

# Religiosity and Artisanal Mobility: The Confluence of Confraternity and the Silk Industry in Byzantine Thebes circa 1100

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Thebes ascended to prominence as the paramount centre of the Byzantine silk industry during the twelfth century. Renowned for its exquisite weaving craftsmanship, Theban silk products earned an unrivalled reputation within Byzantium and found substantial demand in neighbouring regions. Existing scholarship has reasonably interpreted the industry as supported by an industrial network around Central Greece. However, the question of the supply of artisanal personnel, especially the silk weavers who played a paramount role in the industry, remained largely underexplored in this context. This article endeavours to delve into the formation of such an artisanal network, using the case study of a Theban confraternity founded in 1048. The confraternity's primary mission was the preservation and dissemination of an icon of the Mother of God. It is known to us through a renewed version of its foundational document, dating to around 1100. The document ends with a subscription list of 47 members, which allowed us to establish the confraternity's extensive geographical reach across Central Greece. Of particular significance is the prevalence of members with surnames linked to specific occupations, especially the presence of four individuals bearing the surname *Blattas*, which is strongly indicative of familial involvement in silk weaving. This suggests an inherent connection between the confraternity and the flourishing Theban silk industry. Taking the confraternity as an example, this article argues that religiosity of this nature could have served as a catalyst for the development of an intraregional network, facilitating the movement and exchange of individuals. Silk artisans, particularly silk weavers, around Central Greece probably took advantage of this network to enhance their mobility, thereby ensuring a continuous influx of textile artisans into Thebes, upon whom its emerging silk industry depended.

*Keywords:* Byzantium, silk, Thebes, weavers, artisans, confraternity, Central Greece, mobility, Blattas

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This article is part of the thematic section *Moving Jobs: Occupational Identity and Motility in the Middle Ages*, guest editors: Annamaria Paziienza and Irene Bavuso. To read all related articles, please access DOI: 10.1553/medievalworlds\_no20\_2024.

*Introduction: The Silk Industries around Central Greece*

During the middle Byzantine period, centres related to silk production started to emerge in the western part of the Byzantine Empire, with Central Greece occupying a prominent position in this industrial development.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the eleventh century, the sporadic evidence available presents a rather obscure picture. In the ninth century, moriculture and sericulture might have already been established in the northwestern Peloponnese, known as »Morea«.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, archaeological and etymological evidence implies that Thisve in southern Boeotia had become a thriving hub for processing imperial purple dye by the tenth century.<sup>3</sup> Notably, purple fishers (κογχυλευται) were active in the Peloponnese in the early tenth century.<sup>4</sup> It is reasonable to assume that specialist industrial sites for dyeing extended to the coastal areas between Naupaktos and Corinth, later designated as the »gulf of the dyers (Şabbāghīn)« by the Arab geographer Al-Idrisi (1100-1166).<sup>5</sup>

Specifically for textile production, our primary source remains the much-debated record from the tenth-century *Vita Basilii*. According to this account, Danelis, a wealthy landowner from Patras, offered various servants and textiles as gifts to the emperor Basil I during her visit.<sup>6</sup> Among these, there were one hundred female *skiastriai* (σκιάστριαι), which may be interpreted as textile workers, such as weavers or embroiderers.<sup>7</sup> The textile collection included *sendais* (σενδαῖς), presumably a type of silk textile adopted from the Muslim East.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that Patras might have already supported a silk industry by the tenth century.

From the eleventh century onward, the picture becomes less ambiguous. The region of Phokis possibly reached its zenith as an industrial centre for silk textiles around the second half of the eleventh century, even earning a reputation as far as Campania, Italy.<sup>9</sup> The tradition of silk production in Phokis might have persisted beyond the early thirteenth century, as exemplified by the silk industry around Naupaktos.<sup>10</sup> In the twelfth century, the island of Andros gained renown for its silk products, attested particularly in Latin sources.<sup>11</sup>

Within this context, the Theban silk industry emerged and ascended to prominence. Thebes served as a regional centre for civil administration and had its own metropolis,<sup>12</sup> despite a relatively small population estimated at 4,000 and 5,000 in the twelfth century.<sup>13</sup> Its silk industry experienced a significant expansion, with its earliest developments dating back to the second half of the eleventh century.

1 Weigand, *Helladisch-Byzantinische Seidenweberei*, 503-514; Jacoby, *Silk in western Byzantium*, 452-500; Dunn, *Problem of Thisvi-Kastorion*, 38-71; De Rosen, *Silk industry*, 30-48; Wu, *Myth of Phocaicus*, 43-62; Wu, *Silk Industry around Naupaktos*, 351-366; Wu, *The metropolitan and the Theban silk industry*, 64-80.

2 Jacoby, *Silk in western Byzantium*, 454.

3 Dunn, *Survey of Thisve*; Dunn, *Problem of Thisvi-Kastorion*, 38-71.

4 Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio*, ed. and trans. Moravcsik and Jenkins, 256.

5 *Géographie d'Edrisi*, ed. and trans. Jaubert, 125.

6 *Chronographiae quae Theophanis Continuati*, ed. and trans. Ševčenko, 252-256.

7 The translation »umbrella bearers« is also possible, see Trapp, *Lexikon zur byzantinischen Gräzität*, s.v. σκιάστρια. Cf. Jacoby, *Silk in western Byzantium*, 458; Lemerle, *Byzantine Humanism*, 155, n. 110.

8 Jacoby, *Silk in western Byzantium*, 458-460.

9 Wu, *Myth of Phocaicus*, 43-61.

10 Wu, *Silk industry around Naupaktos*, 351-366.

11 Jacoby, *Silk in western Byzantium*, 460-462.

12 Papadopoulos, *O Osios Meletios «o neos»*, 57; Nesbitt and Wiita, *Confraternity of the Comnenian Era*, 365.

13 De Rosen, *Rhomanian Boeotia*, 96-97.

Trading documents suggest that as early as 1072, Venetians had already invested in commercial shipping between Venice and Thebes.<sup>14</sup> While these documents do not specify the commodities involved, a later Genoese diplomatic document from 1171 mentions that the Venetians had been trading Theban silk,<sup>15</sup> likely the primary motive for their investments in Thebes. Furthermore, the satirical work *Timarion* reveals that Boeotian textiles, presumably from Thebes, were highly sought-after at the annual St. Demetrios fair in Thessalonike around 1100.<sup>16</sup>

The industry saw continued growth after the late 1140s. In 1147, the Normans from Sicily, having recognized Thebes' reputation in the textile industry, presumably through its silk products that were traded to Italy via Venetian intermediaries, plundered the city during their raid around Central Greece. They abducted the city's textile artisans and transported them to Sicily in an effort to stimulate local silk production.<sup>17</sup> The poet and grammarian John Tzetzes (c. 1110-1180) spoke highly of the Theban silk on various occasions, including a letter dated 1148 responding to a friend who sent him a silk garment from Thebes.<sup>18</sup> The Jewish traveller Benjamin of Tudela (fl. twelfth century), in his travelogue from the 1160s, noted that the Jewish inhabitants of Thebes were the most skilled artisans of silk and purple garments in Byzantium.<sup>19</sup> The Theban silk industry seems to have culminated in the late twelfth century. By circa 1184, Thebes had become a major supplier of textiles for consumption in Constantinople.<sup>20</sup> By 1195, the imperial court had been importing Theban silk textiles annually, and in the same year, when the emir of Ankara demanded tribute from Byzantium, Theban silk was specifically mentioned, attesting to its reputation in the East.<sup>21</sup>

While the silk industry encompassed a series of procedures, including moriculture, sericulture, thread preparation, weaving, dyeing and tailoring, it was the extraordinary weaving process that set the Theban silk industry apart. Theban silk textiles could have been sold without dyeing or tailoring.<sup>22</sup> More importantly, whenever the sources praised the silk industry, it was always the weaving technique that garnered the most attention. In historical records describing the 1147 Norman plunder of Thebes, the captives brought back to contribute to the silk industry in Sicily were always specified as weavers.<sup>23</sup> When John Tzetzes praised the Theban silk garment he received, he emphasized the fineness of execution of its weaving and the Theban female weavers responsible for achieving such excellence.<sup>24</sup> Around 1200, Michael Choniates (c. 1140-1220), the metropolitan of Athens, mentioned Thebes as a »weaving mill (ιστουργός)« for silk textiles.<sup>25</sup>

14 Lombardo and Morozzo della Rocca, *Documenti*, nos. 12-13.

15 Sanguineti and Bertolotto, *Nuova serie di documenti*, 348.

16 Pseudo-Luciano, *Timarione*, ed. Romano, 54.

17 *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, ed. van Dieten, 74, 98; Otto von Freising und Rahewin, *Gesta Friderici I. Imperatoris*, ed. Waitz, 53-54.

18 *Ioannis Tzetzae Epistulae*, ed. Leone, 101-102; *Ioannis Tzetzae Historiae*, ed. Leone, 403, 461.

19 Adler, *Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, 10.

20 *Michaelis Choniatae Epistulae*, ed. Kolovou, 69-70.

21 *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, ed. van Dieten, 461.

22 For an undyed textile, see *Ioannis Tzetzae Epistulae*, ed. Leone, 102. For untailored textiles, see Hörandner, Euthymios Tornikes, 128.

23 See note 17 above.

24 See note 18 above.

25 *Michaelis Choniatae Epistulae*, ed. Kolovou, 82.

Shortly before 1204, the ecclesiastical official and writer Euthymios Tornikes (fl. 1191-1222) described in a poem that the textiles of Thebes were crafted by the hands of women, presumably referring to the female weavers.<sup>26</sup> The exquisite craftsmanship of the Theban weavers is evident in the gold-interwoven silk textiles widely attested in various sources.<sup>27</sup>

The paramount importance of the weaving process underscores that the Theban silk industry hinged upon the maintenance of an adequate group of silk weavers. Regardless of their skill, the prolonged and intensive process of silk weaving meant that this artisanal group had to have been sizable enough to sustain the industry's output,<sup>28</sup> which must have been massive. The industry not only responded to the demand of local customers but also the interregional and international markets.<sup>29</sup> The excavated remains of the silk workshop in Thebes further confirm the substantial volume of the industry's products.<sup>30</sup>

### *An Industrial Network?*

The operational framework of the Theban silk industry has long been the subject of scholarly discussion. Some scholars have suggested that this industry relied on a network that outsourced specific stages, such as moriculture and sericulture, to other settlements around the region. Recent studies, however, have shown that Thebes might have possessed all the necessary infrastructure for the industry to operate independently.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the industry's reliance on a sufficient supply of skilled labour would entail a similar intraregional network for craftsmen. The existence of such institutional organisations gains support from the aftermath of the 1147 Norman plunder when Theban weavers were abducted to Sicily. Despite the potential setback of losing these weavers, the Theban silk industry appeared to rebound swiftly within a decade, as we learn from the travelogue of Benjamin of Tudela,<sup>32</sup> and continued to thrive throughout the century. Given the time-intensive nature of training high-end textile weavers and Thebes' relatively small population,<sup>33</sup> it seems improbable that a new generation of silk weavers could have been developed locally in such a short timeframe. Therefore, the resilience of the Theban silk industry points to the existence of a network that facilitated the influx of competent artisans into Thebes, effectively addressing the shortage of silk weavers.

Around Central Greece, numerous contemporary settlements may have served as reservoirs of silk weavers for Thebes. From the eleventh century, Phokis appears to have harboured a thriving silk industry,<sup>34</sup> which is still attested in the early thirteenth century.<sup>35</sup>

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26 Hörandner, Euthymios Tornikes, 128.

27 *Ioannis Tzetzae Epistulae*, ed. Leone, 102; *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, ed. van Dieten, 74, 98; Lombardo and Morozzo della Rocca, Documenti, 237.

28 For ethnographic studies on similar weaving practices, see Wu, How did Byzantines weave?, 380-385.

29 The Theban silk products were certainly traded to Thessalonike and Constantinople and made their way westward to Italy and eastward beyond Anatolia.

30 Wu, How did Byzantines weave?, 390-392.

31 Wu, Silk industry around Naupaktos, 362-363.

32 See note 19 above.

33 While basic weaving might be learned through an apprenticeship as short as four months, mastering the techniques of weaving patterned textiles usually took years of training, see Cairo Geniza, Legal document: ENA NS 2.41 (1027); Wu, How did Byzantines weave?, 380-385.

34 Wu, Myth of Phocaicus, 43-61.

35 Wu, Silk industry around Naupaktos, 351-366.

In mid-twelfth-century Athens, weaving emerged as a common profession, suggesting the presence of skilled artisans.<sup>36</sup> In the Peloponnese, we have previously discussed the potential existence of a local silk industry in Patras before the tenth century, which might have lasted until the thirteenth century.<sup>37</sup> Corinth, too, had an active involvement in textile production in the twelfth century, with mentions of its weavers in several records.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, Euboea boasted a silk industry after the Latin conquest of 1204,<sup>39</sup> although its Byzantine origins remain a subject of debate.

Sporadic evidence points to the existence of transportation infrastructures facilitating communication between Thebes and other settlements within the region. The *Cadaster of Thebes*, a register dated around 1100 that detailed property taxation between Thebes and Chalkis,<sup>40</sup> provides evidence of a public highway (δημοσία στράτα) connecting these two settlements.<sup>41</sup> This public highway, distinct from common roads (στράτα) documented in the same cadaster, was likely a more efficient means of transportation. Considering that the *Cadaster* only covers a very small area in Central Greece, it is reasonable to assume the existence of similar public highways connecting Thebes in other directions, such as Corinth. Historical accounts suggest that efficient transportation between Thebes and Corinth was attainable, with a traveller on horseback around the year 1000 able to reach Corinth from Thebes within a single day.<sup>42</sup> In the 1160s, Benjamin of Tudela, likely travelling more casually, completed the journey from Corinth to Thebes in just two days.<sup>43</sup> In contrast, the journey from the port of Livadostro to Thebes, which was only a third of the distance or less, took the pilgrim Saewulf (fl. 1102-1103) two days in around 1102.<sup>44</sup>

The *modus operandi* of contemporary textile artisans, including silk weavers, would have encouraged mobility, with artisans gravitating toward settlements offering employment opportunities. Extant sources show that these artisans either worked independently,<sup>45</sup> within workshops,<sup>46</sup> or were associated with ecclesiastical or monastic institutions.<sup>47</sup> Despite the imperial court's annual requisition of Theban silk in the late twelfth century, extant records do not substantiate any direct imperial involvement in its production.<sup>48</sup>

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36 Loukaki, *Nikolaos Kataphlóron*, 162.

37 Jacoby, *Silk in western Byzantium*, 469.

38 *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, ed. van Dieten, 98; *Michaelis Choniatae Epistulae*, ed. Kolovou, 69-70.

39 For example, Tafel and Thomas, *Republik Venedig*, 92. Cf. Jacoby, *Silk in western Byzantium*, 469.

40 For a recent discussion on the dating of this document, see Georgiou, *Dating of the Cadaster of Thebes*, 95-107.

41 Svoronos, *Cadastre de Thèbes*, 54.

42 *The Life of Saint Nikon*, ed. and trans. Sullivan, 102. The saint flourished in the second half of the tenth century, while the *Life* was written in the mid-eleventh century, *ibid.*, 7, 19.

43 Adler, *Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, 10.

44 *Saewulf* (1102, 1103 A. D.), ed. and trans. Brownlow, 32.

45 Pétridès, Jean Apokaukos, 29; Metzler, *De emendanda vita monachica*, 46; *Ptochoprodromos*, ed. and trans. *Eideneier*, 126-128.

46 Oikonomidès, *Boutiques de Constantinople*, 345-356; Koder, *Eparchenbuch*, 102-106.

47 Wu, *Silk industry around Naupaktos*, 351-366; Wu, *The metropolitan and the Theban silk industry*, 74-80.

48 It is plausible that these orders were fulfilled by intermediaries, such as Venetian merchants, who facilitated trade between Thebes and Constantinople. Cf. Jacoby, *Silk in western Byzantium*, 467, 482, 495.

Beyond these arrangements, textile artisans could also form local associations, as attested in the tenth-century Peloponnese for sailors, purple-fishers and parchment makers;<sup>49</sup> in eleventh-century Constantinople for weavers;<sup>50</sup> and around the early thirteenth century in Naupaktos for fishers, textile artisans, leather workers and tailors.<sup>51</sup> Notably, the tenth-century *Book of the Eparch*, which includes regulations on silk-related guilds in Constantinople, stipulated that manufacturers of silk textiles (σηρικάριοι) should not engage wage-workers (μισθωτός) in contracts exceeding one month.<sup>52</sup> In Central Greece, evidence from early-thirteenth-century Naupaktos shows that working as spinners for daily hire (χερνῆτις) was a common practice.<sup>53</sup>

Given that Thebes was home to one of the largest Jewish communities in Byzantium, whose members were skilled artisans of silk textiles,<sup>54</sup> Geniza documents could supply valuable contextual information for our investigation. These documents indicate that professional weavers often bid for weaving orders from customers or textile manufacturers who supplied the necessary threads and instructions.<sup>55</sup> They vended their service in public squares,<sup>56</sup> and sometimes resorted to the recommendation of intermediaries.<sup>57</sup> Artisans with their own workshops could hire resident apprentices or wage-workers.<sup>58</sup> Following this vein, it can be concluded that textile artisans, especially weavers, operated primarily under short-term contracts with customers or workshop owners, who often provided the materials and equipment. At the same time, while their skills were in high demand, they still needed to seek opportunities actively, as evidenced in cases from the Geniza documents, where weavers, like other craftsmen,<sup>59</sup> pursued employment opportunities in distant locations.<sup>60</sup>

The combination of available labour, efficient transportation infrastructure, and a befitting *modus operandi* made it feasible for textile artisans from surrounding regions in Central Greece to come and work in Thebes. However, achieving such an effective influx of artisans as detected from the aftermath of the 1147 deportation required more than just these pre-existing conditions. Relocating for work in a distant city, rather than one's hometown, involved substantial costs and risks.

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49 Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio*, ed. and trans. Moravcsik and Jenkins, 256-257.

50 Sathas, *Mesaiōnikḗ Bibliothēkē*, 529.

51 Vasilievsky, *Epirotica saeculi XIII*, 298. The shipyard attested in Naupaktos in the tenth century, which might have remained operational until the thirteenth century, could have fostered similar associations among workers involved in ship construction and repair, see Staurakos, *Ἐ πολὲ τῆς Ναυπάκτου*, 573-577.

52 Koder, *Eparchenbuch*, 106.

53 Pétridès, Jean Apokaukos, 29.

54 Adler, *Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, 10.

55 Letter: Bodl. MS heb. c 28/34 (circa 1045); Letter: DK 230.2 (alt: II); Letter: T-S 8J27.5 (circa 1065); Letter: T-S 10J13.5; Letter: T-S 13J20.22 (1121-1125).

56 Letter: T-S 8J26.18.

57 Letter: T-S 12.289.

58 Legal document: Bodl. MS heb. a 2/9 (1188); Legal document: ENA NS 2.41 (1027); Letter: JRL Series A 659; Letter: T-S 8J22.26; Legal document: T-S 12.531 (1157); Legal document: T-S NS J273

59 Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 50-51.

60 Letter: T-S 8J22.26; Letter: T-S 8J26.18; Letter: T-S 12.289. In terms of weavers, travelling with their own loom could also have been possible when necessary. The combined evidence shows that the predominant type of loom used in contemporary Byzantium had a simple structure, which could have been dismantled and reinstalled conveniently. There is also evidence that such a loom was used in weaving Theban silk; see Wu, *How did Byzantines weave?*, 368-395. The possible use of more sophisticated looms in Byzantine silk weaving has also been proposed by many scholars. For an overview of this topic, see *ibid.*, 390-392.

Artisans who made the effort to travel to Thebes must have had access to sufficient motility options, that is, elements that enabled them to move from one area to another.<sup>61</sup> In our case, having contacts in Thebes who provided updates on job opportunities, offered job recommendations or otherwise assisted in travel would have been crucial. Following this vein, the high resilience of the Theban silk industry suggests the potential existence of institutional organisations that fostered close associations between artisans in the surrounding regions of Central Greece and the local community in Thebes.

While the surviving sources do not permit a comprehensive view of these institutional organisations, they do allow for a glimpse into a typical form of institution that may have served this purpose.

### *The Confraternity of Thebes*

Preserved in the archives of the Palatine Chapel in Palermo is a document known as the Charter of the Confraternity of Thebes.<sup>62</sup> Composed in Thebes in around 1100, this charter presumably ended up in Sicily due to the 1147 Norman plunder.<sup>63</sup> It was, in fact, a renewal of the original document that established the confraternity back in 1048 but had since deteriorated.<sup>64</sup> The charter reveals that the confraternity's primary mission was deeply rooted in religious devotion. Beyond fostering mutual support among its members, its core purpose was the preservation and dissemination of an icon of the Mother of God, referred to as the Theotokos Nafpaktiotissa. This icon was owned and housed in the Convent of Naupaktian Women in Thebes,<sup>65</sup> an institution presumably founded by a group of Naupaktians who had immigrated to Thebes, bringing the icon with them. It is likely that this icon was previously stationed in the metropolitan church of Naupaktos.<sup>66</sup> These Naupaktians are thought to have been among the refugees who sought sanctuary in Thebes during the rebellions in west Central Greece in the first half of the eleventh century.<sup>67</sup>

Although the icon belonged to a Theban convent, the contemporary members of the confraternity resided in various settlements in Central Greece.<sup>68</sup> On a monthly basis, these members would take turns hosting the icon in the churches of their respective settlements and conduct the required liturgical ceremonies. Accordingly, the confraternity held monthly assemblies in the churches hosting the icon and organized processions for the icon's transportation to its next itinerary station. In addition to these monthly gatherings, an annual mass celebration also brought the confraternity members together.

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61 Kaufmann *et al.*, *Motility: Mobility as capital*, 745-756; see also the introduction to the thematic section, Paziienza and Bavuso, *Moving Jobs*.

62 Menna, *Confraternita di S. Maria la Naupattitissa*, 546-547; Nesbitt and Wiita, *Confraternity of the Comnenian Era*, 360-384.

63 Nesbitt and Wiita, *Confraternity of the Comnenian Era*, 379-380; Menna, *Confraternita di S. Maria la Naupattitissa*, 547.

64 John Nesbitt and John Wiita dated the document between circa 1080 and 1120, while Anthony Cutler and William North further narrowed it down to between 1092 and 1118, see Nesbitt and Wiita, *Confraternity of the Comnenian Era*, 375; Cutler and North, *The gift of service*, 214.

65 Archaeological finds suggest that the convent might have been located in the modern courthouse south of the Kadmeia of Thebes, see Koilakou, *Byzantinōn naōn tēs Thēbas*, 413 and n. 76.

66 Bees, *Panagias tēs Naupaktiōtissēs*, 9. Cf. Paliouras, *Θεοτόκου της ναυπακτιωτίσσης*, 616.

67 Nesbitt and Wiita, *Confraternity of the Comnenian Era*, 378.

68 See below.

Confraternities are attested throughout the history of Byzantium, many of which were also dedicated to the veneration and procession of icons.<sup>69</sup> However, the Confraternity of Thebes stands out due to its remarkable regional engagement.<sup>70</sup> Subscriptions recorded at the end of the charter sometimes include geographical identifiers that reveal the members' places of residence. Apart from Thebes, members were identified from Athens, the district of Lake Kopais (north of Thebes), Euboea (Karystos, Kuturlon, Euripos), Preventza (modern-day Prantikón, north of Agrinion), Corinth, Mount Hypatos (north of Thebes), Adrianople (a suffragan of the bishopric of Naupaktos) and Anatolikon (modern-day Aitolikon, northwest of Mesolongi).<sup>71</sup> Thus, the confraternity's membership extended far beyond the city of Thebes, incorporating individuals from localities scattered across Central Greece.

The prescription for possible weather-related postponements suggests that the confraternity's prescribed gatherings may have been obligatory.<sup>72</sup> However, considering that some members lived over 200 kilometres apart, maintaining regular attendance when the icon was hosted in distant churches would have been highly demanding. In this case, it is plausible that the monthly assemblies were attended by those members who lived near the icon's itinerant churches, with all members coming together only for the annual mass. Even if the members met just once a year, the activities of the confraternity would have fostered a cohesive regional network centred on Thebes. In this context, institutions like the confraternity could have exerted influence extending beyond their primary religious mission. For example, the regional identity they cultivated might have contributed to the localization trend observed in Central Greece in the twelfth century.<sup>73</sup> In Boeotia, such institutions could have fostered the emergence of groups like the Boeotian Leaders (βοιωτάρχουντων), which could be effectively organized into a militia to resist incursions that threatened local interests.<sup>74</sup>

### *The Confraternity and Silk Production*

The composition of the confraternity's membership sheds some light on its potential association with silk production. Of the 49 members who signed the charter, 20 were clerics, including priests, monks and readers, while 29 were laypersons.<sup>75</sup> It has been convincingly argued that the membership extended beyond these 49 individuals; the signatures encompassed the households they represented, following the tradition of Byzantine fiscal and legal documentation.<sup>76</sup> At times, the attributive words or surnames that followed the first names provided further clues about the members' identity. By following this vein, members from families with artisanal backgrounds have been reasonably identified.

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69 Baun, *Local Community in the Medieval Greek Apocrypha*, 371-374; Nesbitt and Wiita, *Confraternity of the Comnenian Era*, 382-284.

70 For a discussion of the confraternity's procession in the comparative context of the contemporary Mediterranean, see Brubaker, *Processions across the Mediterranean*, 219-235.

71 Nesbitt and Wiita, *Confraternity of the Comnenian Era*, 370-373.

72 Nesbitt and Wiita, *Confraternity of the Comnenian Era*, 365.

73 Herrin, *Realities of provincial government*, 58-102; Shawcross, *Golden Athens*, 65-95.

74 *Michaël Akominatou tou Choniatou*, ed. Lambros, 315. Cf. Herrin, *Realities of provincial government*, 82, 90.

75 Nesbitt and Wiita, *Confraternity of the Comnenian Era*, 366-368.

76 Neville, *Authority*, 72-73; Neville, *Taxing Sophronia's son-in-law*, 84.



For instance, the surname *Chalkeus* (Χαλκέως) may be related to smithing, *Sapleros* (Σαπολήρου) to soapmaking, and *Maloseiros* (Μαλοσίρος/Μαλοσίρου/Μαλόσειρος) to cheese-making.<sup>77</sup> Our focus here is on those recorded with the surname *Blatas* (Βλατᾶς), including two priests (Michael and Christodulos), one reader (Ioannes), and a layman (Andreas).

Beyond the charter, the presence of *Blat(t)as* and its variant forms like *Blatton* and *Blattades* are sporadically attested as surnames in various locations, including Rome in the sixth century, Otranto in the tenth century, Thessalonike, Crete and possibly Mount Athos around 1400.<sup>78</sup> An etymological study provides insights into these family names. In the context of the mid-Byzantine period, the term *blattia* and its derivatives referred to finished silk cloth, possibly within an imperial setting.<sup>79</sup> In the twelfth century, the Constantinopolitan author Ptochoprodromos included *katablattas* among the artisanal professions that were lucrative and rewarding.<sup>80</sup> In the 1430s, the writer and teacher John Argyropoulos (c. 1393/4-1487) wrote an invective against a certain individual named *Katablattas*, probably Demetrios Katablattas, who was a wealthy and well-connected judge in Constantinople. John associated the surname Katablattas with the art of weaving and asserted that it was common, especially among those who worked on silk textiles.<sup>81</sup> All these indications suggest that the Blat(t)as-root surnames literally denoted involvement in silk weaving.

On the other hand, John Argyropoulos mentioned that Demetrios' father was a weaver »who knew nothing more than to attend to the wefts and warps, threads and shuttles«. He was once whipped and shamed for stealing the treasury (τὰ δημόσια), which possibly means that he used his position to appropriate the funds or materials for producing luxurious silk textiles. John also mentions that Demetrios learned the craft of weaving from his father.<sup>82</sup> While John's account might contain some exaggeration aimed at discrediting Demetrios' family background, it likely had a factual basis since John and his audience would have had some knowledge of Demetrios' father.<sup>83</sup> Demetrios' decision to change his surname to *Katadokeinos* as a form of concealment further suggests an artisanal family background that was viewed unfavourably in Byzantine society.<sup>84</sup> Thus, Demetrios' father probably worked as a silk weaver, at least for a time, even though Demetrios himself did not follow him into the profession and eventually became a prominent judge.<sup>85</sup>

77 Nesbitt and Wiita, *Confraternity of the Comnenian Era*, 377-378.

78 *The Life of Saint Neilos of Rossano*, ed. and trans. Capra, Murzaku and Milewski, 69.1; Hunger, *Johannes Chortasmenos*, 86-87. Cf. PmbZ 1016, 21184; PLP 2645, 2812, 2814.

79 Galliker, *Silk in the Middle Byzantine period*, 347-349; Jacoby, *Silk in western Byzantium*, 458, note 29.

80 *Ptochoprodromos*, ed. and trans. Eideneier, 127.

81 Canivet and Oikonomidès, *La comédie de Katablattas*, 9-15, 61.

82 Canivet and Oikonomidès, *La comédie de Katablattas*, 31-35, 61.

83 Thus, John alluded to the scandals surrounding Demetrios' father, including the previously mentioned theft incident, presuming that his audience was already familiar with these details.

84 Canivet and Oikonomidès, *La comédie de Katablattas*, 33. The denigration of tradesmen like silk weavers was ingrained in Byzantine society and might be traced back to its roots in antiquity, see, for example, Alexiou, *Prodromic poems*, 17.

85 In this regard, Pierre Canivet and Nicolas Oikonomidès' identification of the father appears unconvincing, see Canivet and Oikonomidès, *La comédie de Katablattas*, 9-10.

The case of Demetrios illustrates that, even as late as circa 1400, Blat(t)as-root family names could be occupational, pointing to actual involvement in silk weaving. Moreover, the stigma associated with such surnames may have encouraged subsequent generations, who pursued different, more respectable careers, to adopt new surnames.

Hence, although those who bore the surnames of Blat(t)as variants were not necessarily related, they must have all originated from ancestors who assumed the surnames in their role as weavers of luxurious silk. With this context in mind, the subscription of four Blatas in the confraternity's charter can be revealing for our purposes. These Blatas could have been unrelated individuals; however, their shared surname – an exactly identical variant of Blat(t)as – and their common origin in Central Greece may suggest a familial connection. Since three of these Blatas were clerics rather than professional silk weavers, their families had probably already progressed through at least two generations by then. Thus, we may reasonably trace their origin back to a period prior to the first half of the eleventh century. Nevertheless, the fact that these clerics still retained the stigmatic occupational surname indicates that in circa 1100, the families were not far removed from their artisanal engagement. It is likely that there were silk weavers among their grandparents, parents, or peer relatives.

### *The Confraternity and the Theban Silk Industry*

Undoubtedly, the surviving charter establishes the confraternity as a primarily religious association. Its foundation predates the first debatable signs of the emerging silk industry in Thebes by two decades,<sup>86</sup> and the industry's zenith by more than a century. Thus, connecting the confraternity's original remit with the Theban silk industry would be far-fetched. However, in its subsequent operation, the confraternity's regional engagement could have contributed to the artisanal mobility crucial for sustaining the industry, as exemplified by its rapid recovery after the 1147 Norman deportation. Founded in 1048, the confraternity remained operational for at least a century until 1147.<sup>87</sup> During this period, it bore witness to the early stage of the Theban silk industry, wherein the physical and institutional infrastructures that effectively attracted non-native textile artisans to Thebes must have been developed. In this context, the confraternity could have played a pivotal role in developing these infrastructures through its frequent and periodic gatherings, bringing together residents from different parts of Central Greece.

Regarding the physical infrastructures, the intense and regular exchanges encouraged advanced logistic systems and facilities for intraregional travelling. When the confraternity was first founded, its membership was likely limited to localities with direct connections to the confraternity, such as Thebes and Phokis.<sup>88</sup> The broad regional engagement evident in the renewed charter likely resulted from a gradual expansion coinciding with infrastructure improvements, which might have included the public highways implied in the *Cadaster of Thebes*. Such improvements would have facilitated the influx of non-local silk artisans into Thebes.

In terms of institutional infrastructures, the confraternity's activities created convenient channels for textile artisans to connect with people beyond their own settlements.

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86 See note 14 above.

87 The charter was probably amongst the items looted during the 1147 Norman plunder, see note 62 above.

88 For the case of Phokis, see below.

The confraternity members across Central Greece who regularly participated in the gatherings could have maintained close contact with one another. Non-native participants travelling to the host settlements would have had the opportunity to interact not only with confraternity members but also with local residents who joined the processions, expressed devotion to the icon, or helped with the logistics such as catering and accommodation.<sup>89</sup> These occasions could have become opportunities for the artisanal population to form connections with people outside their resident settlements and acquire specialist information from other parts of Central Greece.

The artisanal population influenced by the confraternity is exemplified by silk weavers, with the Blatas families being a noteworthy case, presumably engaged in this occupation. Blatas constitutes the best-represented surname in the confraternity's subscription. In the event that these Blatas included relatives, such prevalence indicates that familial connections played a role in membership recruitment, as more Blatas individuals were initiated into the confraternity's activities through relatives who already held membership. The four recorded Blatas probably represented only household units, and their extended families likely came to their aid during their months attending the icon. Consequently, professional silk weavers from the Blatas families will probably have constituted part of the confraternity's network as well. These artisans could have been the confraternity members included in the charter, potentially like the layman Andreas Blatas. Alternatively, they could remain unrecorded, represented by the subscribed members, or participating through their family connections without formal membership.

Although all four Blatas signatures in the charter from circa 1100 lack geographical identifiers, contextual information provides insights into the families' likely location(s). Since we have traced the families' history prior to the first half of the eleventh century, they could have been based in the few known early silk industrial centres on the west coast of the Gulf of Corinth, such as Patras or Phokis. This attribution gains credibility if we take into account Phokis's close relationship with the confraternity, encompassing important localities like Naupaktos, the homeland of the icon Theotokos Nafpaktiotissa, and the monastery of Hosios Loukas near Steiri, to which the convent was probably affiliated.<sup>90</sup> The region must have encompassed a large proportion of the confraternity's membership, as exemplified by subscribed members like Niketas of Adrianople and Konstantinos of Anatolikon,<sup>91</sup> and served as a major arena for its activities since its foundation. Therefore, the case of the Blatas families indicates the presence of a group of silk weavers not based in Thebes but closely engaged in the intraregional network fostered by the confraternity.

In this context, it can be argued that the confraternity might have boosted the motility of non-Theban silk weavers, promoting their relocation to Thebes in search of work opportunities. Given its role as the site of the Convent of Naupaktian Women and the seat of the confraternity's supervisory metropolitan, Thebes was undoubtedly home to a substantial portion of the confraternity's members and the primary location for its activities.

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89 Cf. Neville, *Taxing Sophronia's son-in-law*, 84-85.

90 Nesbitt and Wiita, *Confraternity of the Comnenian Era*, 376, n. 23; Oikonomidès, *Monastery of Hosios Loukas*, 248-249.

91 Nesbitt and Wiita, *Confraternity of the Comnenian Era*, 367-368.

Silk weavers from different parts of Central Greece could have leveraged the confraternity's Theban focus to advance their careers, effectively transforming it into an institutionalised platform for exchanging insider information related to their profession. For instance, silk weavers from the Blatas families, even if not Theban residents, could have been updated about the opportunities brought by the emerging silk industry in Thebes through frequent in-person visits, interactions with their Theban-based fellow members, or other contacts under the confraternity's auspices. The scale and location of the silk-related workshops, as indicated by their archaeological remains, suggest that their prosperity would not have gone unnoticed by local residents, even without specialist knowledge.<sup>92</sup> Even for chance visitors like the Norman raiders in 1147, their effective plunder of these workshops further confirms the latter's prominence in the local landscape. This insider information could also have spread from Theban residents through the confraternity's regional network elsewhere, reaching prospective artisans beyond Thebes.

Apart from serving as informants, Theban contacts accessible to textile artisans involved in the confraternity could have been valuable in other ways. Theban elites, probably including those from the Kalandos and Kamateroi family,<sup>93</sup> could have provided work opportunities in their own households.<sup>94</sup> Those well-connected Thebans could have recommended or vouched for artisanal fellows for positions.<sup>95</sup> Theban ecclesiastics, constituting a significant portion of the confraternity's membership, could have accommodated non-native artisans in facilities associated with their churches or monasteries, including the Convent of Naupaktian Women. They could also have facilitated employment within ecclesiastic institutions which had a huge demand for silk textiles, such as for various liturgical occasions. In such cases, artisans could have become affiliated with these institutions, either as artisanal personnel<sup>96</sup> or lay monastics, continuing their profession in the form of ascetic exercises.<sup>97</sup>

### Conclusion

Our investigation has shown that the Confraternity of Thebes, despite its primarily religious remit, could have played a pioneering role in channelling textile artisans, especially silk weavers, from various parts of Central Greece to sustain the emerging silk industry in Thebes.

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92 Louvi-Kizi, Thebes, 635-637; Koilakou, Byzantina ergastèria (baphès?) stè Thèba, 23-24; Koilakou, Biotechniques egkatakastaseis, 223-227; Wu, How did Byzantines weave?, 390-392.

93 Nesbitt and Wiita, Confraternity of the Comnenian Era, 366-367. A member of the Kalandos family is recorded in the *Cadaster of Thebes*, see Svoronos, *Cadastre de Thèbes*, 18, 51; A contemporary member of the Kamateros family George was the *praitor* of Peloponnese and Hellas, whose seat was probably Thebes, see Jeffreys *et al.*, *Prosopography of the Byzantine World*, s.v. ›Gregorios 105›; Nesbitt and Oikonomidès, *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals*, 22; Herrin, *Realities of provincial government*, 61.

94 For a possible silk workshop in central Thebes owned by a local elite, see Louvi-Kizi, Thebes, 635-636; Cf. Jacoby, *Silk in western Byzantium*, 479. The production of silk textiles in elite households for private use is attested in tenth-century Constantinople, see Koder, *Eparchenbuch*, 104.

95 Instances of recommending silk weavers as such are attested in the contemporary Mediterranean, see, for example, Letter: T-S 12.289 of the Geniza documents. In tenth-century Constantinople, obtaining the endorsement of others was essential for conducting various types of business related to silk, see Koder, *Eparchenbuch*, 92, 98, 102, 106.

96 For textile artisans affiliated to the metropolitan see of Naupaktos in the early thirteenth century, see Wu, *Silk industry around Naupaktos*, 360.

97 Such lay monastics are attested in Thebes in the second half of the twelfth century, see Wu, *The metropolitan and the Theban silk industry*, 74-80.

Although the confraternity's primary focus was on Thebes, it had a regional engagement which entailed frequent gatherings of members across Central Greece. This engagement, on the one hand, possibly expedited the development of infrastructures that facilitated intraregional travel within Central Greece. On the other hand, non-Theban textile artisans associated with the confraternity, as represented by the silk weavers from the Blatas families, gained increased motility, allowing them to pursue careers in Thebes. These artisans were not only encouraged to visit Thebes frequently but also established valuable connections with Thebans through the close-knit network fostered by the confraternity. These Theban contacts could have served as informants, provided employment opportunities and recommendations, or offered various forms of accommodation to the artisans.

The developments set in motion by the confraternity could have effectively transformed the entirety of Central Greece into a labour reserve for the Theban silk industry, which significantly bolstered the industry's resilience, as evidenced by its rapid recovery following the devastating Norman raid in Thebes in 1147.

#### *Acknowledgements*

This work was supported by the National Social Science Fund of China under Grant number 23CSS005. I express my gratitude to the editors and the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on the manuscript of this article.

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### Abbreviations

ENA NS = Elkan Nathan Adler Geniza Collection New Series

PLP = Erich Trapp, Hans-Veit Beyer, Rainer Walther and Christian Host, *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit* (Vienna, 2001).

PmbZ = Ralph-Johannes Lilie, Claudia Ludwig and Beate Zielke, *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit* (Berlin, 2013). PmbZ online accessed on 21 April 2024: [www.degruyter.com/view/db/pmbz](http://www.degruyter.com/view/db/pmbz).

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