the total (church clerics comprise 16.8 percent), their epitaphs mention sailmakers, netmakers, shipwrights, assorted traders, bootmakers, tailors, granary guards, doctors, bakers, tavern keepers, singers, bankers, money changers (these had their own cemetery), potters, machinists, gem engravers, glaziers, and many more.8 Numbering 456 in all, these inscriptions offer the kind of raw demographic sampling that modern historians might expect to find serving as the basis of a social history. But rarely do we find anything else like it, especially in our literary sources. Compare a description written by John Moschus early in the seventh century. For him, a typical Christian community consisted of

city and country folk, natives, migrants; all who travel by land or sail the sea; men, women, the elderly and infants, youths and adults; masters and slaves; rich people and poor people; rulers and ruled; wise and simpletons; clergy, virgins, ascetics, widows, and the honorably married; magistrates and landlords.9

It might be said that Moschus was just trying to be comprehensive. Yet his sketch reveals a social vision limited not merely to generic categories but to a binary way of thinking whereby mentioning one group immediately brought to mind its opposite. This is the mentality, and the imagined components of Early Byzantine society, with which we will be mainly dealing here.

As historians of Byzantium know, our sources are largely limited to the range preserved by medieval Orthodox monastic scribes after the sack of Constantinople in 1204. These selected a few ancient authors to reproduce and discarded the rest. As a result, we have hundreds of homilies by Greek preachers of the late fourth and early fifth century who were later considered “Hierarchs” of Byzantine Orthodoxy (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom), but little else written on ethical subjects unless saved under their names.10 Treatises on ascetic and theological subjects abound, but there are few on church administration, and none on any gift category discussed in this book. Few letter collections survive, and those that do rarely preserve two sides of an exchange. It is therefore impossible to follow the flow of ideas among high-profile personalities over successive generations as Peter Brown has masterfully done for Western Europe in his Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD.11 By contrast, historians of Early Byzantium must pick through a scattering of monoliths, archetypes, and sherds.
But all is not lost. Besides imperial laws, church manuals, and monastic rules addressing conditions and explaining expected norms and concerns, we have papyri and inscriptions from church and monastic sites that surpass any documentary evidence available for the West. We have secular and church histories written in Greek and Syriac from the fifth to the seventh centuries, the likes of which have not survived in Latin. Moreover, in addition to Greek preaching, we have homilies and sermons written in Syriac by Jacob of Serug and in Coptic by Shenoute of Atripe. We also have the fifth-century letters of the priest-monk Isidore of Pelusium and the sixth-century letters of the ascetic recluse Barsanuphius and John. The latter were written on a variety of issues to monks, clerics, and laypeople in southern Palestine, and, for my purposes, have truly been a gift that keeps on giving.

Above all there is Christian hagiography. By this I mean narratives meant to depict, define, and commemorate human holiness. It is true that hagiography is a normative genre that presents an idealized world in which prayer made everything possible, and it is true that hagiographers depicted gift giving to cast their Christian exemplars and pious supporters in the best possible light. It is also true that hagiography tends to be stereotyped and prone to describe its subjects in terms of scriptural models. Usually, such schematic features would make the genre highly problematic as historical evidence. Yet in our case, these features can be particularly illuminating. In the first place, when read side by side, hagiography’s stock episodes create semantic fields in which certain words predictably appear in certain contexts, enabling us to reconstruct a series of discourses connecting specific gifts to particular contexts and purposes. In the second place, hagiography was still an innovative genre in Early Byzantium. Schematic features notwithstanding, its variations depict situations from different angles, often revealing unexpected layers of issues and concerns. Of course, it is frustrating that hagiographers rarely present their subjects in terms of development or change, and we can never know how faithfully their depictions reflect actual circumstances or common understandings. Yet they also highlight “divine” dimensions of mundane interactions that would have otherwise been lost. Indeed, Early Byzantine hagiographers sometimes make a point of criticizing people for thinking “like a human” (anthrōpinon), especially when it came to generosity. This was a basic lesson they wished to convey to their readers. Ignoring it would make us miss important facets of certain gift ideals.

To relate this hagiographical evidence to that of sermons and other genres, I treat all such depictions and discussions as expressions of an Early Byzantine discourse particular to each gift. Each chapter seeks to delineate and explain the discourse that arose around a particular gift ideal and gift-giving practice in this era, tracing relevant concerns from the fourth to the seventh century. I am not always as regionally specific as I would have liked: each chapter gravitates towards a particular area or context, but my sources have often forced me to weave together
material from multiple Near Eastern locations. Nonetheless, I am confident that the discourses I trace reflect suppositions held by most church and monastic authorities and their Early Byzantine followers—whether partially or in whole, consciously or not. My confidence is partly based on documentary evidence. Excavations of the Early Byzantine town of Nessana in southern Palestine (Auja el-Hafir/Nitzana in Israel’s Negev desert) in the 1930s uncovered nearly two hundred papyri, including records related to an early seventh-century monastery dedicated to the saints Sergius and Bacchus on top of a hill in the center of town. One of these papyri, P. Ness. III 79, called by its editor “An Account of Offerings to the Church of St Sergius,” reflects a major distinction discussed in this book. It contains a series of registers listing gifts that the monastery received over a two-year period. Most of these were registered as prosphorai offerings, but some were not: two of the registers were entirely devoted to gifts called eulogiai, (blessings), instead. The papyrus shows that the monastery’s stewards carefully distinguished between the prosphorai and eulogiai they received, just as we might expect from the Early Byzantine discourses on liturgical offerings and blessings. In other words, P. Ness. III 79 proves that contemporaries drew distinctions along the categorical lines indicated by hagiography and other types of literature examined here.

Nonetheless, we are dealing with ideals and practices whose roots in the social complexity of Early Byzantium are largely obscured by normative literature. For context we must consider how late Roman social and administrative structures shaped Christian notions of generosity, piety, and holiness. We must apply anthropological insights about the tendency of gift ideals to develop in contrast to other gifts or preexisting modes of exchange (see my prologue), requiring us to think of their dynamic relation to each other. And we must recognize that the discourses we are discussing were, for the most part, ascetic discourses.

By ascetic discourses, I mean those produced by monks and their lay admirers, or by ascetically minded preachers like Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom. We are examining the implications of an ancient Christianity that affirmed stark differences in spiritual attainments and measured “righteousness” (i.e., holiness) not only by degrees of abstinence from carnal distractions like sex, wealth, and consumption but by relative capacities for sacrificing oneself or one’s possessions for others. Indeed, a distinction between monastic and lay (or “worldly,” kosmikos; cf. John 18:36) society was one of the binary structures that shaped Early Byzantine religious thought and culture.

Because of the process by which our sources were preserved in the Middle Ages, we cannot be certain how far this ascetic outlook actually prevailed in Early Byzantium. It certainly pervades Early Byzantine Christian literature, however, and it was not just a monastic outlook. Several sources confirm that ascetic aspirations and practices also inspired laypeople. Some of these founded confraternities and called themselves “Zealous Ones” (spoudaioi), “Lovers of Labor” (or “Fellow Workers,”
Monastic authorities knew them more generally as “Christlovers” (*Philochristoi*)—that is, committed laypeople who took their religion seriously. Attested mainly in hagiography but also in historical narratives and letters of Barsanuphius and John, these Christians could be found at all levels of late Roman society. They ranged from fictional characters like Eucharistius the Secular, a peasant who reportedly reserved two-thirds of his earnings to entertain monks and feed the poor, to historical figures like John Vincomalus, a fifth-century consul who changed clothes each day to work in a monastery kitchen after attending his senate meetings; Grattisimus, a palace eunuch who entered a monastery after retirement; and Christopher, a sixth-century palace guard who wore a hair shirt beneath his uniform and spent winter nights passing out coins in the streets of Constantinople. They also came from informal bible study groups, such as those attested in cities like Edessa, Gaza, and Alexandria that included people like the classically trained orator named Aeneas, who participated in sessions with an Egyptian monk in suburban Gaza, and the numerous lay theologians mentioned in the sixth-century writings of Cosmas Indicopleustes and John Philoponus. Amateurs in the truest sense of the word, these groups met to discuss finer points of Christian exegesis and evidently took great satisfaction from interacting with spiritual experts. Some of them became even more closely connected to local holy people through the rituals of baptism and rigors of penance found in ancient Christian culture.

Such Christlovers formed supportive relationships with clerics and monks, attending their services, asking their advice, and providing accommodations and other forms of hospitality during their travels. Undoubtedly, they represented a valued pool of reliable contributors to church and monastic finances; sometimes they put church or monastic leaders on the spot, asking them to explain their colleagues’ actions, pressuring them to maintain standards. They also would have been reliable consumers of the ascetic discourses examined here. As a hagiographer remarked about the lay *spoudaioi* attending a monastic lecture outside Constantinople, “Even in the world, there are many who are spiritually ardent and thirst for some charismatic pious person to convert their souls to a fear of God.”

But even casual Christians had impact on the ascetic discourses examined here. Unexpected needs prompted people of all sorts to seek out the services of religious professionals, and one reason authorities sought to define different types of gifts was to clarify what expectations each type established between such lay patrons, church leaders, or ascetic exemplars. In other words, the Early Byzantine repertoire of religious gifts was meant not just to provide Christians with the means to meet various obligations of their religion, ranging from philanthropy to expressions of gratitude for divine benefits. It was also meant to foster transparent, “righteous” interactions between secular and religious ranks.