Carestia

The area of carestia ("scarcity of food," "want," "high cost of living") and its variants in form and meaning extends from Italy to Portugal. The origin of the term is still unknown, in spite of the various attempts listed by Corominas (s.v., carestia) and Wartburg (FEW, II, 373). We think that it reflects a typically Byzantine institution.

In an essay, "On the Question of Byzantine Feudalism" (Byzantion, VIII [1933], 587), A. A. Vasiliev states:

In the East the Greek word kharistikion corresponded in meaning to the Latin word beneficium, and the Greek word kharistikarios corresponded to beneficiarius, i.e. a man granted land on condition of paying military service. But in Byzantium, especially beginning with the tenth century, the system of distribution of land as kharistikia was usually applied to monasteries, which were granted both to laymen and to clergy. Possibly this peculiarity of Byzantine beneficium (kharistikion) should be connected with the iconoclastic epoch, when the government in its struggle against the monks resorted to the secularization of monastery lands, which gave the emperor a rich source for land grants. This circumstance in all probability is the reason why the original meaning of kharistikion,
a grant of land in general not specifically monasterial, was lost and the term *kharistikon* was used specifically as a monastery grant.

The result to which the charisticary system led is briefly described by H.-G. Beck, *Kirche und theologische Literatur im byzantinischen Reich* (München, 1959), p. 136:

The charisticary received the monastery as a kind of fief; with this, he was curator (*εφορευς*) of the monastery. . . . If in its beginnings the institution seems to have been in the interest of weak monasteries, soon misuse occurred: the charisticaries saw in their monasteries prebends which they were able to exploit at will for their own purposes.

In short, in the phrasing of F. Dölger (*Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, XL [1940], 559), "the charisticariate is the invasion of the laic aristocracy into the sphere of monastic possessions." ²

A treatise by the eleventh-century patriarch John of Antioch, which is directed against the transfer of monasteries to the charisticaries (Krumbacher, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Literatur*, p. 156), presents a good description of the havoc that it brought about. The treatise is found in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, CXXXII, 1115–50; we quote two passages:

Τέως σήμερον, τα ἱλείθερα θάλλουν καὶ ἐπιδεδώσας τα δὲ δυσλα καταλίονται . . . Οὁ γὰρ τὰ καταλελυμένα διώροινται ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον τὰ συνιστάμενα καὶ εἰθαλὴ τὴν πρόσοδον ἔχοντα.

("At this very day, the free monasteries flourish and grow but the ones enslaved [under the charisticary system] break up. For
not the ones in decline are given as benefits but rather those in good status with thriving income.” page 1137)

The charisticary sequestered everything that belonged to the monastery:

(“... not only the buildings, the suburban estates, the animals, and the revenues of every sort, but also the churches themselves. He considers the abbot and the monks as his serfs, and holds everybody and everything as his private property. He allots to the churches of the Lord and to the monks a minimal portion of the whole revenue, and this he gives them just like alms, after much begging. Immediately even the most urgent food supply of the monks ceases and vanishes.” [1140])

This particular context of the exploited and impoverished Byzantine monasteries explains easily the use of the term carestia as it is preserved in the West. Although some of the semantic shades, such as the “want” or the “high cost of living” may be due to the secondary influence of carere (“to be without”) and carus (“costly”), as suggested by Corominas, the common use of them still reflects the effect of the charisticary system on the life of the monks.
The variant of the term, which was borrowed by the West, is (as far as we see) not recorded in the ecclesiastical literature. It is, however, listed, in Latin transliteration, in the ninth-century Glossarium amplonianum secundum explicitly as a Graecism: "caristia graece quasi gratia" (Corpus Glossariorum Latinorum, ed. G. Götz, Leipzig, [1881-91], V, 274, 50). This corresponds to the Greek *χαριστεία or *χαριστία ("benefice," "grant") based on χαρίζω as, say, καρπιστεία and καρπιστία are based on καρπίζω. The suffixes -εία and -ία, to be sure, overlap a good deal in Hellenistic Greek (Mayser, Grammatik der griechischen Papyri, 1:3, 9). Documented derivatives in medieval Greek: χαριστική ("donative," "prebend"), (Sophocles, s.v.) and χαριστικάριον ("he who receives the χαριστική ['prebendary']"), (Du Cange, s.v.).

A variant of *χαριστεία had already been borrowed by the West once before. Latin caristia (neuter plural) is the designation of a popular Roman feast, during which families gathered on picnics and presents were given (Pauly-Wissowa, Real-Encyclopaedie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft ([Stuttgart, 1894-1961], s.v., caristia). M. Leumann (Die Sprache, I [1949], 208) suggests that the Latin term was based on the Greek χαριστείον ("thank-offering"), (Liddell-Scott, s.v.); Emout-Meillet (s.v. caristia) posit the variant *χαριστία. It does not seem that the word continued in Romance. In the East, however, the ancient term survived in the Byzantine ecclesiastical and feudal terminology as the designation of grants and benefices. How the Byzantine word was transferred to the West is not clear. It may have spread from Byzantine southern Italy, or, since it was still in use in the twelfth century (Laurent, Revue des études byzantines, XII [1954], 106-7), it may have been heard by the crusaders.
The derogatory shade of meaning apparently did not develop in Byzantium. What, to the Greek speaker, was just a technical term of administration (unpleasant though it may have been) became to the foreigner who heard it in a certain context and saw it in a certain setting a word that expressed want, hardship, and starvation.

1. Including Rhaeto-Romance *chalastria*, etc. (Schorta in his *Dizziunari Rumantsch Grischun*, III, 174).


3. An immediate connection between this Graeco-Latin *caristia* and our Romance *carestia*, hesitantly posited by Corominas, is improbable for semantic reasons, as already pointed out by Yakov Malkiel, “Linguistic Problems in a New Hispanic Etymological Dictionary,” *Word*, XII (1956), 47.