

CONTEXTUALIZING THEODORE METOCHITES AND HIS REFOUNDATION OF THE CHORA*

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Leading intellectual, prime minister, tycoon and founder of the magnificent monastery of the Chora, Theodore Metochites dominated life in Byzantium during the first quarter of the fourteenth century. The literature dedicated to Metochites and the Chora is extensive, reflecting the quantity of evidence available and its significance for topics ranging from philosophy and art to the society and government of Byzantium. Regarding Metochites, most attention has been on his scholarly aspect and less on his other two, more practical, sides, namely those of the imperial official and the magnate, which remain poorly understood. The image of Metochites as a vain and rapacious official who restored the Chora to expiate his sins, eloquently painted almost fifty years ago by Ihor Ševčenko, lingers on, in spite of the more nuanced interpretations proposed by other scholars.¹ We need a fuller and more balanced biography of Metochites and a more convincing explanation of his refoundation of the Chora. The case of Metochites is exceptionally well-documented and essential for the study of the Palaiologan ruling class. The latter is also true for the monastery he restored. The Chora is not simply a monument that is fundamental to the study of Palaiologan art and architecture.² It is also key

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1. I. ŠEVČENKO, *Metochites*, especially p. 31-33.

2. On the monument and its art, see P. UNDERWOOD, *The Kariye Djami*, 3 vols., New York, NY 1966, and R. OUSTERHOUT, *The Architecture of the Kariye Camii in Istanbul*, Washington, DC 1987.