Review


These two books are essentially the same. Both draw on the same body of research, displaying an extremely broad and impressive knowledge of Greek literature of the period c.500–c.1500. Both are cogently argued and the thesis that they present is well developed. The French volume remains faithful to the original lectures as they were delivered in Paris, whereas the English volume has additional material and bibliography, notably relating to the Palaiologan period, and the argument is reoriented by a reordering of themes. Careful attention is paid to secondary literature throughout, and the latest insights are often privileged over older works, for the author is clear that the study of Byzantine literature is only now maturing. However, the foundation of the study is a profound appreciation of Byzantine texts, notably the full run of historiography, which the author has read closely, and on much of which he has written before, whether in monographs (Prokopios, Psellos), translations into English (Prokopios and Psellos again, plus Genesios and Attaleiates), or learned articles (the aforementioned, but also Agathias, Lydos, Skylitzes, and more). Among the author’s major points, I highlight three of especial importance: that there was a clear break between the writing of late antique and middle Byzantine history; that the Byzantines had no ecumenical world view, which could translate into a notion like the “commonwealth”; and that the idea that Byzantine literature offers the reader a “distorting mirror” is itself a distortion, reflected through a modern, not medieval, prism.

Rather than review the material twice, I shall offer an overview of the French lectures, since these are less accessible to readers of *Speculum*. After a concise and articulate introduction, labeled chapter 1, the author’s second chapter considers the key writers of late antique ethnography, which is to be found embedded in Greek historiography. Examples are drawn from Prokopios, Agathias, and Theophylaktos. The third chapter develops this line, focusing on “subversion.” It begins with a long quotation from Priskos, on which insightful commentary is offered, before turning back to Prokopios and Agathias, to explore the *politeia*. This is stated to be the most significant concept in later Roman and Byzantine political thought, and a fuller monographic treatment of it is promised (now forthcoming with Harvard University Press). Prokopios’s ethnographic digression on the *Ephthialitai* is examined in detail, and his positive remarks on this barbarian *politeia* are shown to be negative commentary on the bloodstained politics of Justinian. Similar insights are offered on Agathias’s consideration of the Franks. The idea that ethnographic commentary is more about the Romans than the barbarians is far from novel, of course, but here the idea is applied with nuance to texts that the author has mastered.

The fourth chapter turns to Byzantine writers, positing that the writing of ethnography declined severely after the sixth century, until it reappeared in the fourteenth. (The fourteenth-century material is examined more fully in the English volume.) This was not, we are shown, due to absence of information, and a number of passages concerning spies, diplomats, and former prisoners or hostages are examined. Secret archives, now lost, are
posited, and military treatises introduced. Chapter 5 catalogues opportunities deliberately
missed—notably when engaged in diplomatic activity or the cognate activity of converting
Slavs—by Byzantine writers to engage in ethnographic enquiry. Chapter 6 concerns two
works, the Taktika of Leon VI and the De administrando imperio, which was produced
by or for Leon’s son, Constantine VII. Both texts are shown to conform to established
Byzantine types rather than to offer ethnographic information per se.

Chapter 7 is concerned with middle Byzantine historiography, offering a survey of works
that do not trouble with ethnographic digressions. As the author notes, this is not especially
perplexing before the twelfth century, when chronicles dominate the scene, but demands
fuller consideration as historians became self-consciously classicizing. Sketches signal, al-
though none proves (given the limited space allocated to each), that each historian had
his—or in one case her—own goals, which were largely incompatible with ethnography,
or in the context of which indulging in ethnographic digression was unnecessary. Psellos,
Niketas Choniates, and Attaleiates are wisely singled out for fuller attention. Chapter 8,
a companion piece, explores those few passages in middle Byzantine historiography that
might be interpreted as ethnographic. In fact, it is shown, they set out the geo-strategic
background to events covered in narrative histories, and are therefore of a type with the De
administrando imperio. In this regard, the author is arguing for the existence of dossiers
of such information in imperial archives, which makes a good deal of sense. An excursus
on the origins and migrations of Kuvrat’s Bulgars, as reported by Theophanes—the type
of origin myth beloved of recent students of “ethnogenesis”—is among the earliest of such
reports, and that in Skylitzes on the Seljuks is a crucial and original means to date his
work to the later 1080s or 1090s (as C. Holmes has argued quite recently on compatible
grounds). The notable exception that proves the rule is identified as the description of
the defeated Rus’ and their leader Sviatoslav in 971, which is incorporated into Leo the
Deacon’s History, but which the author shows to be the work of a classicizing author in
praise of the emperor John Tzimiskes.

Chapter 9 begins with an extremely lively series of reflections on language, notably
the use of literary language, which debunks the thesis that Byzantine literature acts as a
“distorting mirror.” The use of classical ethnonyms, most of which were late antique, is
accompanied by contemporary glosses, such that the meaning is rarely unclear. Moreover,
such naming was also taming, projecting claims over lands that the Romans had always
held, but which were now occupied by the latest variant of barbarian, where once dwelt
Skythians or Celts. Chapter 10 concerns the nomadic Pechenegs, one brand of Skythian,
some of whose leaders were converted, but who as Christians never became anything more
than barbarians. The Pecheneg conversion was, in any case, a matter of politics rather
than conviction, and its representations were subject to the usual rules that governed
literature, whether panegyric or history. The case study in chapter 11 is the Bulgarians and
their leaders. Theodore Daphnopates, acting both as epistolographical scold and oratorical
apologist, knows that the “half-Greek” Tsar Symeon, still less his son Peter, could not be
wholly Roman. Archbishop Theophylaktos, who lived among the Bulgarians at Ohrid,
would regard them as only half civilized two centuries after their conversion, and a half
century after their lands had been annexed by Basil II in 1018. Certainly, the author shows
that the rhetoric of Christian ecumenism is harder to find than examples disparaging non-
Romans, but one wonders whether his emphasis is not skewed too far in one direction,
accumulating data in the manner he observes elsewhere to be dangerous. That is to say,
each text or oration was serving its own purpose on the occasion it was written or delivered,
not revealing a universal truth about Romans and barbarians, nor how all Romans felt
about all non-Romans at all times.

Chapter 12 seems somewhat less refined than much that has gone before, dissolving at
times into a procession of quotations from others, notably from some very recent books.
The basic argument, that Christian Romans were as chauvinistic as any other type of
Roman, is unexceptionable, and few would now wish to argue that the Christianization of
the Roman Empire did not entail, to a very large degree, the Romanization of Christianity.
The argument, presented as novel (and in its formulation sophisticated) would appear to
be analogous to two very well-established controversies: the idea that imperial Christianity
corrupted an allegedly pure pre-Constantinian Church, over which theologically inclined
historians have argued for more than a century; and the notion that brands of Christianity
were ethnic designators, for example that Arianism was a “barbarian” form of Christianity,
emerged by “Germanic tribes.” The final chapter begins with a very user-friendly summary
of some, but not all, of the author’s principal findings. One might quibble at the ordering
of the points, which appears to reflect neither their perceived importance nor the order
in which they were made. The ensuing narrative is more denouement than conclusion,
introducing Islam as the “elephant in the room” that has thus far capably evaded our
gaze; had we been looking in a “distorting mirror”? The author succeeds in tying the
various strands together very capably around this new theme, but it requires sleight of
hand. The introduction of Islam far earlier in the English version allows for its more
successful integration into the argument and therefore represents one of the best aspects of
the reworking. Both works deserve to be read carefully.

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