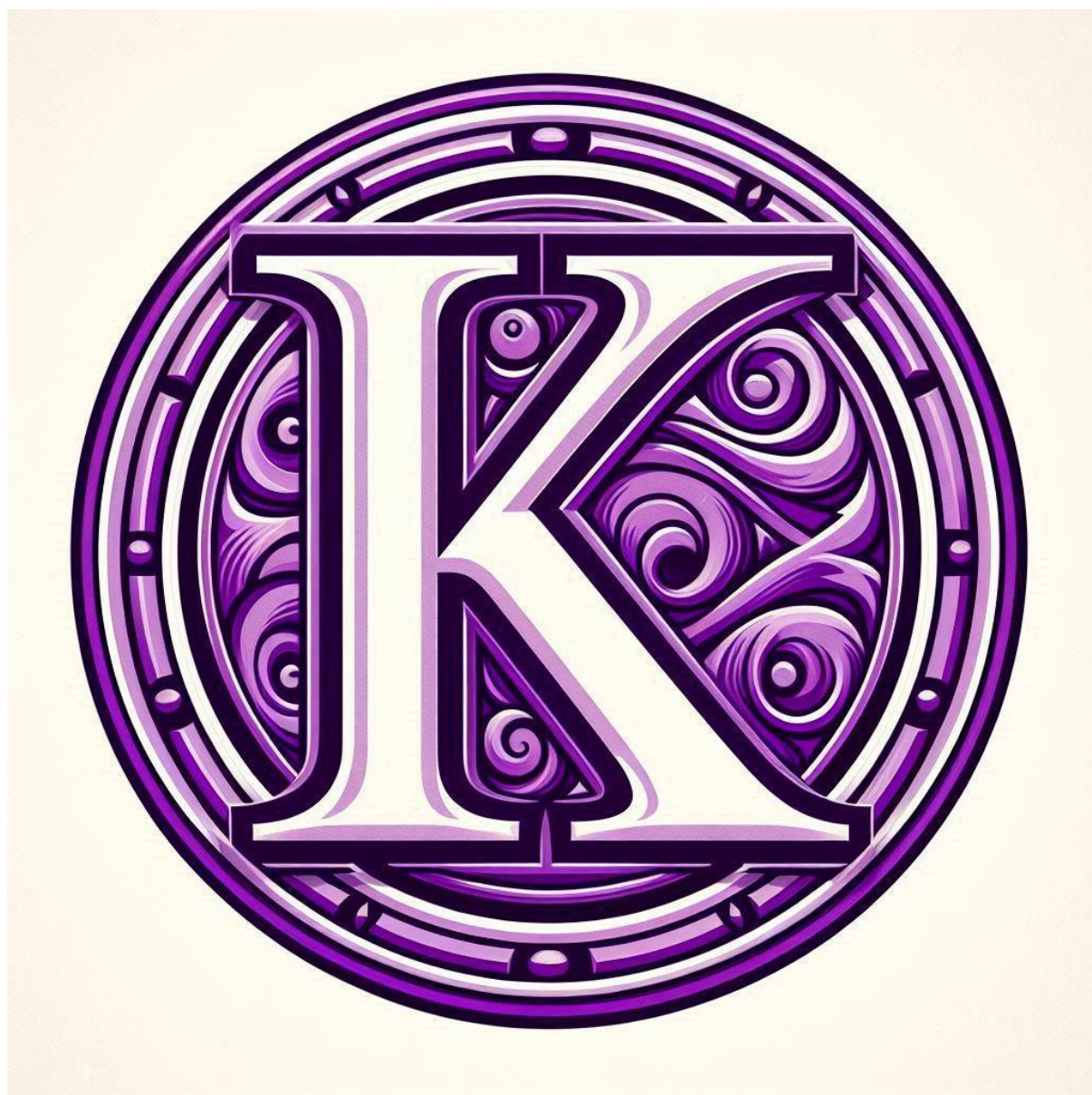


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*a cura di Lorenzo M. Ciolfi*

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**In collaborazione con:**

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## **Celebrating Two Decades, Confronting the Future**

The second issue of *Porphyra*'s 20x20 volume stands as both a celebration and a meditation: a celebration of two decades of continuous scholarly activity, and a meditation on the precarious future of independent academic publishing in Byzantine studies. Since its inception in 2003, *Porphyra* has aimed to foster a forum of intellectual autonomy, methodological openness, and critical rigour. For nearly twenty years, except for the unavoidable hiatus during the global pandemic, the journal has appeared online with admirable regularity, offering two issues per annum.

Yet this milestone is now shadowed by an acute awareness of the fragile infrastructure upon which such a venture rests. Severe technical complications have impeded our timely publication, revealing the vulnerabilities inherent in a project run not by salaried staff or institutional frameworks but by passionate scholars, whose academic lives often unfold outside formal university structures. The lack of human resources, combined with the increasing demands of digital maintenance, raises sobering questions about the long-term sustainability of *Porphyra*. It is with neither pessimism nor resignation, but with intellectual honesty, that we must acknowledge: the continuation of *Porphyra* beyond this issue remains uncertain.

Despite these adversities, the journal has recently entered a promising phase of international collaboration. Our partnership with the *Association des étudiants du monde byzantin* has led to the inclusion of selected proceedings from their annual conference, thereby expanding *Porphyra*'s scope and fostering new generations of Byzantine scholars. These volumes epitomise our enduring commitment to transnational and intergenerational dialogue. Looking ahead, *Porphyra* will submit its candidacy in September 2025 for inclusion in the "Classe A" list by the ANVUR, the highest tier of scholarly journals officially recognised within the Italian academic system. We believe the journal meets the qualitative and structural criteria required for this classification: rigorous peer review, a double-blind editorial process, continuity in publication, and measurable scientific impact. Moreover, *Porphyra* is supported by an international scientific advisory board and adheres to all scholarly standards expected of reputable academic journals.

This volume's contents are testimony to the journal's scholarly relevance and editorial integrity. The issue gathers ten articles spanning literary, historical, theological, and numismatic dimensions of

Byzantium. From **S. Aggio**'s literary reflection on the Byzantine novel as a joyful sharing of history, to **Anthony Kaldellis**'s acute exploration of authorship and intolerance in Late Antiquity, the thematic breadth is both deliberate and illuminating. **M.C. Chiriatti** contributes a detailed and rigorously annotated study on Gregory of Nyssa's corpus, offering an interpretative framework that highlights its rhetorical, theological, and political significance within the Christian imperial discourse. Equally notable are **J. Preiser-Kapeller**'s reflections on the Byzantine Anthropocene and the environmental footprint of the Eastern Roman Empire, and **P. Marciniak**'s inquiry into the metaphysical perceptions of "nature" in the Byzantine world. **F. Ronconi** discusses the evolution of manuscriptology and describes the success of the latest edition of his *International Itinerant Paleographic School*, while **H. Lamers** investigates multilingualism as a humanistic paradigm within Byzantine scholarship. **G. Vespignani**'s study on Vlad III Dracula and the Ottoman campaigns of 1462 presents a rare confluence of late Byzantine historiography and post-Byzantine memory, while **T. Braccini**'s work on divination and Byzantium advances interpretive frameworks rooted in both philology and cultural anthropology. The issue closes with a contribution by **J. Liu** and **Q. Li**, who provide a compelling digital archaeology of Byzantine coinage in China – an example of how Byzantine Studies continues to be global in both reach and relevance.

In these pages, then, one finds not merely academic output, but intellectual resilience. *Porphyra* has always been more than a publication: it is a collective act of belief in the enduring necessity of Byzantine studies. Whether or not this act may continue in its current form, this volume remains a testament to what has been achieved, and to what might still be possible.

**Nicola Bergamo**

*Editor in Chief*

## **Il romanzo bizantino come gioiosa condivisione della Storia**

*Sonia Aggio*

Autrice del romanzo *Nella stanza dell'imperatore* (Fazi Editore)

Credo che chiunque abbia familiarità con la materia bizantina concorderà con me, quando affermo che approfondirla significa ritrovarsi tra le mani un immenso, preziosissimo bacino di storie. E tra tutte le storie a nostra disposizione, ho da subito avuto l'impressione che la vicenda umana e politica dell'imperatore Giovanni I Zimisce (969-976) possedesse delle forti potenzialità narrative. Il nostro primo "incontro" è stato, per così dire, poco ortodosso; Zimisce ha fatto la sua apparizione in *medias res*, attraverso un brano estratto dalla *Storia* di Leone Diacono – nella traduzione curata da A.-M. Talbot e D.F. Sullivan – che da solo prometteva, anzi, *garantiva* una storia potente.

Gli elementi: una congiura, una notte tempestosa, un eroe che era anche un assassino.

Giovanni Zimisce risultò ancora più intrigante quando ebbi modo di approfondire i chiaroscuri della sua figura: mi trovavo di fronte a un buon imperatore, un usurpatore, uno degli artefici dell'espansione bizantina del X secolo, e allo stesso tempo un uomo messo in ombra dalla fama di chi lo precedette – Niceforo II Foca (963-969) – e di chi lo seguì – Basilio II Bulgaroctono (976-1025).

Da allora – era il 2017 e frequentavo il corso di Storia dell'*Università degli Studi di Padova* – uno dei miei obiettivi è stato quello di trovare la quadratura del cerchio, per trasformare vita reale e avvenimenti documentati in un *racconto* da offrire anche e soprattutto a chi non conosceva Bisanzio, e di certo non conosceva Zimisce. Il risultato di queste fatiche è stato *Nella stanza dell'imperatore* (Fazi Editore), il mio secondo romanzo, che è uscito nel gennaio 2024. Trae il suo titolo da un verso della poesia *Byzantium*, di William Butler Yeats – da non confondersi con la più nota *Sailing to Byzantium* –, e la narrazione copre un periodo che va dal 935 al 976, cioè dall'infanzia alla morte di Zimisce, ma vorrei precisare che non si tratta di una biografia romanzata: la narrazione si focalizza soprattutto sul suo percorso militare e politico, che culminò con la sua ascesa al soglio imperiale.

A distanza di più di un anno dalla sua pubblicazione, vorrei sfruttare questo spazio per rispondere alla domanda che mi è stata posta più di frequente, sia nelle interviste che durante gli

incontri con il pubblico, e finanche in conversazioni informali con amici e colleghi. La domanda è la seguente: *Perché hai deciso di dedicare un romanzo a un periodo storico poco noto come l'impero bizantino?*

Durante gli eventi pubblici a cui ho avuto modo di presenziare, più di un moderatore è arrivato anche a chiedermi quanto fosse ragionevole, e vincente dal punto di vista commerciale, scrivere un romanzo incentrato su una figura storica che non è nota al grande pubblico e che – elemento da tenere in considerazione nel nostro panorama editoriale – sfiora solo marginalmente le vicende italiane.

La prima risposta, un po' provocatoria, è spesso stata: *Perché non avrei dovuto?*

Dopotutto, a guardare con attenzione, si scopre che le vicende bizantine sono già state materia romanzesca in Italia. Cito, a titolo di esempio, alcuni titoli italiani pubblicati negli ultimi trentacinque anni, in cui l'elemento bizantino (per personaggi e vicende) è predominante: *La reliquia di Costantinopoli* di Paolo Malaguti, *Notturmo bizantino* di Luigi De Pascalis, *Morfisa o l'acqua che dorme* di Antonella Cilento, *Il fuoco greco* di Luigi Malerba (che per primo ha indagato il periodo turbolento che va dal 962 al 969), *Teodora, la figlia del Circo* di Mariangela Galatea Vaglio e *L'ultima città dell'impero* di Gastone Breccia. Mi permetto di sottolineare la predilezione che i miei colleghi scrittori (italiani ma anche stranieri: si pensi a *Gli amanti di Bisanzio* di Mika Waltari, o a *La città fra le nuvole* di Anthony Doerr) hanno dimostrato per l'ultimo secolo di vita dell'impero, e in particolare per la caduta di Costantinopoli, segno della perfezione drammatica insita in una storia conclusa tragicamente qual è quella bizantina. Vorrei infine porre l'attenzione anche su due titoli che provengono invece dal settore della letteratura per l'infanzia, *Storia di una principessa e della sua forchetta* di Annalisa Strada e *La ladra del vento* di Davide Morosinotto, per illustrare la versatilità della materia bizantina e le sue possibilità di espansione.

Il "romanzo bizantino" ha dunque una sua tradizione, anche se rimane vero che la materia non possiede ancora la forza d'attrazione e la popolarità di altri periodi storici – penso, ad esempio, alla Roma imperiale.

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Ora, chi si impegna nella scrittura di un romanzo storico si deve confrontare con due situazioni opposte.

La prima: che la parte narrativa e immaginativa sia scialba e carente.

La seconda: che la parte narrativa e immaginativa predomini sulla componente storica del romanzo.

Nel primo caso, il lettore comune si troverà tra le mani qualcosa che non è un romanzo, ma il secco riassunto di un testo divulgativo. Nel secondo, il lettore avrà sì un romanzo, ma non un romanzo *storico*, poiché mancano due condizioni imprescindibili – accuratezza e profondità nella ricostruzione del passato – per poterlo così definire.

In entrambi i casi, l'opera ha fallito, ha mancato il suo obiettivo.

In questa sede non intendo attribuire al mio romanzo il merito di aver superato questi due ostacoli: questa valutazione può essere fatta soltanto dai lettori. Io posso solo garantire di aver fatto del mio meglio per scrivere un romanzo equilibrato, che non respingesse i lettori e non li ingannasse con false promesse. Ma con mia grande sorpresa, all'uscita del libro l'ostacolo non è stata la materia bizantina in sé – al netto delle difficoltà intrinseche in elementi caratteristici come l'onomastica o la gerarchia militare del X secolo; il problema è stato piuttosto la concezione che i lettori avevano di sé stessi in relazione al romanzo storico.

La domanda che mi ponevano, in realtà, era: *Perché hai scritto un libro che io non posso leggere, non sapendo abbastanza di Storia?* Questa è stata una grande rivelazione.

Dalla mia esperienza di lettrice, scrittrice e bibliotecaria, ho tratto la conclusione che tra tutti i generi letterari soltanto la narrativa storica subisce questo pregiudizio. Raramente un lettore si tira indietro da un *thriller*, da un *romance* o addirittura da un *fantasy* prima ancora di iniziarlo – più precisamente, raramente si tira indietro perché non si sente “abbastanza preparato”. Possiamo provare a ipotizzare le cause: un'assenza di contenuti attraenti di *historical fiction* nei media, o forse metodi di insegnamento antiquati e respingenti, o ancora la crescente inaccessibilità – logistica ed economica – dei luoghi della cultura storica.

Quale che siano le ragioni, credo che la narrativa storica possa aiutarci a smantellare questa mentalità. Il romanzo storico *non* insegna, *non* spiega, *non* mistifica la realtà: la *racconta*. E raccontandola, la rende vicina, brillante, consistente. Restituisce la carne e il sangue a una disciplina spesso svilita, disumanizzata da elenchi, date mandate a memoria, nozioni ripetute senza senso critico, personaggi ridotti a un nome e a un intervallo di date.

Vorrei a questo proposito condividere questa osservazione folgorante, che apre la *Storia* di Leone Diacono e che mi ha accompagnato nei sette anni che ho trascorso scrivendo di Giovanni

Zimisce e del suo tempo: «[history] *brings mortal affairs back to life or gives them youthful vigor, and does not allow them to be swept away and concealed in the depths of oblivion*»<sup>1</sup>. Sono passati più di mille anni, ma continuiamo la sua opera, e ritengo che questo entusiasmo, questa gioia di narrare – la scrittura di *Nella stanza dell'imperatore* è stata per me un'esperienza davvero felice – possano essere la chiave per il successo del romanzo storico come introduzione alla Storia tout court. Certo, è ancora necessario infrangere il muro di diffidenza dei lettori, e per questo occorrerà del tempo, ma una volta che questo sarà accaduto, scrittori e lettori potranno godere della Storia – bizantina, ma non solo – come di un'esperienza ricca e gioiosa, una fonte di inesauribile meraviglia<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In SULLIVAN – TALBOT 2005, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> Il mio ringraziamento va al prof. Niccolò Zorzi e al prof. Giorgio Ravegnani, che mi hanno aperto le porte di Bisanzio.

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## Authorship and Intolerance in Late Antiquity

*Anthony Kaldellis* (University of Chicago)

In late antiquity theological questions became pressing social and political issues that affected more than just intellectual elites. Theological positions became rallying cries for the formation of confessional communities, which are the bread and butter of late antique scholarship. Yet at the same time it became increasingly dangerous to discuss God. Polymnia Athanassiadi in particular has questioned the upbeat view of late antiquity that has come to prevail in recent decades, which focuses the rise of religious communities and the creation of new identities. She draws attention to the parallel rise of a hegemonic attitude that she labels *la pensée unique* (in Greek, μονοδοξία), the assumption that there is only One True Faith, one based on canonical sacred texts, and that deviants – or deviation – had to be abolished, one way or another. Monodoxy entailed the enforcement, through legal, physical, and textual violence, of specific beliefs and called for the elimination of their rivals<sup>1</sup>. This attitude can be found among both Christians and pagans, albeit asymmetrically: Christian authorities believed that everyone but themselves was wrong (and so evil), whereas pagan authorities targeted only specific groups, such as Manicheans and Christians. As is well known, “pagans” mostly lacked a unified and coherent concept of their own ingroup, that term being a Christian projection. But in the third century AD emperors deployed notions of “Roman religion” that encompassed the entire empire and thereby brought them into further conflict with Christians<sup>2</sup>.

This dark side of late antiquity is sometimes downplayed in an effort to ameliorate the period and remove the odium of the Enlightenment, which saw it as an era of political and cultural decline and fall. Yet this aspect has not been entirely whitewashed away<sup>3</sup>. Rising intolerance was not only a motive force in the history of religion during this period, it also imposed new constraints on authors, beyond the dangers of writing about imperial politics that had been in place since the beginning of

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<sup>1</sup> ATHANASSIADI 2010, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> RIVES 1999; KALDELLIS 2023, pp. 64-67.

<sup>3</sup> CAMERON 2012, p. 14.

the Principate<sup>4</sup>. This paper is a preliminary effort to assess how and whether the climate of monodoxy shaped the history of literature<sup>5</sup>. It will examine the travails of dissident authorship in the persecution of Christians by pagans, then of Christians by Christians, and finally of pagans by Christians. The focus will be on authors who were the targets of intolerance because of what they were writing, and not on the intolerance toward others that they themselves expressed in their works.

A number of Christian authors were executed in the persecutions (e.g., Justin Martyr, Origen, Cyprian, Pamphilos), but not *because* they were authors; they were targeted in the same way as other Christians. The major persecutions were grounded in imperial edicts, but the latter never made it a crime to have written Christian texts per se. What was dangerous was *being* a zealous Christian eager for martyrdom at the time of one's trial, which some authors were<sup>6</sup>. One possible exception is a North African deacon named Felix who, around 310, was indicted for having written a letter slandering the emperor (it is unknown which one) as a tyrant. However, the charge against him must have been treason, that is directing an insult against an emperor, and not expressing Christian beliefs in writing. The incident did not take place during a persecution. Interestingly, he was shielded by the bishop of Carthage, for unknown reasons<sup>7</sup>. Some of the edicts driving the persecution required that Scriptures and other liturgical books be turned over, but this was a danger to books, not authors<sup>8</sup>. Christian authors, then, had little reason to dissemble their position in writing – at least until other Christians came to power and things got more complicated. Before that, imperial authorities were not trying to identify and arrest Christians through their writings.

After Constantine, the criminalization of heresy and the long search for the One True Doctrine of God created greater insecurities for Christian writers. Later generations remembered these conflicts as pitting good against evil, and many still view them as struggles among men with definite theological positions. In reality, most of the protagonists were constantly adjusting their positions and were unsure or confused about the views of their peers or rivals<sup>9</sup>. The same was true of the emperors

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. KALDELLIS 2017.

<sup>5</sup> The paper was written in 2016 and submitted to the editors of a volume, with whom it sat for years. As the volume has been canceled, I am publishing it elsewhere, with some updating.

<sup>6</sup> MOSS 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Optatus, *Against the Donatists* 1.17 (tr. EDWARDS, pp. 16-17).

<sup>8</sup> STE. CROIX 1954, pp. 75 and 84-85; BARNES 1968.

<sup>9</sup> HANSON 1993.

who acted as arbitrators, dispensing rewards and punishments<sup>10</sup>. For all that “heretics” and “heresiarchs” were demonized afterward, in real time it was easy to see that few of them were courting controversy or thought that they were saying anything controversial at all. Most of them probably thought that they were expressing a consensus among Christians, or a position that made intuitive sense, only to find themselves accused of heresy and put on trial at a Council. The case of Nestorios, bishop of Constantinople (428-431), is illustrative<sup>11</sup>.

As a result, many bishops and theologians were concerned precisely *not* to reveal their views, assuming they had clear views to begin with, in part because no one knew in advance whether his own position would be accepted as “orthodox” or condemned as heretical. This was the main risk of writing theology in the later empire: no one knew if he would be the next Arius. It was safer to make doctrinal alterations quietly, which is why heretics were so frequently denounced for falsifying authoritative texts and curses were pronounced against those who did so. I mention this here because forgers were authors too, after a fashion<sup>12</sup>. The context of insecurity made forgery a more attractive option among Christians. Few pagans, by contrast, cared about forged mythographic sources<sup>13</sup>.

No theologian knew in advance what position would be labeled heretical until history had spoken. Richard Lim summarized the dangers involved:

behind demands for a profession of faith stood the potential threat of popular outrage and perhaps even violence. [...] This aspect of late Roman social life rendered clear and forthright speech in doctrinal matters a risky proposition. In such a charged environment, guarded silence or deliberate obfuscation was often the safest course. [...] Even the most seemingly well-meaning audience could contain spies sent by one’s rivals to exploit moments of weakness, or imperial informers eager to challenge and to accuse<sup>14</sup>.

The dangers inherent in theological writing were thus the inverse of the dangers in writing the history of the emperors. In imperial historiography, everything prior to the current reign could be discussed more or less freely, so long as it did not touch on sensitive matters pertaining to the current regime, but events after the accession of the current emperor had to be treated panegyrically, bravely

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<sup>10</sup> GADDIS 2005.

<sup>11</sup> BEVAN 2016.

<sup>12</sup> EHRMAN 2013, pp. 62-67.

<sup>13</sup> CAMERON 2004.

<sup>14</sup> In LIM 1995, pp. 152-153.

(that is, with risk), or not at all. In Church history, by contrast, one had to stick to the official version down to the last moment of closure – that is, the most recent Ecumenical Council – after which one was sailing on uncharted waters.

But regimes changed and Councils were sometimes reversed, which could land one on the wrong side of history. Silence was thus the safest strategy. After his ordeal at Constantinople at the Council of 381, Gregorios of Nazianzos claimed to be enjoying «the safe prize of silence» (σιωπῆς ἀκίνδυνον γέρας)<sup>15</sup>. Theologically, his (Nicene) side had prevailed, but he had burned so many bridges with those in power that he preferred to keep quiet. This silence was the photonegative image of perceived peril. It is not easy to hear silence, but it is there. It was a strategy used by laymen too when it came to theological issues. Jonathan Conant has noted that in Vandal North Africa the

secular poets Luxorius, Florentius, and Felix never mention Arianism or the persecution of the Nicene Christians [by the Arian Vandals]. Perhaps it would have been impolitic for any of these men to have done so, as most of them (in both the Vandal and the Byzantine periods) enjoyed or sought to gain a position at the relevant court<sup>16</sup>.

Referring to these authors, Merrills and Miles suggest that «ambitious writers tended to shy away from controversial themes»<sup>17</sup>. It was as dangerous to write about God as it was to criticize the emperor.

Most bishops were neither combative nor adventurous. They were the quiet “back-benchers” at the Councils who wanted only to stay out of trouble and maybe gain some influence with higher-ups<sup>18</sup>. Only a few, such as Athanasios of Alexandria, the African bishops who opposed Justinian in the matter of the Three Chapters, and the founders of the anti-Chalcedonian churches in the sixth century, were willing to take a stand against imperial doctrinal policy and, if necessary, face the consequences, which normally meant flight among supportive communities in the hinterland but also possible arrest and exile, if not worse. They may have been few, but they stirred up considerable trouble for the emperors, who wanted nothing more than for theological debate to cease after the end of the last Council that they had sponsored (and almost always rigged). Constantine tried in vain to

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<sup>15</sup> In Gregorios of Nazianzos, *epist.* 91.1 (the phrase was a stock poetic expression), cited in LIM 1995, p. 171.

<sup>16</sup> In CONANT 2012, p. 376.

<sup>17</sup> In MERRILLS – MILES 2010, p. 226.

<sup>18</sup> MACMULLEN 2006, pp. 79-84.

get the bishops to shut up, and later emperors passed laws that forbade discussion of the Council of Chalcedon<sup>19</sup>.

This was, then, an inherently unfree and dangerous environment for the expression of theological opinions. Imperial authorities quickly found it necessary to persecute dissident Church leaders. As in the persecutions of the Church by the pagan emperors, Christian dissidents were hounded not primarily because of what they had written but because they opposed imperial policy. Writing was only part of such opposition but sometimes it could be targeted specifically. The emperor Anastasios, for example, condemned a Chalcedonian florilegium as “Nestorian” and exiled the monks who composed it to Egypt<sup>20</sup>. Much dissident literature was thus produced, consumed, and transmitted narrowly within its own confessional community. Writing for such groups, while under their protection, was safer. The fate of bishops who opposed imperial decisions without the backing of such a community is illustrated by Nestorios, the deposed patriarch of Constantinople. After Ephesos (431), he retired to a monastery near Antioch to wage a pamphlet war protesting his condemnation and deposition. When he refused to cease, he was exiled to Petra «and subsequently (when he continued his agitation against the emperor’s policy) to the prison colony of the Great Oasis in Egypt»<sup>21</sup>. There he kept up the fight, writing the *Tome of Herakleides*. This book was forbidden to all and was, by law, to be sought out and burned<sup>22</sup>. It has even been suggested that Nestorios used the name Herakleides in order to disguise and protect himself. But the text cannot be mistaken for the work of anyone else, so its strange title remains inexplicable<sup>23</sup>.

Another strategy was dissimulation. The first author we know who had to cope with the aftermath of the Council of Nicaea in 325 was Eusebios of Kaisareia. He was quite cagey and evasive in his response to the Council<sup>24</sup>. The heretic-hunter Epiphanius of Salamis believed that Akakios of Kaisareia, Eusebios’ successor, was also an Arian who disguised his position out of fear of the emperor<sup>25</sup>. The truth of this claim is less important than what it says about contemporary perceptions: even the right confession could be suspected as insincere, creating a lose-lose situation for Christian

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<sup>19</sup> HATZIANTONIOU 2009, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup> HATZIANTONIOU 2009, p. 73.

<sup>21</sup> In MCGUCKIN 1994, pp. 115-117.

<sup>22</sup> SAREFIELD 2006, p. 292.

<sup>23</sup> JANSSEN 2009, p. 147 n. 73; see pp. 137-147 for false authorial identities; but cf. BEVAN 2016, p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> VAN DAM 2007, pp. 277-316.

<sup>25</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 73.23.6 (tr. WILLIAMS, pp. 468-469); see HANSEN 1993, pp. 582-583.

theologians. Conversely, dissimulation and covert allusion emerged as virtues. Eusebios, for example, believed that Old Testament prophecies did refer to Rome, albeit only covertly. In order «to prevent any offence being taken by the rulers of the empire from a too-clear reference to them, the prophesy was cloaked in riddles»<sup>26</sup>. None other than the emperor Constantine argued in his *Oration to the Saints* that Vergil knew that his prophesy in the *Fourth Eclogue* was about Christ but, «to avert the rage of savagery, he directed the mind of his audience toward their own tradition»<sup>27</sup>, i.e., he dissimulated by allowing the Romans to believe that his text referred to their pagan religion, thereby evading their wrath. Lactantius assumed that the ancient poets could not tell the truth about religion out of fear and so sometimes spoke anonymously in order to condemn current vices<sup>28</sup>. John Chrysostom lectured on St Paul's reluctance to name Rome in his prophesy about the «restrainer»<sup>29</sup>. These Christian authors seem to condone such evasive and guarded strategies, but it is important to note that they were also projecting a late antique mentality of fear and dissimulation onto the past. They assumed that all religions were monodoxic and entailed intimidation.

Once the emperors had staked out theological positions, taking a different position ran the risk of implicitly criticizing the emperor, or tempted some writers to do so explicitly, at which point the dangers of theological dissent intersected with those of treason. Christian writers critical of the official theology had to tread carefully, wait until the emperor died, or disseminate their works among the like-minded only<sup>30</sup>. Few were brave enough to speak out boldly. Usually they waited for the emperor to die and then addressed him posthumously in “bold” speeches in which they acted as if he were alive (like Gregorios of Nazianzos writing against Julian)<sup>31</sup>. During the persecution of anti-Chalcedonians by the emperor Justin I, «no one could speak out of fear of the emperor»<sup>32</sup>. An anti-Chalcedonian writer in the later sixth century, John of Ephesos, explained that his mild account of Justin II in the first two parts of his ecclesiastical history was due to the fact that he was writing under his reign and did not want to be charged with treason. Paulos, another anti-Chalcedonian and a bishop of Antioch, was caught writing about the persecution under Justin II. He saved himself by accepting

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<sup>26</sup> In Eusebios, *Evangelical Demonstration* 7.1.323a (tr. FERRAR, p. 61); see JOHNSON 2006, p. 182.

<sup>27</sup> In Constantine, *Oration to the Saints* 19 (tr. EDWARDS, p. 47); see SCHOTT 2008, p. 121.

<sup>28</sup> DIGESER 2000, pp. 44 and 86.

<sup>29</sup> In GURAN 2006, p. 281.

<sup>30</sup> For examples of threading this needle from the fourth century, see FLOWER 2013.

<sup>31</sup> For Christian invectives against Christian emperors, see FLOWER 2013.

<sup>32</sup> In John of Nikiou, *Chronicle* 90.15 (tr. CHARLES 1916, p. 134).

Chalcedon<sup>33</sup>. These were cases where dissident authorship crossed into potential treason and disloyalty.

This brings us to pagan authors in the Christian empire. How perilous was their situation? The suspension of persecution by Galerius in 311 (with the Edict of Serdica) and then by Constantine and Licinius in 313 (Edict of Milan) opened an unprecedented window during which it was legal for a Roman to adhere to a non-Roman religion (Christianity). Those two emperors even declared that freedom of thought in religion was good<sup>34</sup>. But this pluralism was not to last. As Athanassiadi has shown, pagans (including intellectuals and authors) increasingly became the targets of Christian persecution. Alan Cameron, by contrast, has presented a rosier picture of polite exchange with no repercussions. He rejects the view that «pagans did not dare to speak their mind openly» and along with it the reading of any work as secretly pagan. No one, he believes, had reason to pretend to be Christian or hide his views. Such suggestions are «undermined by the lack of any known prosecution for any pagan work. [...] There is simply no evidence that Christians in authority actually punished the expression of pagan sentiments. Obviously, there must have been some limits. But so far as we know courteous disagreement was never forbidden»<sup>35</sup>.

There are many problems with this view, which is part of the “see no evil” school of late antiquity. I accept the core philological thesis of Cameron’s *The Last Pagans of Rome* that modern scholars have concocted a resistance movement in late fourth-century Rome where probably none existed, and also that they have wrongly equated classical culture with paganism, when Christians consumed and produced classical culture just as much. This is a major thesis and certainly correct. But Cameron also imposes a flat reading on the sources, which, in his hands, can have no nuance: they say what they mean, nothing more, and nothing is ever going on beneath the surface. What authors do not say, or do not say directly, is never considered as a hermeneutical category, nor even as a problem. This choice is in part required by his philological prosopography: Cameron reads texts in order to place their authors into one of four categories that, for him, are exhaustive: zealous or lukewarm Christians and zealous or lukewarm pagans. Ambiguity, strategic silence, and dissimulation would create too much confusion and fuzziness for these tidy categories, which have

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<sup>33</sup> John of Ephesos, *Ecclesiastical History III* 2.25, 3.1, and 2.2-3, respectively (tr. PAYNE SMITH).

<sup>34</sup> Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 48; Eusebios, *Ecclesiastical History* 10.5.1-14; this angle is developed by DRAKE 2000, pp. 193-198.

<sup>35</sup> In CAMERON 2011, pp. 206-207 and also 745.

all the subtlety of a census form. They offer a weak foundation on which to study literary, religious, and cultural history, as they strip out all nuance.

Cameron effectively grants to the pagans of the later empire greater freedom to speak and write freely than even bishops enjoyed. But it is impossible to believe that even prolific pagan authors such as Libanios, Proklos, and Symmachus have left us *all* their thoughts regarding Christianity and the imperial policies that were dismantling and outlawing their religion. They say little about these topics directly, which should not be taken à la Cameron as happy indifference but as careful self-censorship, the equivalent in the religious sphere of historians who refrained from discussing the current reign. The only pagan after Constantine who had nothing to fear was Julian, and he availed himself of the opportunity to speak at length about Christianity. Moreover, it is also likely that many only pretended to be Christians, given the legal disadvantages to which pagans were being increasingly subjected and the fact that our sources, including laws, complain often of counterfeit piety<sup>36</sup>. Julian himself had pretended to be a Christian until he had the power to speak freely. When seventh-century authors looked back to the fourth century and wrote fictions about it, they too imagined a world in which pagans had to pretend to be Christians in order to get ahead<sup>37</sup>. This strategy has to be factored into our reading of the literature. Late pagans were not conforming to Cameron's four census forms when they wrote. They were coping with dangerous realities that required them to keep quiet, dissimulate, or face the consequences.

One category of writing remained as dangerous under the Christian state as it had been under its pagan predecessor: magical books, a category that could be expanded to include the sacred books of persecuted religious groups, such as the theurgical texts of the Platonists (Augustine argued that there was no difference between magic and theurgy)<sup>38</sup>. Diocletian burned Manichaean and Christian books. Constantine burned Gnostic and Montanist books, the works of Arius, and the anti-Christian treatises of Porphyry the philosopher, and his subjects were required by law to turn them over to be burned<sup>39</sup>. Emperors set the tone by requiring these burnings, followed by bishops and monks. The trials under Valens targeted the possession of magical books, resulting in preemptive destruction of

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<sup>36</sup> TROMBLEY 2001, I pp. 73-94, for complaints about cryptopaganism (more references in the index); KALDELLIS 2004, pp. 169-170; KALDELLIS 2003, p. 303.

<sup>37</sup> See the the prefect Demosthenes in Georgios of Alexandria's *Life of John Chrysostom*, discussed in KALDELLIS 2009, p. 46.

<sup>38</sup> Augustine, *City of God* 10.9; for the suppression of magical literature and authors, see ROHMANN 2016; PHILLIPS 1991; for theurgy, see TANAESANU-DOBBLER 2013.

<sup>39</sup> SAREFIELD 2006; MACMULLEN 1997, p. 162 nn. 4-5.

personal libraries with diverse contents<sup>40</sup>. One Lollianus was convicted under Valens of having written a book on the black arts when he was young<sup>41</sup>. But even if they were not prosecuted as authors, many of our authors owned such books and lived with the fear that the historian Ammianus Marcellinus describes. This was true not only of pagans. John Chrysostom recounts how he and a friend found an object in a river that turned out to be a magical book, but, as there was a soldier passing by, he had to hide it in his cloak – in terror – and then throw it away<sup>42</sup>.

Many other categories of traditional religious thought and writing could land one in trouble in the Christian empire. This is not the place to review in full the persecution and extirpation of traditional religion by the imperial government. Our interest is authorship. But the context of legal discrimination and “corrective” persecution meant that pagan writers certainly felt threatened. Self-censorship and covert authorial strategies were, after all, a function of pervasive fear, which is amply attested. We know little about each case, but the picture that emerges from the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries is one of insecurity, not a polite “agree to disagree” that Cameron’s methodology requires. What matters is the kind of world that pagan writers *thought* they were living in and they reveal this to us this through the stories that they remembered and recorded. So even if high-profile pagan writers were attacked by their political enemies because of their high profile, and the opinions expressed in their works were only pretexts for those attacks, that still created a chilling climate for others, whether they had a high profile or not<sup>43</sup>.

The prophets of Apollo at Didyma and Antioch, who were the authors of oracles associated with the philosophical instigators of the Great Persecution, were tortured under Constantine<sup>44</sup>. The philosopher Sopatros (a student of Iamblichos) was executed by Constantine on an accusation of magic. The philosopher Maximus of Ephesos (a friend of Julian) was tortured and executed under Valens on a charge of magic<sup>45</sup>. The Alexandrian philosopher and writer Hypatia was torn apart by a Christian mob in 415<sup>46</sup>. The prefect, poet, and philosopher Kyros of Panopolis was exiled in 441 in

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<sup>40</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 28.1.26, 29.1.41, and 29.2.4.

<sup>41</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 28.1.26.

<sup>42</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homily 38 on the Acts of the Apostles* 5 (in PG 60, coll. 274-275).

<sup>43</sup> ROHMANN 2016, pp. 93-96.

<sup>44</sup> LANE FOX 1986, pp. 671-672; for their link to the Platonists, see DIGESER 2012.

<sup>45</sup> *PLRE* I, 846 (Sopatros), 583-584 (Maximos). For the total persecution of intellectuals associated with Julian, see WATTS 2015, p. 138.

<sup>46</sup> For shifts in the stories that pagans told about her later, see WATTS 2017, p. 118.

part on the grounds that he was a “Hellene”. Cameron has argued that this was a false charge, but even so it sent a powerful signal to real Hellenes about what they could expect just for being who they were<sup>47</sup>. The philosopher and writer Hierokles was flogged in mid-century Constantinople by «those in power», Damaskios’ code-word for Christian authorities, after which he said to his tormentors, «Cyclops, take your fill of blood» – using another code-word for Christians<sup>48</sup>. The professor of rhetoric and high official Isokasios was arrested in 467 and tried for paganism, though he «defused the anger of the crowd» through his comportment and by accepting Christian baptism<sup>49</sup>.

Pagan professors in Alexandria were targeted in the later fifth century by Christian students, crowds, and imperial inquisitors, and some were arrested and tortured, after which they had to tone down their teaching and their lectures were monitored by violent para-ecclesiastical groups<sup>50</sup>. The poet and historian Pelagios was executed by the emperor Zeno in 490 on the grounds that he was a pagan – just like that<sup>51</sup>. The pagan schools of Athens were closed by Justinian in ca. 529 and their professors departed for Persia (they returned when the shah guaranteed their protection in a treaty). The last head of the Academy, Damaskios, wrote a history detailing the experience of persecution and resistance of the philosophers of his generation<sup>52</sup>. He refers in one place to «the fear hanging over their heads» (τοιούτου ἐπικρεμαμένου δέους), reminding us of Ammianus’ image of the sword of Damocles that hung over all during Valens’ persecutions of (alleged) magicians<sup>53</sup>. The learned pagan prefect Phokas was forced to take his own life in 541/542 during one of Justinian’s anti-pagan purges rather than face execution for apostasy<sup>54</sup>.

In light of this evidence, recorded by pagans at the time and retained in memory later, one cannot agree with Cameron that «there is simply no evidence that Christians in authority actually

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<sup>47</sup> CAMERON 1982, pp. 268-270.

<sup>48</sup> In Damaskios, *The Philosophical History* 45B (= the *Life of Isidoros*), in ATHANASSIADI 1999, pp. 132-133; code: ATHANASSIADI 1993, p. 18. For why Cyclops was an insult, see BRANN 2002, p. 190. For “those in power,” see Damaskios’ *Philosophical History* fr. 113I, 118B, and 145B; also KALDELLIS 1999, pp. 241-242; and CAMERON 2011, pp. 190-191 (“the prevailing religion” is a pagan phrase).

<sup>49</sup> In BROWN 1992, pp. 132-133.

<sup>50</sup> WATTS 2006, ch. 8.

<sup>51</sup> *PLRE* 2 (Pelagius 2), pp. 857-858.

<sup>52</sup> ATHANASSIADI 1993. Academy: WATTS 2006, ch. 5.

<sup>53</sup> In Damaskios, *The Philosophical History* fr. 106B.

<sup>54</sup> KALDELLIS 2014.

punished the expression of pagan sentiments»<sup>55</sup>. These victims either were authors or came from the classes that produced them. Maybe they were not being punished *as authors* in all cases but their very existence and intellectual appeal among pagan circles offended the ascendant monodoxy. By the sixth century, philosophers were advising their readers to keep their heads down. In his commentary on Epiktetos, Simplikios commented on what philosophers should do «in corrupt states». He drew on the advice of Sokrates in the *Republic* that those who have met with «wild beasts» should keep quiet and mind their own business. His advice was that they should avoid public life or move elsewhere (as he had, briefly, to Persia). He goes on:

in these kinds of states, in which most people resent those who want to live according to nature [i.e., a Stoic ideal], it is fine to present yourself as a moderate [...] guard yourself (φυλάττεσθαι) by staying far away from offending people in power (τὰ πρὸς τοὺς δυνάστας προσκρούματα) and from tasteless *parrhesia*, in times such as these<sup>56</sup>.

The ensuing discussion in that text of «wild beasts that cannot be tamed» is certainly a coded reference to Christian agitators.

Simplikios' contemporary Olympiodoros of Alexandria commented on the same passage of the *Republic* in his discussion of what a philosopher ought to do in a bad state, also referring to wild beasts<sup>57</sup>. Westerink has shown how cautiously Olympiodoros touched upon topics in which Christians had a stake and how he used vague expressions to refer to their power, e.g., «the present circumstances», as in the passage of Simplikios above and, before him, in Damaskios<sup>58</sup>. Silence and evasion stemmed not from acquiescence, but from fear and apprehension.

It is therefore suspicious that the late Platonists, who were politically active at the highest levels and had strong religious convictions, almost never mention Christianity explicitly in their extant writings (excepting Julian, the only one with nothing to fear). But it is impossible to believe that they had no opinions about it, which means that they either kept quiet about it (which should put us on the alert for preemptive self-censorship) or spoke allusively. I have already pointed out some of their code-words, including arcane, poetic, or vague terms that could be given innocuous interpretations for the purpose of plausible deniability. Far from being indifferent, these men were intensely

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<sup>55</sup> In CAMERON 2011, pp. 206-207.

<sup>56</sup> In Simplikios, *Commentary on the Manual of Epiktetos* 32.186-234 (ed. HADOT), with Plato, *Republic* 496d-e; see KALDELLIS 2004, pp. 105-106; WATTS 2010, pp. 53-88, and in particular p. 80.

<sup>57</sup> Olympiodoros, *Commentaries on Plato's Gorgias* 26.18; wild beasts: 32.4 and 41.2.7 (ed. WESTERINK).

<sup>58</sup> WESTERINK 1962, pp. XVI-XIX; cf. Damaskios, *Philosophical History* fr. 36A: «τὰ παρόντα».

interested in contemporary developments and felt a need to define themselves in relation to what Damaskios called «the other side», to which some of his own people would «defect» occasionally and abandon their «ancestral traditions», as if there was a war on<sup>59</sup>. References to Christians in Proklos and Damaskios are accordingly generic: «the foreigners», «the others», «impious ones», «uneducated ones», «atheists», «those in power», «the establishment», and «those who intimidate us» and take things from the temples<sup>60</sup>. Photios was right that Damaskios attacked Christianity «covertly»<sup>61</sup>, and a Byzantine scribe even caught Damaskios' meaning, adding in the margin, «you're the impious ones; we're the Christians, a divine and most pious race!»<sup>62</sup> Scholars have identified a range of other possible pagan code-words, taken from mythology and literature: the Giants and Titans, i.e., the enemies of the gods trapped within the earth (signifying their materiality), and Typhon (in Proklos and others)<sup>63</sup>; Vulture Giants (Marinos)<sup>64</sup>; Cyclops (at Hierokles' trial); immortalizing Getai (Agathias)<sup>65</sup>; the hawk that clutches the nightingale in its talons in Hesiod's fable (Proklos)<sup>66</sup>; and «those who move the immovable» (Marinos), next to which a Byzantine scribe wrote, «I think he's hinting at us Christians»<sup>67</sup>.

Jonathan Barnes has recently proposed that few if any of these phrases were meant to refer to Christianity, but his argument consists of little more than scoffing and joking at the idea that they were, so it is difficult to assess its merits. Barnes prefers to read each passage as referring to anything other than Christians, so one comes away with the impression that the last pagans were utterly unconcerned and uninterested in Christianity and in the developments (religious, intellectual, and

<sup>59</sup> In Damaskios, *Philosophical History* fr. 102B (Horapollon): «αὐτομολήσῃ πρὸς ἑτέρους καὶ καταπροήσεται τοὺς πατέρας νόμους».

<sup>60</sup> In Damaskios, *Philosophical History* fr. 66A, 78C, and 118, and see above. The term ἐπιεικής (a “reasonable,” “decent” man) was code for “one of us,” philosophical Hellenes: ATHANASSIADI 1999, p. 147 n. 120; intimidation and temples: WATTS 2015, p. 137 (Libanios). In general, see SAFFREY 1975; SINIOSSOGLU 2008, pp. 6, 46-47, 93, 124, and 177; HOFFMANN 2012. For possible allusions in late antique hymns, see SMOLAK 2004.

<sup>61</sup> In Photios, *Bibliothēke* cod. 181.

<sup>62</sup> In SAFFREY 1975, p. 561.

<sup>63</sup> SAFFREY 1975; also Eunapios, *History* fr. 56 = *Lives of the Philosophers* 472; Damaskios, *Philosophical History* fr. 19, with ATHANASSIADI 1993, p. 7; ATHANASSIADI 1999, pp. 77-79 n. 7; JONES 2014, pp. 97 and 128. See also Libanios, *Letter* 1518.5 on the Giants who destroyed two statues in Sparta in collaboration «with the rulers at that time».

<sup>64</sup> Marinos, *Life of Proklos* 15 (tr. EDWARDS, p. 79): «giant birds of prey»; see SINIOSSOGLU 2011, p. 55.

<sup>65</sup> KALDELLIS 1999, pp. 227-231.

<sup>66</sup> SINIOSSOGLU 2011, p. 56.

<sup>67</sup> In Marinos, *Life of Proklos* 30; *scholion*: «τοὺς Χριστιανοὺς ἡμᾶς δοκῶν μοι αἰνίττεσθαι»; SAFFREY – SEGONDS 2001, p. 165 n. 1.

political) that it represented<sup>68</sup>. To pull this off, Barnes also has to downplay the persecution of later paganism – he jokes that Hierokles was only whipped, not executed, and went back to Alexandria, so what’s the big deal? – and he also has to take silence as signifying lack of interest, a major error of the school of irenic Christianization. As we saw, the Platonists had something else in mind when they advised each other to «keep quiet». Less aggressively flat readings of late antique sources are sensitive to the way in which silences about the powerful were implicit accusations<sup>69</sup>. Barnes also takes the codes at face value, and calls them out for not being impenetrable, but that was not their function. Not naming your foe when you insult him and he has you in his power is prudent, but there is also distaste at work here: pagans avoided contaminating their texts with the repugnant Christian name. In their own literature they could at least imagine and vicariously inhabit a world in which that pollution had no name and existed only in the margins. There was in the code-words also an artistry, an inventive wit and superior stance that affected to disdain the existence of the imperial religion, to pretend that this problem was but an iteration of vices which ancient thought had dealt with long ago in generic terms. It too might pass. More work remains to be done here, which could benefit from James Scott’s anthropological notion of “hidden transcripts” that oppressed groups use to communicate among themselves<sup>70</sup>. One aspect of this practice is that it uses expressions that are banal on the surface but have additional meanings for the ingroup.

As stated above, numerous sources attest to religious simulation, specifically to pagans pretending to be Christians for protection or gain. After a certain point pagans could not hold office by law and could be dismissed or executed merely for being pagans, so Cameron’s view that no one had an interest to pretend to be a Christian is implausible. By ca. 400 dissimulation as a strategy must have been so pervasive that it was noteworthy when a pagan was *open* about his non-Christian beliefs. Eunapios says that his Gothic hero Fravitta, «the leader of the godly and divine party [...] openly declared that he worshipped the gods after the ancient fashion and had no inclination towards deceit and evasion». Instead, quoting Homer, «he hated the man who hides one thing in his heart and speaks

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<sup>68</sup> BARNES 2013. Barnes does not pause and ask why Proklos, in his treatise on the eternity of the world, would bother to attack some obscure Middle Platonists. Barnes is also not troubled by the fact that all Christian readers of this work understood its real target, and subtitled it *Against the Christians*. For Barnes, subtexts do not exist.

<sup>69</sup> E.g., KELLY 1995, p. 247.

<sup>70</sup> SCOTT 1990.

another», confirming that many were doing exactly that<sup>71</sup>. In another passage, Eunapios claims that the Goths crossing the Danube «kept a deep and impenetrable silence» about their paganism:

what they revealed was a fiction and sham designed to fool their enemies: they all claimed to be Christians and some of their number they disguised as their bishops [...] laying down a false scent. [...] The rest of the time, under cover of the deepest secrecy, they worshipped the holy objects of their native rites<sup>72</sup>.

Eunapios then comments incisively on how this fooled the naïve Christian Romans. K.S. Sacks argues that Eunapios means by this that «paganism could succeed by assuming the pose of Christianity»<sup>73</sup>. This might mean pagans pretending to be Christians, or, on a more ambitious reading, producing pseudo-Christian theology to inject the new faith with the philosophical principles of the old, carving out an intellectual space hospitable to their Platonism. According to some, this is what the works of pseudo-Dionysios were meant to do (one study even attributes them to Damaskios)<sup>74</sup>. While no one can deny the Neoplatonic matrix of his thought, it has also been proposed that the pseudonym was meant to situate the author in a specific theological relation to St. Paul<sup>75</sup>. We will probably never know the real intentions or the full extent of dissimulation going on in this corpus, given how carefully its author hid his identity.

Eunapios is an interesting case. He was critical of the reigning Theodosian dynasty and outspoken about the dominant religion<sup>76</sup>. It is revealing that both Eunapios soon after 404 and Zosimos (the last openly non-Christian historian) in ca. 500 felt safe enough to release their histories, even if only among like-minded people at first. In the case of Eunapios, however, we have a piece of information whose interpretation has divided scholars. Photios claims to have seen two editions of the *History* (an old and a νέα ἔκδοσις), which covered the same period and were both anti-Christian, but Eunapios had cut many of his insults against Christianity from the second edition, even though this left the work with abrupt transitions<sup>77</sup>. Photios does not say why Eunapios did this. Some have

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<sup>71</sup> In Eunapios, *History* fr. 59, in BLOCKLEY 1981, II pp. 86-87 (modified), quoting *Iliad* 9.312-313. For Fravitta's outspokenness, see fr. 69.4: he demanded to be allowed to worship in the old way.

<sup>72</sup> In Eunapios, *History* fr. 48.2, in BLOCKLEY 1981, II pp. 74-77; see HEATHER 1986, pp. 305-310.

<sup>73</sup> In SACKS 1986, p. 55.

<sup>74</sup> MAZZUCCHI 2006, pp. 299-334; LANKILA 2010.

<sup>75</sup> STANG 2012. Stang wrote before he could benefit from EHRMAN 2013, which challenges his benign reading of pseudonymity.

<sup>76</sup> BUCK 1998.

<sup>77</sup> Photios, *Bibliothēke* cod. 77.

therefore conjectured that it was out of caution or to attract a wider readership (indeed the work did become popular)<sup>78</sup>. Cameron attributes the revision to a Christian scribe, but Photios is explicit that the second edition was also anti-Christian, only less so<sup>79</sup>. Other factors further complicate the issue of this revision, which requires separate treatment<sup>80</sup>.

Writing in ca. 410, and personally connected to prominent pagan officials, Eunapios was in a safer position than anyone writing a century later or under Justinian, by which point teachers and philosophers had been specifically targeted. The anti-Christian historian Zosimos is therefore an interesting case, as he was writing in ca. 500. Photios says that he held the rank of *comes* and was a retired *advocatus fisci* (ἀπὸ φισκοσυνηγόρου)<sup>81</sup>, and we infer from one passage that he was writing in Constantinople<sup>82</sup>. Given the tension between his beliefs and the legal requirements of his office, scholars have conjectured that he «concealed his paganism while he was in office» or that his polemical history, which is in fact unfinished, was not circulated until after his death, which was not far off for a retired official anyway<sup>83</sup>. These are guesses that stem from assumptions about the perils of pagan authorship, to explain how Zosimos «got away with it». While it would not have been safe to bet on Cameron and expect Christians to cordially «agree to disagree», this may still be too solitary and furtive an image of the author. It is likely that Zosimos belonged to a flourishing circle of like-minded people, whom Athanassiadi tried to identify as his audience<sup>84</sup>. After all, we still have to

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<sup>78</sup> TREADGOLD 2007, p. 83.

<sup>79</sup> CAMERON 2011, p. 671; but see BLOCKLEY 1981, I p. 3.

<sup>80</sup> One problem is that we do not know from which edition our fragments come: most scholars assume the second, which rules out a Christian redactor because what we have is anti-Christian. The issue is complicated by the fact that, in addition to the two editions mentioned by Photios, Eunapios refers in his *Lives of the Philosophers* (written certainly before 404), to an existing version of the *History* that he seems to have been planning to update (esp. 475-476). Scholars, then, are divided as to the nature of the two editions. One camp thinks that there was an anti-Christian narrative reaching down to some point in the later fourth century, followed by an extended and less anti-Christian version down to 404; whereas other scholars think, as Photios says, that both versions went down to 404, even if Eunapios took a long time to finish the first, and the revisions affected only religious polemics. Cameron's belief in a Christian redactor is undermined additionally by the fact that he belongs to the first group: yet a redactor cannot have continued the *History* down to 404 from its original end-point, and revised the work.

<sup>81</sup> Photios, *Bibliothèque* cod. 98.

<sup>82</sup> Zosimos, *New History* 2.30-32.

<sup>83</sup> Respectively TREADGOLD 2007, p. 109, and KARPOZILOS 1997, pp. 340-341.

<sup>84</sup> ATHANASSIADI 1999, pp. 350-357 ("Who was Count Zosimus?"); see also BJORNLIIE 2013.

explain how his *New History* survived the millennium that followed, even if in one manuscript only<sup>85</sup>. Some later Christian Romans were evidently interested in his work.

To conclude, it was always dangerous in the ancient world to express deviant or unconventional opinions about religious matters, even in democratic Athens. This did not change in the later Roman empire. What was distinct about that period, however, was the intersection of two new factors: first, the division of society into discrete religious groups with incompatible views and, second, the active involvement of imperial authority on the side of one or another of these groups, which exposed those who disagreed with imperial policy to accusations of treason. Authors and intellectuals among all groups had to navigate this uncertain and dangerous terrain carefully. To be sure, neither the state nor the Church invested in institutions of systematic surveillance and censorship. This was no Soviet Union. Writers with contrarian views who had political cover (e.g., through personal connections) could usually express them and get away with it. But nor was it the rosy and consequence-free environment that we find in some scholarship.

Authors from this period frequently refer to “fear”. This was not just fear of physical violence at the hands of a mob or of prosecution and punishment by the authorities, though both are attested. Most of our writers belonged to wealthy or elite social strata and it was a sufficient deterrent for them simply to be passed over for office or promotion, whether secular or in the Church. So both fear and careerism resulted in considerable preemptive self-censorship in the later Roman empire. In this regard, it was perhaps much like modern societies with systematic censorship, where internalized self-censorship and careful side-stepping of sensitive issues nevertheless accounts for far more silencing than official crackdowns. As Tolstoy is said to have remarked, the problem is not what the censor did with his works, but what he never wrote down in the first place. There was no censor in the Roman empire, nevertheless it is clear that authors writing on religious matters could not express themselves freely, leaving us with the difficult but necessary task of imagining what they prudently left untold. What this means in practice is that we need to read their works with a sharper eye for nuance, strategic silences, and dissimulation. In other words: we need more close readings of individual authors, not just the social history of late antique religious groups.

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<sup>85</sup> KALDELLIS 2015, pp. 47-64.

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## **Dalla teologia alla propaganda: i Βασιλικοὶ Λόγοι di Gregorio di Nissa e le origini della retorica bizantina**

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Nella fase culminante della transizione culturale che allo scorcio del IV secolo ridefinì l'assetto politico e religioso dell'Impero romano d'Oriente, i βασιλικοὶ λόγοι di Gregorio di Nissa costituirono un laboratorio retorico e ideologico in cui si fusero pratiche sofisticate tradizionali e strategie di persuasione cristiana. Ne risultò che le orazioni funebri e i panegirici che il vescovo cappadoce compose si configurarono come strumenti letterari di carattere pubblico volti a consolidare l'ortodossia nicena e a legittimare una concezione del potere imperiale fondata sulla comunione tra trono imperiale e cattedra. Questo studio intende offrire una ricostruzione iniziale di tale fenomeno, combinando l'analisi filologica del *corpus* gregoriano con lo studio delle matrici teoriche entro cui esso si innesta – in particolare la tradizione della Sofistica e la manualistica retorica tardoantica (Menandro di Laodicea, Ermogene, Aftonio) – nonché mettendo in luce i meccanismi attraverso cui la forma epidittica venne adattata, ri-significata e impiegata in funzione politica e catechetica. Il presente lavoro attinge ai testi critici e ai saggi specialistici sulle orazioni di Gregorio di Nissa e sulla funzione della retorica dalla tarda antichità, e integra osservazioni filologiche, analisi retoriche e considerazioni storiche per restituire un quadro complessivo e coerente del valore complessivo di questi λόγοι<sup>1</sup>.

Nella cornice culturale del IV secolo, la retorica smise progressivamente di essere mera tecnica scolastica e uno strumento di comunicazione di uso pubblico per diventare l'elemento costitutivo di un *habitus* che orientò pratiche educative, definì canoni letterari e intervenne nella costruzione dell'identità istituzionale, perlopiù cristiana; tale spostamento fu reso possibile dalla persistenza dei

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<sup>1</sup> Queste opere del Nisseno sono raccolte nella collezione avviata dall'illustre filologo tedesco Werner Jäger (*Gregorii Nysseni Opera*), in particolare nei volumi IX e X.1 (a cura di G. HEIL et alii, Leida, 1990-1992), nei quali sono pubblicati i seguenti discorsi: l'*Oratio Funebris in Meletium Episcopum* (ed. A. SPIRA, vol. IX); l'*Oratio Consolatoria in Pulcheriam* (ed. A. SPIRA, vol. IX); l'*Oratio Funebris in Flacillam Imperatricem* (ed. A. SPIRA, vol. IX); l'*In Sanctum Stephanum I* (ed. O. LENDLE, vol. X.1); l'*In Sanctum Stephanum II* (ed. O. LENDLE, vol. X.1); l'*In XL Martyres I*<sup>a</sup> (ed. O. LENDLE, vol. X.1); l'*In XL Martyres I*<sup>b</sup> (ed. O. LENDLE, vol. X.1); l'*In XL Martyres II* (ed. O. LENDLE, vol. X.1).

manuali e dei canoni retorici della Sofistica come deposito normativo di forme e procedimenti – codificati e diffusi tramite i *progymnasmata* e i trattatisti – e dalla conversione delle modalità di comunicazione pubblica alla nuova religione dell’Impero, ragioni per le quali l’eloquenza si configurò come strumento non solo di rappresentazione ma anche di governo.

Nella società imperiale romana – specialmente nella sua fase più tarda – la retorica occupava un posto preminente sia nella vita pubblica che nell’educazione privata. Tale centralità dell’eloquenza e del discorso persuasivo si rifletteva direttamente nell’apparato amministrativo dello Stato, il quale, di fronte a una burocrazia sempre più ampia, si trovava nella necessità di una sempre più grande coorte di funzionari alfabetizzati e retoricamente formati. Questi uomini di lettere, provenienti in gran parte dalle rinomate scuole del tempo, che continuarono a essere i principali centri di formazione delle *élites*, non solo mantennero vive le tradizioni pedagogiche classiche, ma fornirono alla cancelleria imperiale, ai tribunali e ai centri municipali, oratori capaci di comporre arringhe legali complesse, documenti ufficiali e discorsi cerimoniali.

In questo contesto, le circostanze storiche e istituzionali che videro la Chiesa acquisire spazi pubblici e funzioni amministrative proprie dei retori secolari comportarono il progressivo affidamento a queste figure ecclesiastiche di cerimonie pubbliche di rilievo – tra le quali redigere e pronunciare le orazioni funebri per i principali esponenti della *domus* imperiale e i discorsi in occasione delle feste pubbliche in onore dei martiri – a vescovi provvisti di formazione retorica; l’atto della commemorazione, così rielaborato, assunse al contempo valenze consolatorie, dottrinali, encomiastiche e propagandistiche, che concorsero simultaneamente a curare il lutto, a creare modelli di imitazione di vera fede, a rinforzare il credo ortodosso e a consolidare, pertanto, l’autorità ecclesiastica. La tesi che in questo contributo si sostiene è pertanto che i βασιλικοὶ λόγοι di Gregorio non siano mere esemplificazioni di un genere desueto, bensì corpi testuali funzionalmente integrati nella macchina simbolica e propagandistica dell’Impero cristiano, e che essi ricoprissero a loro volta un ruolo attivo nella creazione e nella diffusione di una nuova immagine di sovranità, quella che possiamo definire come “βασιλεία cristiana”.

I discorsi imperiali di Gregorio di Nissa costituiscono tuttavia una sezione marginale all’interno dell’ampia tradizione di studi sulla sua produzione letteraria, prettamente di contenuto teologico. Con la denominazione di βασιλικοὶ λόγοι intendiamo riferirci alla produzione per lo più retorica e letteraria del vescovo cappadocce ascrivibile alla fase matura della sua opera e, precisamente, al

periodo compreso fra gli anni 379 e 386: un arco cronologico nel quale Gregorio si dedicò, alternativamente, tanto alla composizione e lettura pubblica di orazioni ufficiali (rivolte a personalità eminenti della sfera ecclesiastica e politica, quali: il vescovo Melezio di Antiochia, presidente del primo concilio di Costantinopoli del 381; la principessa Pulcheria, primogenita dell'imperatore Teodosio e di Elia Flaccilla, sua prima consorte reale; e il discorso per il trapasso della stessa imperatrice, deceduta pochi mesi dopo la morte della figlia), quanto a discorsi di carattere più encomiastico (quelli, cioè, pronunciati in occasione delle πανηγύρεις in occasione dei *dies natales* di santi martiri come, ad esempio, le orazioni pronunciate in onore del protomartire Stefano, il soldato Teodoro di Amasea e i Quaranta Martiri di Sebaste).

Sebbene il βασιλικὸς λόγος come categoria letteraria consenta di raccogliere tali orazioni sotto un'unica designazione per la loro affinità retorica interna (almeno sulla base dei canoni di Menandro di Laodicea, contenuti nel suo *Περὶ ἐπιδεικτικῶν*), questa "etichetta" presenta una certa complessità, dovuta principalmente alla difficoltà di ricondurre ad un'unità testuale e concettuale i diversi discorsi inclusi in tale classificazione, che manifestano invece una notevole eterogeneità contenutistica e letteraria. Tuttavia, gli elementi comuni risultano essenzialmente due: l'ἐγκώμιον e il θρῆνος, strumenti costitutivi della costruzione, secondo l'autore del *Περὶ ἐπιδεικτικῶν*, del βασιλικὸς λόγος. Infatti, secondo il retore che ne giustifica l'essenza, entrambi concorrono organicamente all'elaborazione della monodia:

qual è, dunque, lo scopo della monodia? Compiangere ed esprimere compassione. Se il defunto non è un parente, si tratta semplicemente di compiangerlo, mescolando gli elogi con i lamenti («τὰ ἐγκώμια τοῖς θρῆνοις») e accentuando costantemente l'elemento elegiaco, affinché l'orazione non sia solo un encomio, ma affinché l'encomio («τὸ ἐγκώμιον») diventi l'occasione del lamento («πρόφασις τοῦ θρῆνου»)<sup>2</sup>.

Gregorio di Nissa fece ricorso a tre dei generi sofistici – ossia il discorso, l'omelia e il panegirico – per esaltare i massimi rappresentanti del potere imperiale ed ecclesiastico e, al contempo, per ridefinire il Credo niceno mediante lo strumento della retorica. In effetti, lo sviluppo della tradizione cristiana aveva imposto ai Padri della Chiesa un'esposizione chiara e sistematica delle proprie posizioni, al fine di ridefinire il credo ortodosso e di contrastare gli attacchi eretici. Il Cappadoce, attraverso i suoi λόγοι, condensò due differenti visioni del Credo: quella teologica,

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<sup>2</sup> In 434.18-23 (ed. RUSSELL-WILSON, p. 203).

necessaria a rendere i fedeli consapevoli della loro professione di fede, e quella politica, trasmessa ai cittadini dell'Impero per mezzo della retorica. La conseguente ricontestualizzazione del discorso cristiano, e la sua rielaborazione secondo i modelli retorici della Sofistica trasformarono, come ha opportunamente sottolineato A. Cameron, una mera tecnica retorica in un messaggio di forte pregnanza retorico-politica, accuratamente configurato in termini di legittimazione del potere, al fine di conferire autorevolezza e solidità all'autorità politica appena acquisita dalla Chiesa cattolica<sup>3</sup>. Un autore anonimo del V secolo sottolineava, a questo proposito, nei suoi *Prolegomeni*, che «gli Ateniesi usarono i canoni della retorica nella democrazia, i Lacedemoni nell'oligarchia e i Bizantini nella fede e nell'ortodossia sotto un impero»<sup>4</sup>. L'arte del parlare (la ῥητορικὴ), pertanto, fu strettamente vincolata ai vari sistemi politici, adattandosi ad essi nel modo di volta in volta più conveniente<sup>5</sup>. Questa affermazione riassume eloquentemente il ruolo della retorica durante il primo periodo bizantino: i mezzi dell'eloquenza dovevano adeguarsi non a un semplice impero, ma all'Impero cristiano d'Oriente. Questo è il motivo principale per cui la tradizione retorica bizantina affondava indubbiamente le sue radici nei primi secoli cristiani, dove il contesto classico fu riadattato in risposta agli schemi emergenti della nuova tendenza religiosa. In una prospettiva più ampia, la retorica bizantina può risultare una derivazione del movimento della Sofistica, al quale nel tempo furono innestati concetti neoplatonici e cristiani sulla funzione del linguaggio<sup>6</sup>.

Eredi del passato sofistico, i primi cristiani si trovarono destinatari di un corpo vasto e complesso di prescrizioni retoriche e letterarie, cosicché il discorso cristiano ricontestualizzò il passato sofistico, adottandone lo schema letterario per trasformare una semplice tecnica retorica in un potente messaggio, modellato in termini politici, che mirava a legittimare il loro potere politico appena acquisito<sup>7</sup>. La retorica tardo-bizantina, pertanto, riadattò la maggior parte dei canoni retorici pagani e dei contenuti letterari in chiave cristiana, allo scopo di diffondere il messaggio della nuova religione, grazie al supporto imperiale dopo la promulgazione dell'Editto di Tessalonica.

Nella serie di discorsi encomiastici dedicato ai *dies natales* di martiri come Stefano, Teodoro di Amasea e i Quaranta Martiri di Sebaste, abbiamo molte informazioni per osservare in che modo

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<sup>3</sup> CAMERON 1991, p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> *Prolegomenon Sylloge* 41.7-9 (ed. RABE): «Ἀθηναῖοι δὲ καὶ ἡ τῶν ῥητόρων δεκάς ἐπολιτεύσατο μὲν ὡς ἐν δημοκρατίᾳ, Λακεδαιμόνιοι ὡς ἐν ἀριστοκρατίᾳ, ἡμεῖς δὲ νῦν εὐτυχῶς ἐν βασιλείᾳ πιστῶς καὶ ὀρθοδόξως».

<sup>5</sup> KUSTAS 1971, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> Si veda ancora CAMERON 1991.

un vescovo formatosi nella tradizione sofistica abbia saputo applicare i canoni retorici pagani per scopi profondamente innestati nel nuovo contesto cristiano. Alla fine del IV secolo il discorso cristiano, sebbene complesso, si rivelò al contempo estremamente efficace: sostenuto dallo sviluppo di un nuovo linguaggio religioso, da nuove piattaforme pubbliche e, soprattutto, dal favore imperiale, esso si affermò come la forma di propaganda più adatta al crescente potere della Chiesa. I mezzi di comunicazione nella Tarda Antichità, valutati sotto una prospettiva moderna, erano piuttosto limitati e risultavano in larga misura appannaggio della Chiesa; persino la produzione letteraria si andava cristianizzando progressivamente. Il ruolo dei vescovi, pertanto, mutò radicalmente grazie al patrocinio imperiale, tanto da finire con l'instaurare una nuova relazione con il potere politico. Nella rinnovata cultura urbana del tempo, gli oratori cristiani occuparono la posizione precedentemente spettante agli oratori epidittici della Sofistica e, di conseguenza, i loro discorsi assunsero connotazioni politiche più marcate rispetto al passato. La manifestazione più evidente di tale trasformazione fu la consacrazione dei discorsi funebri – in particolare quelli rivolti ai membri della famiglia imperiale – quale competenza esclusiva di figure episcopali di rilievo, come Ambrogio in Occidente e Gregorio di Nissa in Oriente. L'importanza per un vescovo, novello retore pubblico, nel ricoprire tali incarichi e, pertanto, nel poter pronunciare questo tipo di discorsi è duplice: da un lato essi attestano la fiducia che la *domus* imperiale riponeva nella capacità persuasiva dei Padri della Chiesa; dall'altro essi rivelano come il linguaggio dell'encomio e del lamento potesse venire impiegato per riaffermare la continuità dottrinale e per rinforzare la legittimità dell'autorità, tanto ecclesiastica quanto imperiale. In altre parole, il grammatico e l'oratore che conoscevano i canoni di Menandro, Ermogene e Aftonio, e che con essi erano abituati a misurarsi in sede scolastica, misero la propria competenza al servizio di una predicazione pubblica che, pur mantenendo la forma classica della monodia, ne trasformava il contenuto e gli scopi.

Se formalmente i βασιλικοὶ λόγοι riprendono la struttura menandrea della monodia, ossia l'intreccio di ἐγκώμιον (elogio) e θρήνος (lamento), la loro novità consiste nel modo in cui Gregorio riorientò questa struttura verso finalità catechetiche e politiche: l'elogio non è più fine a se stesso, bensì strumento per modellare l'interpretazione della morte come inizio della vita eterna, per presentare un defunto esemplare (sia un vescovo che un martire) come archetipo della vita cristiana e per offrire alla comunità un modello normativo da imitare. Così, per esempio, la definizione di Melezio come «nuovo apostolo»:

ἡϋξησεν ἡμῖν τὸν ἀριθμὸν **τῶν ἀποστόλων** ὁ **νέος ἀπόστολος**, ὁ συγκαταψηφισθεὶς **μετὰ τῶν ἀποστόλων**. εἴλκυσαν γὰρ οἱ ἅγιοι πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς τὸν ὁμότροπον, τὸν ἀθλητὴν οἱ ἀθληταί, τὸν στεφανίτην οἱ στεφανῖται, τὸν ἀγνὸν τῇ ψυχῇ οἱ καθαροὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ, τὸν κήρυκα τοῦ λόγου οἱ ὑπηρέται, τοῦ λόγου. ἀλλὰ μακαριστὸς μὲν ὁ πατὴρ ἡμῶν τῆς τε **ἀποστολικῆς συσκηνίας** καὶ τῆς πρὸς τὸν Χριστὸν ἀναλύσεως, ἐλεεινοὶ δὲ ἡμεῖς· οὐ γὰρ ἐξ μακαρίζειν ἡμᾶς τοῦ πατρὸς τὴν εὐκληρίαν ἢ ἁωρία τῆς ὀρφανίας<sup>8</sup>.

Si tratta non solo di una commemorazione agiografica ma anche di una vera e propria dichiarazione di continuità apostolica, richiesta dall'esigenza di legittimare le decisioni conciliari e la linea ortodossa rappresentata dal vescovo di Antiochia.

La consolazione offerta ai membri della famiglia imperiale nei confronti di Pulcheria è studiata in funzione di una *captatio benevolentiae* che ristabilisce la fiducia pubblica e rafforza la prestazione simbolica del potere imperiale in chiave cristiana. Quest'uso della retorica come dispositivo di connessione tra il privato e il pubblico, tra la dimensione liturgica e l'ordine politico, è uno dei fattori che caratterizza l'evoluzione politica e culturale della tarda antichità: esso spiega in che modo l'uso e il rimaneggiamento dei *topoi* classici possa costituire una risorsa formale che il predicatore cristiano sfrutta per costruire efficacemente l'autorità. «Lo scopo di Gregorio di Nissa era quello di persuadere, e poteva riuscirci disponendo dell'intero arsenale delle tecniche classiche a sua disposizione»: con queste parole A. Cameron sottolineò come l'obiettivo retorica primario di Gregorio non fosse altro che la coltivazione della genuina persuasione tra i suoi uditori<sup>9</sup>. Un obiettivo per il quale egli utilizzava volentieri l'intero spettro delle tecniche ereditate dai sofisti classici – dalla *dispositio* meticolosa, ai tropi retorici, fino alle esortazioni cariche di *pathos*. Gregorio, approfittando della piattaforma pubblica concessagli come oratore ufficiale, utilizzava l'occasione del discorso per infondere nell'assemblea l'idea di quanto fosse importante il culto cristiano e di come tale condotta di vita producesse molte ricompense.

Grazie a questo coinvolgimento popolare, il predicatore cercava dunque di instillare nei fedeli la nuova «ὁμολογία τῆς πίστεως», facendo proseguire il culto imperiale pubblico e, allo stesso tempo,

<sup>8</sup> GR. NYSS., *Melet.* 441.4-12 (GNO IX, ed. Spira): *il numero degli apostoli si è accresciuto per noi con questo nostro nuovo apostolo, annoverato tra di essi; i santi lo hanno attirato a sé per affinità, gli atleti hanno aggiunto un compagno d'arena, i coronati un altro incoronato, i puri di cuore uno puro d'animo, i ministri della Parola un altro araldo della stessa. Ma beato è nostro Padre per l'unione apostolica e per il ritorno a Cristo, mentre miseri siamo noi, perché la precoce orfanezza non ci permette di benedire serenamente la sua dipartita.*

<sup>9</sup> CAMERON 1991, p. 123.

mentre elogiava i defunti, perseguiva la legittimazione del Credo niceno, articolando una nuova ideologia ufficiale per le figure imperiali, come ad esempio l'imperatrice Flaccilla, che incarnava l'icona di una nuova βασιλεία, quella cristiana, tramite le sue tre principali virtù: εὐσέβεια, αἰδώς e ταπεινοφροσύνη<sup>10</sup>.

A livello tecnico si osservi come Gregorio padroneggi i procedimenti fondamentali prescritti nei manuali retorici: nella *dispositio* la struttura esordio-narrazione-argomentazione-epilogo viene accompagnata da accorgimenti di *captatio* e da strategie di πάθος con tinte baroccheggianti che permettono catturare l'attenzione emotiva degli uditori, mentre nell'*elocutio* l'uso di metafore calzanti (la colomba non ancora piumata, il fiore appena sbocciato...) così come l'impiego di termini teologici motivati e le citazioni scritturistiche contribuiscono a ricondurre il sentimento privato a una cornice ideologica pubblica. Non meno importante è l'adozione di *topoi* agiografici e biografici nei discorsi dedicati ai martiri: l'omelia per il protomartire Stefano e le lodi come quelle rivolte al soldato Teodoro trasformano il racconto della vita del santo in un modello performativo al punto che la festa del *dies natalis* si trasforma nell'occasione (καιρός) per rafforzare l'insegnamento morale e dottrinale della comunità. La tecnica retorica, dunque, non è esercizio astratto ma prassi performativa, che crea un sentimento di comunità e di condivisione della fede cristiana.

Analogamente, il valore politico del discorso si manifesta con particolare chiarezza nella *laudatio* per l'imperatrice Elia Flaccilla, dove la cristianizzazione delle virtù imperiali tradizionali (*pietas*, *castitas* e *caritas*) produce un nuovo codice etico per la sovranità: l'imperatrice non è semplicemente lodata come figura morale privata, ma proposta come icona pubblica della βασιλεία cristiana, capace di incarnare le qualità che rendono il governo idoneo a ricevere l'*imprimatur* ecclesiastico; alla funzione celebrativa si aggiunge dunque la funzione normativa e propagandistica: attraverso l'esaltazione delle sue opere di carità e della sua tenace opposizione nei confronti dell'arianesimo, l'orazione contribuisce a costruire una narrazione in cui il trono imperiale è legittimato dall'ortodossia e dalla pratica virtuosa. In questo senso, i λόγοι assumono valenza di testi programmatici, perché delineano un modello ideale di sovranità che i contemporanei sono chiamati a riconoscere e, se possibile, a imitare.

La seconda sezione di queste orazioni, per converso, concentra l'attenzione su finalità encomiastiche che valorizzano l'ostentazione delle virtù – *in primis* le virtù cristiane – dei defunti già inseriti nel canone liturgico, pur conservando e rielaborando matrici e *topoi* ereditati dalla tradizione

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<sup>10</sup> MARCOS SÁNCHEZ 1997, p. 9.

retorica precedente, ivi compresi prestiti provenienti dalla narrazione agiografica e dalla prosopografia biografica. Tale duplicità di matrici trova un'esemplificazione paradigmatica nel panegirico in onore di Gregorio Taumaturgo: l'occasione liturgica – il *dies natalis* – consentiva all'oratore cristiano, nella forma omiletica rivolta all'assemblea festiva (πανήγυρις), una costruzione retorica del modello di santità come campione archetipico dell'ortodossia.

Alla categoria dei λόγοι ricondurremo dunque quelle omelie che si conformano al nuovo prototipo letterario – per esempio, quelle indirizzate al protomartire Stefano, ai Quaranta Martiri di Sebaste e a Teodoro di Amasea – e la cui approfondita rilettura critica delle fonti e l'analisi prosopografica delle testimonianze risulteranno particolarmente produttive per ricostruire il rapporto tra memoria agiografica e dato storico<sup>11</sup>. Questi discorsi si situano nel quadro cronologico immediatamente successivo al tentativo ultimo di restaurazione neoclassica di Giuliano (361-363) e nella fase di istituzionalizzazione dell'ordine cristiano sotto Teodosio I (379-395), contesto in cui fenomeni socioculturali molteplici spiegano da un lato la diffusione di massa della nuova fede, sin allora perseguitata sino all'età di Massimino Daia (310-313) e stigmatizzata come “barbara” dalle élites sofistiche, e dall'altro la configurazione di un nuovo ordine politico (l'*Imperium christianum*) dotato di un peculiare *ethos* e di una nuova sensibilità estetica. In questa prospettiva, l'interpretazione retorico-agiografica richiede strumenti metodologici combinati – esegesi retorica, critica delle fonti, prosopografia, e uno studio dei *topoi* liturgico-panegirici – per valutare il grado di inter-penetrazione fra dispositivo performativo e costruzione normativa della memoria collettiva.

Se si considera la natura istituzionale delle cerimonie funebri e commemorative, diventa evidente che la ripetizione e la codificazione dei *topoi* e delle formule costituiscano l'elemento che rende possibile la trasmissione intergenerazionale di tale repertorio retorico: i manuali scolastici della tradizione sofistica ne fornivano gli schemi, ma è la prassi liturgica che li ritualizzava, per cui la retorica si stabilizza come norma di comportamento pubblico. La ricerca storica recente ha inoltre mostrato come la scuola di Gaza e le istituzioni educative bizantine plasmassero la ricezione di questi strumenti, adattandoli alle esigenze teologiche e amministrative dei secoli successivi; questa dinamica di conservazione e trasformazione ne spiega la continuità fino alle epoche medievali, quando i *progymnasmata* e le lettere classiche rimasero la matrice formale della produzione colta, soprattutto in ambito cristiano.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. ESPER 1984.

In sintesi, il βασιλικὸς λόγος gregoriano è al contempo prodotto di una tradizione ereditata dalla classicità e fattore di innovazione, poiché innesta il vecchio repertorio in nuove finalità istituzionali e confessionali.

Dal punto di vista metodologico, la lettura dei λόγοι richiede una pluralità di strumenti interpretativi: l'analisi filologica che controlla varianti testuali e formule, la lettura retorico-formale che individua le strategie persuasive e le figure retoriche, e l'interpretazione storica che legge i testi alla luce degli eventi e delle politiche ecclesiastiche del periodo. Combinando tali prospettive si ottiene una visione capace di cogliere sia la profondità teologica del discorso nisseno, sia la sua efficacia politica. Così, per esempio, le formule con cui Gregorio presenta la morte come «passaggio» – riprendendo e riformulando passaggi biblici – sono insieme espressione di una concezione escatologica propriamente cristiana e di strumenti retorici volti a catturare la συμπάθεια del pubblico, poiché reindirizzano il lutto individuale verso una speranza condivisa in una vita ultraterrena; similmente, la frequenza di immagini sacre nei discorsi del vescovo opera come dispositivo di legittimazione che dà consistenza all'autorità conciliare e patriarcale. L'analisi integrata mette quindi in evidenza come la persuasione si eserciti non soltanto sul piano logico-argomentativo ma anche sul piano simbolico e teatrale, dove la parola pubblica produce effetti concreti finalizzati a costruire idee sacre (ἐκφρασις) nelle menti degli ascoltatori e la cui finalità è indubbiamente rivolta al proselitismo cristiano.

Tra i risultati più rilevanti che emergono da questa rilettura vi è la constatazione che la retorica cristiana tardoantica non reprime né espunge la tradizione classica ma la riutilizza criticamente, operando un processo di appropriazione che consente di sfruttare la potenza formale dei modelli pagani per veicolare contenuti cristiani; in particolare, la pratica della σύγκρισις e della ἡθοποιΐα – tipiche della tradizione dei *progymnasmata* – viene impiegata per stabilire confronti morali che esaltano la santità del soggetto lodato e per disegnare tipologie esemplari utili alla formazione etica della comunità. Questa dialettica tra continuità e trasformazione è, a parere di chi scrive, l'indicatore più chiaro della modernità culturale che caratterizza il passaggio dal paganesimo all'Impero cristiano: la società non annulla il patrimonio retorico precedente, bensì lo riorienta, adattandone il potenziale persuasivo al nuovo pubblico.

In prospettiva comparativa, il caso di Gregorio mette in luce analogie e differenze con altri protagonisti della retorica cristiana precedenti, contemporanei e posteriori come Basilio di Cesarea, Ambrogio – in Occidente – e Giovanni Crisostomo: analogie nella scelta di impiegare la lode funebre

come sede di argomentazione dottrinale e di legittimazione politica; differenze nel grado di elaborazione formale, nell'uso del *pathos* e nella tensione fra erudizione classica e semplicità pastorale. L'analisi comparata può così contribuire a definire meglio i contorni di una tradizione retorica che è insieme un *continuum* ed una pluralità di risposte locali e personali alle esigenze comuni del tempo. In ultima analisi, osservare le similitudini e le scelte divergenti tra questi autori consente di discernere le logiche istituzionali che plasmano i modelli oratori e di comprendere come la pratica retorica si distingua a seconda dei contesti locali e delle carriere ecclesiastiche.

In conclusione, l'analisi dei βασιλικοὶ λόγοι di Gregorio di Nissa alla luce della tradizione dei *progymnasmata* e della teoria della retorica bizantina permette di rintracciarvi una forma sofisticata di azione pubblica, nella quale la prassi educativa, la memoria liturgica e la comunicazione politica si intrecciano fino a produrre un discorso capace di consolidare il credo e di forgiare modelli di governo. L'oratoria gregoriana, per quanto fortemente ancorata alla norma sofistica, ha dimostrato l'efficacia di una strategia comunicativa che trasforma la commemorazione in strumento di persuasione collettiva, in cui l'encomio diventa occasione del lamento e la lode si converte in catechesi pubblica: questa è la lezione centrale che questi preziosi testi ci offrono. A fronte di ciò, rimangono aperti numerosi filoni di ricerca che meritano approfondimenti specifici – tra cui lo studio delle redazioni manoscritte e delle varianti testuali, l'analisi puntuale della retorica dell'esegesi impiegata nei passaggi dottrinali, e la comparazione sistematica con i panegirici occidentali e orientali.

Lo sviluppo di tali ricerche contribuirà a precisare ulteriormente quanto i λόγοι abbiano rappresentato non solo testimonianze di stile, ma atti culturali e politici capaci di incidere profondamente sulla formazione dell'identità imperiale cristiana. In definitiva, la parola pubblica di Gregorio di Nissa rimane, anche ai nostri occhi, un laboratorio privilegiato per comprendere la compresenza di continuità e innovazione che caratterizza la nascita della retorica bizantina e la sua funzione nella costruzione della legittimità religiosa e istituzionale.

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## **The Byzantine Anthropocene: geological footprints of the medieval Roman Empire\***

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Since the year 2000, the “Anthropocene” has become one of the most discussed terms not only in natural sciences, but also social sciences and humanities. The term was originally introduced into the wider debate by the atmospheric chemist and Nobel Prize winner Paul J. Crutzen (1933-2021) and the biologist Eugene F. Stoermer (1934-2012), who argued that modern industrialised societies had begun to modify planet Earth in a way comparable only to geological forces and with a lasting impact detectable even in millions of years, such as by the production of artificial radioactive elements since the mid-1940s. Although the *International Commission on Stratigraphy* in March 2024 rejected a proposal to introduce the “Anthropocene” already into the official geochronology of Earth, the term is well-established by now and especially gained weight and visibility with the discussion on modern-day anthropogenic climate change<sup>1</sup>.

Furthermore, there are various proposals for an earlier start of the geological “age of humans”, dating back even to the rise of agriculture more than 10.000 years ago, when farming communities began to transform the planet at a totally different scale. Such a “long” or “early Anthropocene” equally runs against a narrative which would focus exclusively on the last two centuries of industrialised capitalism<sup>2</sup>. If we define the Anthropocene by acknowledging «that the familiar divide between people and the natural world is no longer useful or accurate», since human societies shape and shaped everything, «from the upper atmosphere to the deep seas»<sup>3</sup> – then also Byzantium has its place in it. Just to make sure, the “Byzantine Anthropocene” is around in scholarship for some years

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<sup>1</sup> For the concept of “Anthropocene”, see BONNEUIL – FRESSOZ 2016; LEWIS – MASLIN 2018; HORN – BERGTHALLER 2019; ELLIS 2020; FRANKOPAN 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. BONNEUIL – FRESSOZ 2016 and LEWIS – MASLIN 2018.

<sup>3</sup> In PURDY 2015, p. 9.

now – one of the earliest studies I am aware of is the wonderful book of Adam J. Goldwyn on “Byzantine Ecocriticism” from 2017<sup>4</sup>.

In this short essay, I argue for a Byzantine Anthropocene also based on the observation that the long-term geological heritage of (economic) activities of the (medieval Roman) past can have an enduring impact even on present ecologies, as for instance the example of the mining area around Küre in modern-day northern Turkey demonstrates (see the **map**). A recent study illustrates that both present as well as past mining activities contribute to a strong heavy metal contamination of groundwater and surface water in the surroundings of Küre<sup>5</sup>. The copper mine of Küre was already exploited in the Byzantine period, but became especially important in the late medieval centuries<sup>6</sup>. Laonikos Chalkokondyles (ca. 1430-1490) informs us that Küre’s revenues enriched first the princes of the İsfendiyaroğulları in Kastamonu and then the Ottoman sultans before and after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, contributing to their rise to great power in those regions earlier controlled by Byzantium<sup>7</sup>.

Not only the revenues, but also the ore of the Küre mine helped to meet the demand of the urban metabolism of Constantinople for raw materials. These inputs of course resulted in outputs of Constantinople’s metabolism in the form of sewages, smoke, and waste<sup>8</sup>. One sink for these outputs especially between the fifth and eleventh century CE was the Theodosius harbour in Yenikapı in Istanbul (see the **map**) – not only because of the commercial activity in the port area, but also due to its position at the endpoint of various inflows at the mouth of the Lycus river. A team from *Istanbul*

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. GOLDWYN 2017. See also IZDEBSKI – PREISER-KAPELLER 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. EKEMEN KESKIN – ÖZLER 2020. On mining, metallurgy and its environmental impacts in the Byzantine world see also MANGO 2018, pp. 66-72.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. BELKE 1996, pp. 242-243.

<sup>7</sup> Laonikos Chalkokondyles 4,20 (ed. KALDELLIS 2014, I pp. 304-305): «after Mehmed [I, 1413-1421] began to reign and some time had passed, he marched against Ismail [actually, İsfendiyar, 1402-1440], the ruler of Sinope, because he had apparently been a friend of Musa who had supported him in the war against Mehmed. But this ruler sent an envoy and set a tribute to be paid from the income from his copper, for it seems that this place alone in Asia, as far as we know, produces copper. So, he paid the income from this to Sultan Mehmed, made a treaty, and ended the war»; and 9,68 (ed. KALDELLIS 2014, II pp. 350-351): «this territory of Ismail begins at the Herakleia that is on the Black Sea, a city of the Sultan, and extends along the Pontos to the land of the Paphlagonians and that of Turgut. It is very wealthy and yields an income of two hundred thousand gold staters per year. As I stated earlier in my narrative, this is the only region of Asia that produces copper, whose quality is second only to that of Iberia, and this generated for the sultan an annual tribute of gold amounting to fifty thousand staters».

<sup>8</sup> On the concept of urban metabolism for Byzantine studies see PREISER-KAPELLER 2021.

*Technical University* demonstrated in 2018 that, according to modern-day limit values, sediments of the Theodosius harbour from the early as well as middle Byzantine period show heavy to extreme contamination levels for metals such as arsenic, cobalt, chromium, zinc, copper and lead<sup>9</sup>.

Lead did not only accumulate in soils and water bodies near mining, production or consumption sites in the Mediterranean, but equally evaporated into the atmosphere and descended into deposits hundreds or – as ice cores from Greenland demonstrate (**fig. 1** and the **map**) – thousands of kilometres away<sup>10</sup>. A diachronic perspective on the ecological impact of Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman mining and metallurgical activities based on such evidence is opened by data from the Crveni Potok bog (situated in the Tara Mountains National Park in modern-day western Serbia, see **fig. 2** and the **map**). Despite its remote location, wind flows exposed the site to emissions from the many mining sites in the western and northern Balkans, where ore mining started especially in late medieval times, but in some cases also centuries before in the Roman and Byzantine periods. The authors of the study therefore argue that the different concentrations of lead over time reflect the intensity of mining and metallurgical activities in the wider surroundings of Crveni Potok in the last millennia<sup>11</sup>.

We could thus interpret this data as measurement for the intensity of one aspect – mining – of the Byzantine Anthropocene in time. We may also be tempted to correlate the fluctuations of the lead concentration with well-known periods of unrest, climate change or epidemic outbreaks, which could have reduced mining activities and metal production, as Longmann and his co-authors did in their study on Crveni Potok of 2018<sup>12</sup>. However, the dating of the Crveni Potok sediments, which is not annually resolved, but only allows for a data point every few decades (see **fig. 2**), leaves us with many uncertainties regarding actual temporal overlaps with extreme events such as epidemics – not to speak about the actual mode of impact of such events on past mining communities<sup>13</sup>.

But the study authors provide another interesting comparison with lead concentration data from sites in Western Europe, which has been extracted as impact of other mining areas of the past, such

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. ERENTURK 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. MCCONNELL 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. LONGMANN 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. once again LONGMANN 2018.

<sup>13</sup> On the challenges to compare these different types of “archives” of environmental history see also the introduction to PREISER-KAPPELLER 2021. For a comprehensive approach to various phenomena and periods of the environmental history of Byzantium see now IZDEBSKI – PREISER-KAPPELLER 2024.

as in north-western Spain (La Molina mire, see the **map**<sup>14</sup>) or Switzerland (Jura Mountains, see the **map**<sup>15</sup>). In all these time series, including Crveni Potok, the most significant increase in the long-term level of lead pollution overlaps with the beginning of Roman control over these areas and mining areas (**fig. 2**). At some sites, the peak lead concentration during the Roman time even outperforms the climax of lead emission in the twentieth century before the reduction of the use of leaded gasoline. But remarkably, the Byzantine peak of lead concentration in Crveni Potok is five times higher than the modern-day peak in north-western Spain and more than double the Roman time peak from that region. And in general, when compared with the data from Spain and Switzerland, Crveni Potok indicates a significant temporal divergence: while the data from Western Europe shows a dramatic decline of lead levels with the disintegration of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century CE, this is not the case for Crveni Potok in the Eastern Roman Empire (despite the equally turbulent history of the Balkans in this period). Although lead levels in Crveni Potok fluctuated over the late antique and medieval centuries (as indicated above, the study authors assumed a correlation with epidemic outbreaks and periods of warfare), they never fell back to “pre-Roman” levels (**fig. 2**) as they did in western European sites or in the data from Greenland (**fig. 1**)<sup>16</sup>.

Similar patterns have been identified in a most recent analysis of lead concentration in various core samples from the Aegean (see **fig. 3** and **fig. 4**)<sup>17</sup>. All sites show a significant increase of lead concentrations with the onset of Roman rule in various parts of Greece from the second century BCE onwards – and these high levels persist in general until the eighth century CE. Two phases with reduced lead pollution are reconstructed in the Aegean samples for ca. 180 CE and ca. 610 CE. Like for Crveni Potok, the authors of the study suggest a correlation with the demographic effects of the “Antonine Plague” of the second century CE and the “Justinianic Plague” of the sixth century CE respectively – but again, the uncertainties of dating of these samples require caution when arguing for connections with specific historical events, epidemical or otherwise<sup>18</sup>.

Interestingly, a long term enduring decrease of lead concentrations can be observed for the samples from Southern Greece (Argolic Gulf, see **fig. 4** and the **map**) after a peak around the eighth

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. MARTÍNEZ CORTIZAS 2013; HILLMAN 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. SHOTYK 1998. For another drill site (Colle Gnifetti) in the Swiss Alps providing data for the seventh to ninth centuries CE see LOVELUCK 2018. See also NAISMITH 2023, pp. 25-29, on early medieval mining.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. LONGMANN 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. KOUTSODENDRIS 2025.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. KOUTSODENDRIS 2025.

century, while data from the Northern Aegean (off coast of Mt. Athos, see **fig. 3** and the **map**) shows a relatively minor reduction in leads levels for the later first Millennium CE and a return to Roman levels in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. It is by the Late Byzantine-Early Ottoman period, that lead concentrations significantly decline in all Aegean samples (see **fig. 3** and **fig. 4**). As we have seen, the Crveni Potok time series on the contrast is accessing towards its peak around 1600 CE in the same centuries (**fig. 2**). The authors of the Aegean provide the following interpretation:

we attribute this discrepancy to enhanced mining activities on the central and western Balkan Peninsula [*i.e.* where Crevni Potok is located], such as within the Dinaric Alps and the Carpathian Mountains. At the same time, it may be connected with a reduction of mining in the Aegean region as a result of the socioeconomic transformation on the Balkan Peninsula following the collapse of the Byzantine Empire<sup>19</sup>.

Lead concentrations across these sites from the Ottoman Empire, however, then all are in decline by the onset of the “industrial age” around 1800 CE (see **figg. 2, 3** and **4**), while lead concentration in the samples from Western Europe reach new and mostly unprecedented heights up until the late twentieth century<sup>20</sup>. In a long term perspective on this data, one could argue that one regional cycle of the “Early Anthropocene” in the Eastern Mediterranean, which had lasted across the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman centuries over two Millennia, came to an end by the eighteenth century, while at the same time a new cycle started on both sides of the North Atlantic, which eventually would integrate the entire globe into the “modern Anthropocene” with its massive impacts on all geo- and ecospheres of planet Earth.

The samples discussed in the present short essay may suffice to claim the status of an “early geological superpower” for our beloved Empire of the *Rhomaioi* in order to talk about a “Byzantine Anthropocene” – and the temporal dynamics of these time series for sure deserve further discussion within the wider debates on Byzantine environmental and socio-economic history<sup>21</sup>. They equally highlight, however, profound differences in the scale and range when compared with modern-day

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<sup>19</sup> In KOUTSODENDRIS 2025, p. 3.

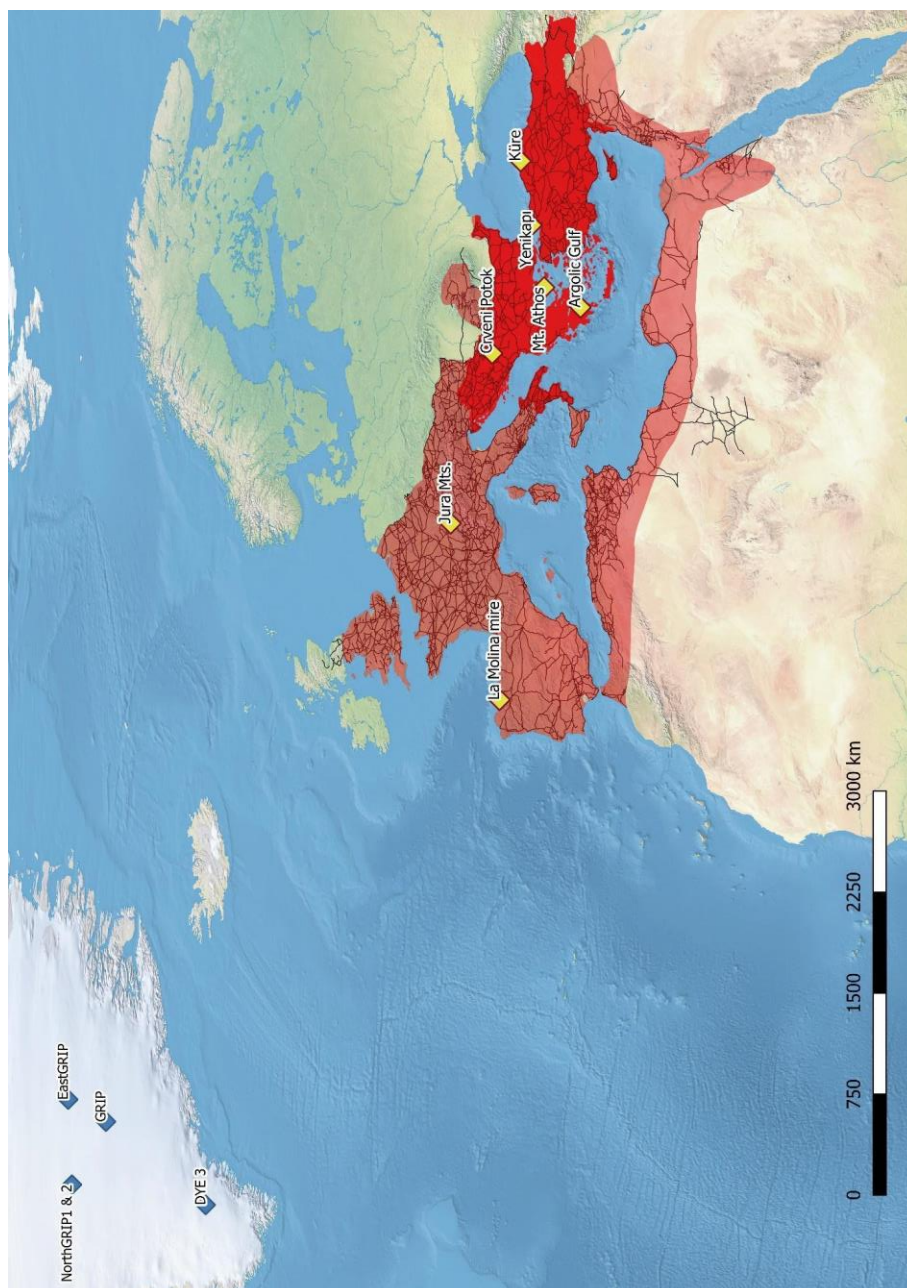
<sup>20</sup> Cf. LONGMANN 2018.

<sup>21</sup> See for instance the summary on the recent debate on the demographic impact of the “Justinianic Plague” in the sixth century CE by SARRIS 2022.

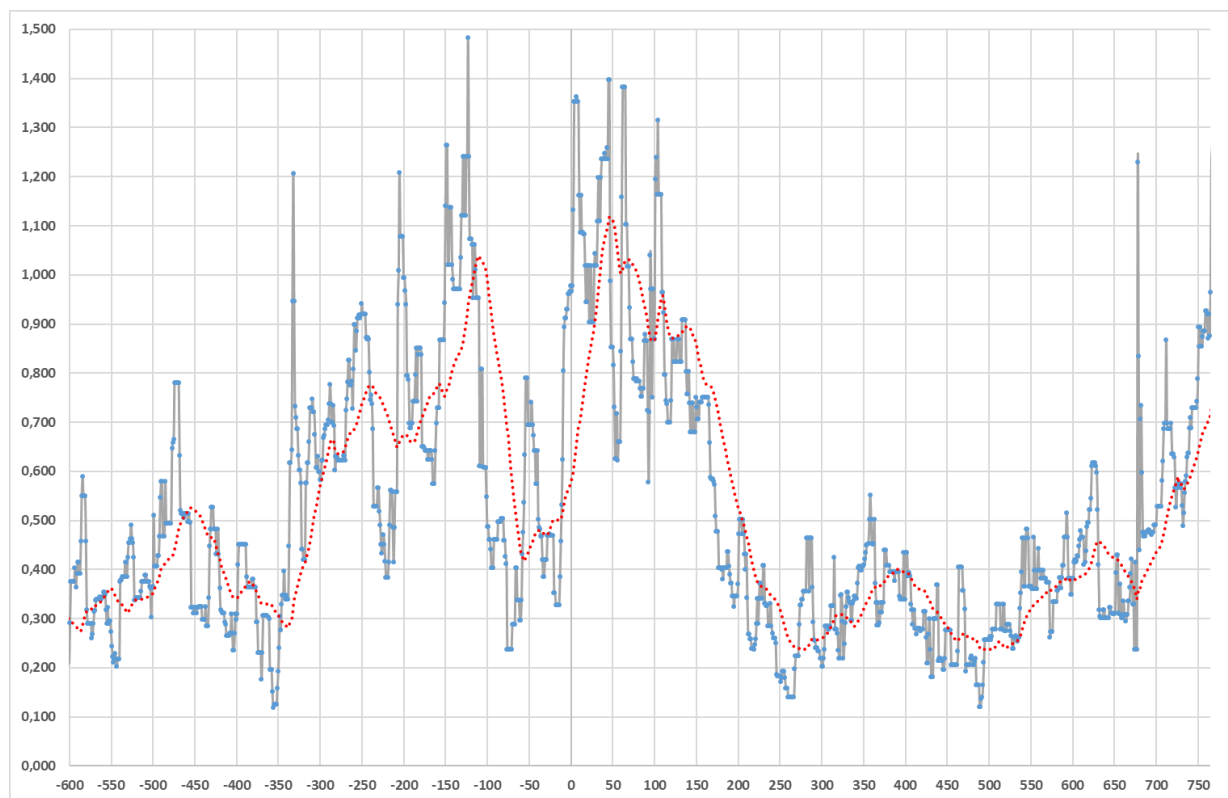
anthropogenic interventions, whose geological footprints may actually by far outlive not only the Byzantine Millennium, but all of past and future human history<sup>22</sup>.

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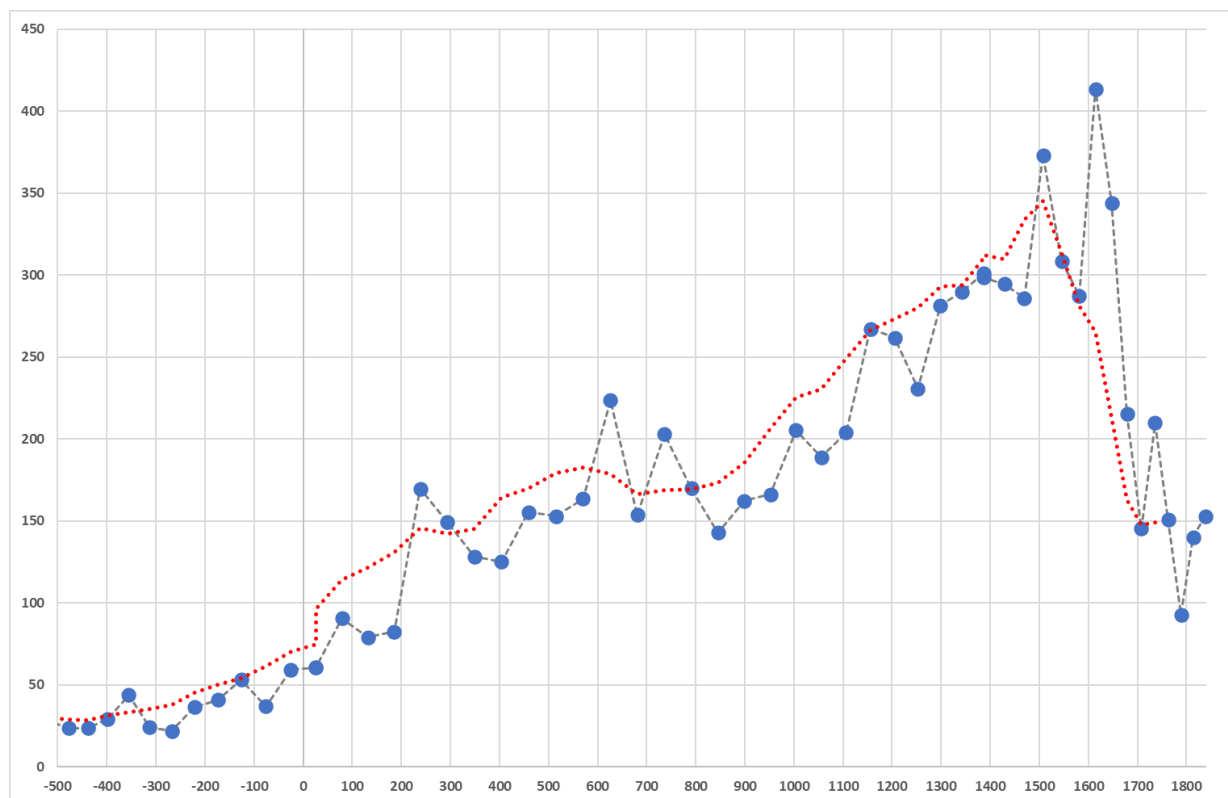
<sup>22</sup> See also BJORNERUD 2018.



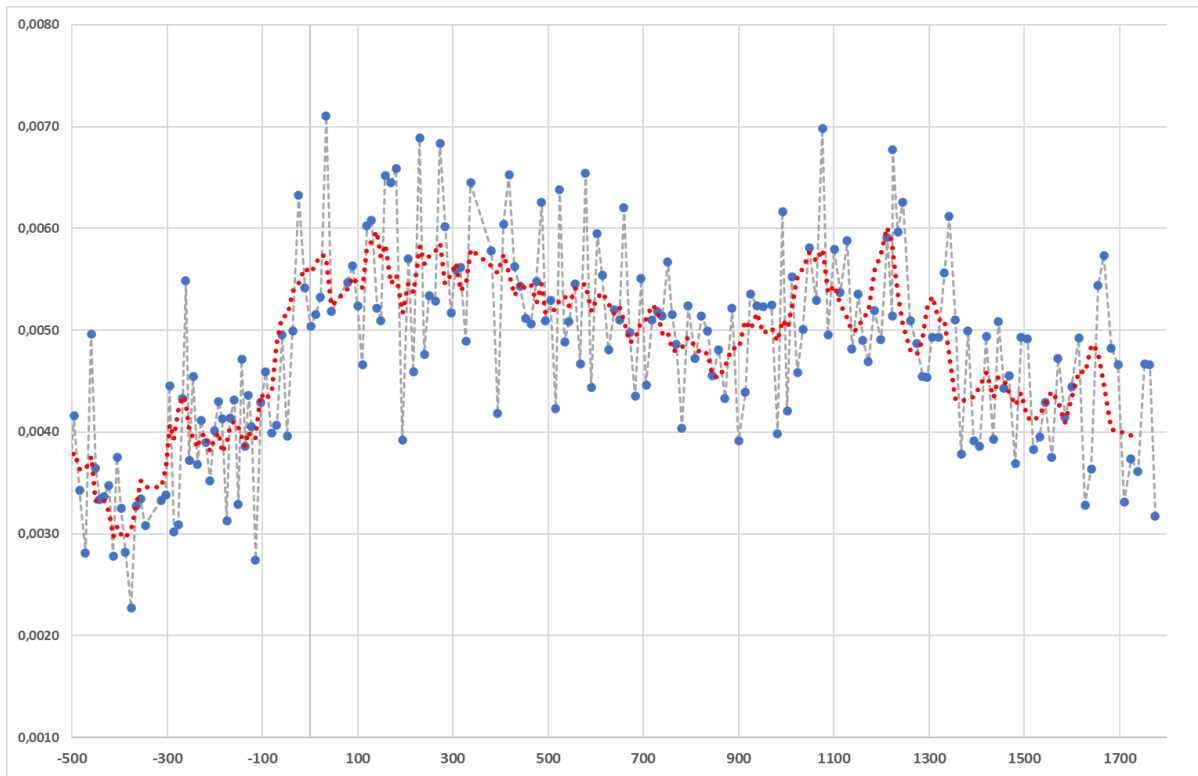
**Map** of the Roman Empire in 200 CE (light red) and in 1025 CE (dark red)  
with geological sample sites mentioned in the paper  
(yellow diamonds: core samples within the former borders of the Roman Empire;  
blue diamonds: ice core sites in Greenland; J. Preiser-Kapeller, 2025)



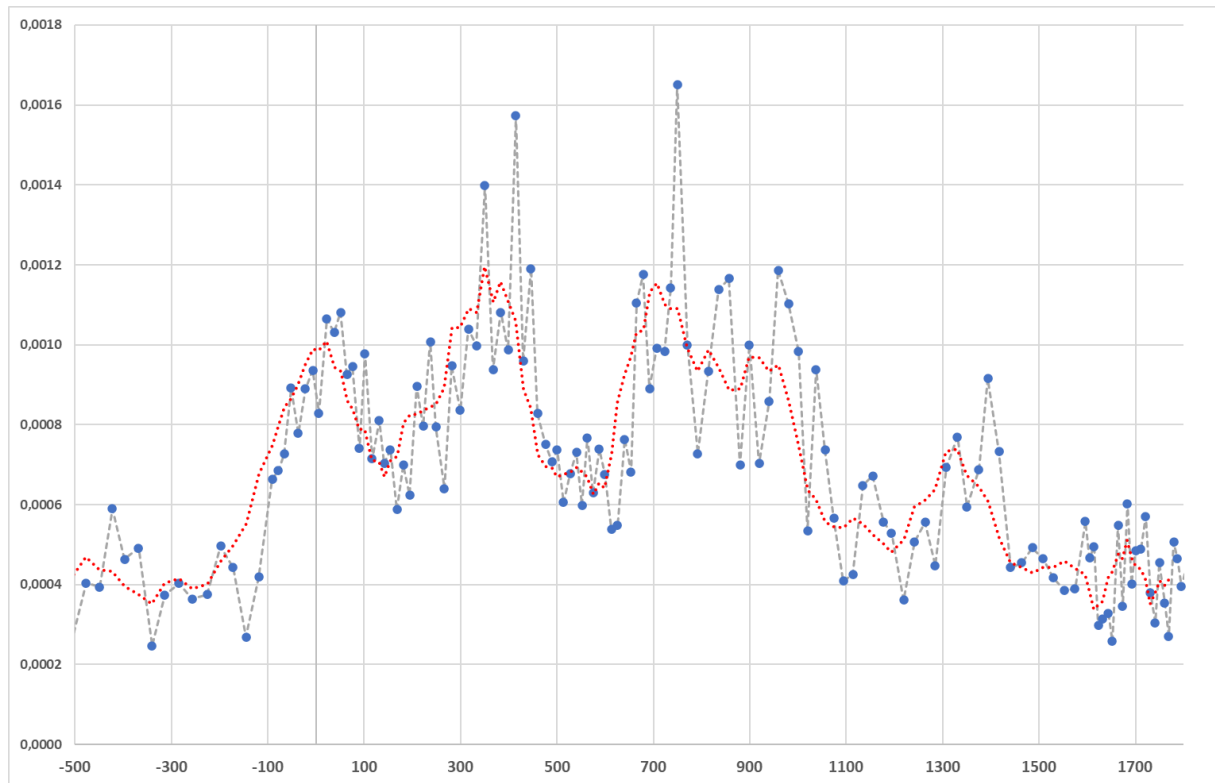
**Fig. 1:** Estimated lead emissions from Europe in kilotons/year based on ice core samples from Greenland, 600 BCE to 800 CE; red dots mark the long-term trend line  
(data: McCONNELL 2018; graph: J. Preiser-Kapeller, 2025)



**Fig. 2:** Lead concentration (in parts per million) in sediments of the Crveni Potok bog in Western Serbia, 500 BCE to 1840 CE; red dots mark the long-term trend line  
(data: LONGMANN 2018; graph: J. Preiser-Kapeller, 2025)



**Fig. 3:** Lead concentration in a core sample from the Northern Aegean (of coast of Mt. Athos), 500 BCE to 1800 CE; red dots mark the long-term trend line  
(data: KOUTSODENDRIS 2025; graph: J. Preiser-Kapeller, 2025)



**Fig. 4:** Lead concentration in a core sample from the Southern Aegean (Argolic Gulf), 500 BCE to 1800 CE; red dots mark the long-term trend line  
(data: KOUTSODENDRIS 2025; graph: J. Preiser-Kapeller, 2025)

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## Understanding Nature in Byzantium\*

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Recent years have brought about a profound shift in how we study the past: it is no longer a past that belongs solely to humans but one that encompasses the natural environment and non-human animals, sometimes working together and sometimes in opposition. There is no denying that this changed approach has been, at least partly, driven by contemporary concerns about environmental issues. This is very well illustrated in a recent book by Kate Rigby, *Meditations on Creation in an Era of Extinction*, which draws heavily on hexameral literature – that is, commentaries on the creation of the world and its inhabitants (not exclusively Greek or Byzantine)<sup>1</sup>. Although written by a specialist in environmental humanities rather than a Byzantinist, this book demonstrates how ancient and medieval texts may serve as an inspiration for addressing and contemplating contemporary issues.

Such a reading of texts about the environment stands in sharp contrast to earlier approaches. In his article *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, originally published in *Science* and reprinted in the influential *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Lynn White made the following remark:

always, in the Greek East, nature was conceived primarily as a symbolic system through which God speaks to men: the ant is a sermon to sluggards; rising flames are the symbol of the soul's aspiration. This view of nature was essentially artistic rather than scientific. While Byzantium preserved and copied great numbers of ancient Greek scientific texts, science as we conceive it could scarcely flourish in such an ambience<sup>2</sup>.

Adam Goldwyn, in his book *Byzantine Ecocriticism*, describes this remark as «fundamentally inaccurate»<sup>3</sup>. Had this statement been true, it would have ultimately nullified any attempts to investigate the Byzantine relationship with an understanding of the natural environment. In short, Byzantine fauna and flora would be reduced to mere symbols of God's will. While the Byzantines

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. RIGBY 2023.

<sup>2</sup> In WHITE 1967, p. 1206.

<sup>3</sup> In GOLDWYN 2018, p. 21.

undoubtedly recognised the world as *opus Dei*, and while their scientific knowledge was rooted more in texts than in empirical observation, they nevertheless understood that the natural world could not be reduced to a mere arena for divine activity. There are many examples of more complex relationships with nature, even in texts whose nature or aim was religious in the first place. Michel Psellos' four short encomia of Mount Olympos (*Minor orations*, no. 36) are a mixture of aesthetic and religious experiences. Psellos speaks directly about the pleasure that watching the mountain gives him: «ὅπη σου τῶν μερῶν τρέψω τὸν ὀφθαλμόν, Ὀλυμπε, ἀκήρατοί μοι εὐθὺς προσβάλλουσιν ἡδοναί». At the same time, he uses the theory of natural contemplation – φυσικὴ θεωρία – and «is interested in pointing out that nature, and specifically Mount Olympos, can make man closer to God»<sup>4</sup>. In other words, nature as an aesthetic and environmental experience blends here with nature as a source of religious contemplation.

In recent years, scholars have attempted to investigate how the Byzantines defined and described “nature” and how nuanced their relationship with it was. Furthermore, it became clear that there was no one fixed definition or one single “Byzantine” approach to nature; Stavros Lazaris has recently shown how Byzantine conceptions of the environment changed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, likely in response to political, societal, climatic, and economic factors<sup>5</sup>.

In today's Byzantine studies, two distinct lines of investigation can be observed: one focuses on climatic changes and their impact on the development of the Eastern Empire, while the other explores Byzantine perspectives on the natural environment and non-human animals. These two approaches, although sometimes different in methods, are mutually complementary. As the editors of the recently published volume *A Companion to the Environmental History of Byzantium* noted:

an environmental historian deals with the physical world, which includes plant growth, the lives of animals, the flows of river and ocean waters, energy conversion, and atmospheric phenomena. This leads to a duality that is atypical in humanistic thinking: on the one hand, the environment appears highly material, while on the other it must be seen as a cultural construct, as images “sitting” in the minds of people from the past; without taking these images into account it is not possible to understand the interdependence of man and nature<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> In LAURITZEN 2011, p. 140.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. LAZARIS 2024.

<sup>6</sup> In IZDEBSKI – PREISER-KAPPELLER 2024, p. 1.

This conclusion also holds true for scholars working on historical animal studies and using such elusive (even if fascinating) methodologies as Blue Humanities. Analysis of literary sources, be they chronicles, saints' lives, or poetry, must be augmented by taking archaeological and zooarchaeological sources into consideration where possible.

However, while scholars of Byzantine environmental history attempt to reconstruct the physicality of the historical environment using archaeological and literary evidence, those working in ecocriticism or historical animal studies focus more on conceptual approaches to nature – ones that are largely shaped by imagination. Ecocriticism, in particular, does not reconstruct the tangible environment but rather the imagined one, offering a way to understand how the natural world was perceived and interpreted.

It would be untrue and unfair to say that studies of the Byzantine natural world have only recently begun. In fact, modern attempts would not be possible without the work done by scholars such as Henry Maguire and Nancy Ševčenko, not to mention Phaidon Koukoules' monumental, even if outdated, compilation<sup>7</sup>. However, it is equally true that the perception of nature in Byzantium has recently generated increased interest among Byzantinists. This is evidenced by a series of new publications tackling this subject. Adam Goldwyn wrote on the role of animals and nature in Middle and Late Byzantine epics/novels<sup>8</sup>. Equally novel was a recent work on political zoology in Byzantium by Tristan Schmidt<sup>9</sup>. Veronica Della Dora published an inspiring study on landscape perception in the Christian-Orthodox discourse<sup>10</sup>. Thomas Arentzen, Virginia Burrus, and Glenn Peers explored the arboreal imagination of the Byzantines<sup>11</sup>. The *Companion to Byzantine Science* includes chapters on zoology and botany<sup>12</sup>. A very recent volume, *The Byzantines and the Sea*, explores the sea not only from a geopolitical and economic perspective but also as a literary concept – though none of the chapters approach it from an ecocritical or Blue Humanities standpoint<sup>13</sup>. The recently published

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, see MAGUIRE 1987 and MAGUIRE 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. GOLDWYN 2018: this book was a pioneering attempt at bringing ecocriticism to the field of Byzantine studies.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. SCHMIDT 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. DELLA DORA 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. ARENTZEN – BURROWS – PEERS 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. LAZARIS 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. ANTONOPOULOU – FLUSIN 2024.

volume *Ecologizing Late Ancient and Byzantine Worlds*, edited by Thomas Arentzen and Laura Borghetti, offers valuable insights<sup>14</sup>.

In March 2021, an international online workshop titled *Nature and the Environment in Byzantium* was held in Birmingham, UK. More recently, in May 2023, Zachary Chitwood delivered a lecture in Katowice on environmental law in the Byzantine Empire. Later that year, scholars gathered in Katowice to discuss the role of animals in Byzantium<sup>15</sup>. Participants in last year's conference in Mainz – part of the Alexander von Humboldt-funded project *Die Byzantiner und die Natur in Byzanz* – continued to explore the Byzantine natural world<sup>16</sup>. A volume bringing together the proceedings of both conferences is currently in preparation. March 2025 will bring yet another conference on British soil dedicated to nature in Byzantium<sup>17</sup>. Finally, in June 2025, a conference on the natural world in hexaemeral literature was held at the Center for Byzantine Studies in Katowice.

Both the publications and conference activities clearly show that interest in studying not only the Byzantine climate but also Byzantine approaches to and understandings of the environment is growing. Unfortunately, Byzantium is traditionally absent from modern syntheses exploring medieval approaches to nature and non-human animals. The recent six-volume work on the cultural history of insects mentions Byzantium only briefly – and not without simplifications<sup>18</sup>. The same applies to volumes on the cultural history of animals and many other similar publications<sup>19</sup>.

Perhaps Byzantine scholars are not yet bold enough to embrace unorthodox ideas when exploring the relationship between nature and humans. Scholars in other fields, however, have done so – for instance, a recent article proposes that the biological systems of octopuses could serve as models for understanding the architecture of a premodern decentralized government, in this case the Ottonians<sup>20</sup>. And yet, some future research trajectories can be envisioned. The team in Katowice, funded by the *National Research Centre*, is currently investigating Byzantine conceptions of the sea and wilderness (mountains, forests). A vast wealth of material remains to be uncovered in hexaemeral literature – such an investigation will surely need to extend beyond the Byzantine world and may

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. ARENTZEN – BORGHETTI 2025.

<sup>15</sup> *Byzantine Animals Between Materiality and Fantasy* (Katowice, 22-23 June 2023).

<sup>16</sup> *Turning over a New Leaf - Perspectives n Byzantine Understandings of Nature* (Mainz, 14-15 November 2024).

<sup>17</sup> 27<sup>th</sup> OUBS International Graduate Conference “Byzantium and Its Environment” (Oxford, 1-2 March 2025).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. KRITSKY 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. RESL – KALOFF 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. WANGERIN 2017.

reveal broader perspectives on nature in the premodern era. A project exploring this is currently being developed in Katowice. The study of imaginary animals remains a completely unexplored field, even though our modern understanding of nature tends to exclude beings we perceive as fictitious.

The Byzantines lived in an environment that was also home to animals – both useful and dangerous – plants, and atmospheric phenomena. It would be naïve to assume that everything around them was interpreted solely as the signs of God’s will or coded messages. More likely, secular views on nature, often inherited from ancient naturalists, were integrated into the religious fabric of Byzantine culture, creating a complex matrix of beliefs. While God ultimately remained at the centre of this worldview, more mundane interpretations were also necessary.

Understanding climate change means understanding how the physical world influenced societal and political developments. Equally important, however, is understanding how people conceptualised the environment. Relations with and perceptions of nature and animals in premodern societies were crucial factors in shaping their functioning.

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**Manuscript Studies as a Field Discipline:  
Material Stratigraphy, Cultural Biography, and Itinerant Pedagogy**

*Filippo Ronconi (EHESS, Paris)*

The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Porphyra* – which almost coincides with the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *International Itinerant Palaeography School (IIPS)* – takes place at a moment when universities and research institutions worldwide, and especially in the humanities, face significant structural challenges. These pressures, most acute in the United States though increasingly visible across much of the Western world, reflect a long-term shift in funding and institutional priorities that poses a tangible threat to the continuity of research. Increasing emphasis has been placed on short-term and often politically oriented projects, sometimes at the expense of stable structures such as departments, universities, and institutes for advanced study. This reconfiguration of the academic landscape has raised, in certain cases, concerns about the future of academic freedom and the autonomy of research agendas. It is therefore important – especially for younger generations of scholars – to recognise the value of safeguarding the fundamental structures of research and advanced training. Such safeguarding does not imply the simple preservation of existing frameworks: as the Byzantines themselves understood, continuity must be accompanied by adaptation and renewal. In this context, the joint celebration of the anniversaries of a Byzantine studies journal – founded and sustained with commitment by early-career scholars – and of an advanced international training initiative open to participants from a wide variety of cultural and national backgrounds represents an important starting point for this discussion.

To speak about manuscripts – their study, their transmission, and the insights they offer into past and present societies – is not only an academic exercise but also, in a broader sense, a contribution to cultural resilience and to the preservation of an open, pluralistic intellectual community.

## 1. *Manuscript Studies as Cultural Studies*

### 1.1. Manuscriptology as a Historical Discipline Anchored in the Present

If the indispensability of manuscript sources for reconstructing past events has been self-evident since the very origins of historical scholarship, manuscript studies in recent decades have acquired not only their own disciplinary and epistemological profile but also a readership that extends beyond the strictly academic sphere<sup>1</sup>. The unexpected success of certain recent books attests to this widening appeal. This is due partly to the intrinsic fascination of the manuscripts themselves – as evidenced by their recurrent role in novels, films, and television series – partly to the originality of the methods used to study them, and partly to the extraordinary nature of the places where they are preserved (historical libraries, ancient monasteries, national museums...).

Yet the strength of manuscript studies also lies in the discreet but persistent presence, in the daily life of twenty-first-century men and women, of echoes from the book and documentary ecosystem of the past. This almost subliminal familiarity makes ancient books and documents appear at once exotic and intimately known. A few examples illustrate this dual perception.

One is the well-known image on a red-figure *kylix* by Douris (5<sup>th</sup> century BC), found at Cerveteri and now in the Berlin *Staatliche Museen's Antikensammlung*, showing a seated man – probably a teacher – correcting a student's work by incising the wax of a wooden tablet (see **figures 1 and 2**)<sup>2</sup>. To a contemporary observer, the scene inevitably recalls the *homo electronicus* bent over a laptop computer. Similarly, the English verb to scroll, denoting the movement of text on a computer screen, echoes the physical action of rolling or unrolling the ancient *rotulus* (“[sc]roll”).

Language harbours even more unexpected survivals. In both Romance and Germanic languages, the etymologies of the words for “book” lead back to wood – either from Latin *liber* or from Proto-Germanic *bōks*, both denoting the layer beneath the bark (the phloem). This is no coincidence: one of the earliest book formats in the Euro-Mediterranean area was the polyptych of wooden tablets, such as the one depicted by Douris, which could be flipped like a notepad and, later, like a printed book. Even common metaphors point back to this ancient book format: when we invite someone to engrave a memory in their mind, we evoke precisely it, since its wooden surfaces were coated with wax.

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<sup>1</sup> PÉBARTHE 2006, pp. 77ff.

<sup>2</sup> For the bibliography, see SIDER 2010, pp. 541-554.

Other everyday words hark back to the most widespread ancient book form, the papyrus roll. English *paper*, Spanish *papel*, German *Papier*, and French *papier* all derive from the Latin name of the plant (*cyperus papyrus*) used to make sheets which, glued end to end, formed a long strip for writing. On this strip, the text could be arranged either in columns parallel to the rolling axis (the Latins called such a roll *volumen*) or in a single long column perpendicular to it (*rotulus*). On the first sheet of documentary rolls, the particulars of the contents were inscribed; from the Greek term for this initial section (*prōtokollon*) comes our word “protocol”. Italian *carta*, Russian *хартия*, French *charte*, and Romanian *carte* descend – though with semantic shifts – from the Greek term for roll (*chartēs*). Latin *volumen* gave rise to Italian, French, and English *volume*, while Italian *tomo*, like English and French *tome*, comes from Greek *tomos*, related to the verb *temnein* (“to cut”) and used in Antiquity for one of the parts into which an overlong work was divided, each part occupying a separate roll.

Even idiomatic expressions retain traces of ancient book formats. The French “être au bout du rouleau” (*to be at the end of the roll*), the Italian and English “voltare pagina” / “to turn the page”, and the widespread *tabula rasa* recall respectively the roll, the codex, and the wax tablet – the three principal formats of the book and documentary ecosystem from Antiquity through the Middle Ages<sup>3</sup>.

## 1.2. Persistence of Book Formats

It may seem counterintuitive that, when speaking of Byzantium, one should evoke rolls and wax tablets. In reality, Byzantine book culture was dominated by the codex, introduced in Rome in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE and already widespread at the dawn of the Empire. So entrenched was the format in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, that Constantine I commissioned fifty codices of the complete Bible (one or two of which may have survived almost intact, the so-called codices *Vaticanus* and *Sinaiticus*) for the churches of his new capital<sup>4</sup>. Nonetheless, tablets and rolls remained in use for educational and administrative purposes. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, describing the school attached to the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, Nicholas Mesarites mentions students who, «carrying rolls under their arm, recite orally what is written therein, after having imprinted it on the tablets of memory by

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<sup>3</sup> On all this, see RONCONI 2024.

<sup>4</sup> EUS. CAES., *Vita Constantini* 4.36-37. See RONCONI 2021a, pp. 136-138.

assiduous reading»<sup>5</sup>. As far as current evidence allows, a unique surviving example of a Byzantine roll associated with scholarly pursuits is Patm. 897, preserved at the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian on the island of Patmos. Made of nineteen paper sheets glued together for a total length of just under eight metres, it is datable paleographically to the 11<sup>th</sup> century and contains parts of the third book of Proclus' commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*<sup>6</sup>. The cursive script and numerous *scholia* suggest an object used for advanced study, likely at a higher level than that evoked by Mesarites. Byzantium also produced luxury illustrated rolls, such as a parchment *volumen* over ten metres long preserved in the *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana* (Vat. Pal. gr. 431), containing twenty-seven scenes from the biblical *Book of Joshua* with their relevant captions. This 10<sup>th</sup>-century Constantinopolitan object is probably the reproduction of a 6<sup>th</sup>-century model, and appears to be a quite isolated case<sup>7</sup>.

While these specimens appear to be quite unique, the use of the roll for documentary purposes was, without question, widespread. Minutes of councils were transcribed on papyrus rolls until the middle Byzantine period. These included the *prōtotypa* – original records derived from the notes taken by patriarchal secretaries in shorthand in real time – and authenticated copies (*isotypoi*), distinct from other copies of the acts written in parchment codices (*sōmatia*, *biblia*, and *teuchē*) and distributed to the patriarchal sees. An accurate iconographic representation of these different kinds of documents appears in 9<sup>th</sup> century codex Paris. gr. 510 (at p. 723; here **figure 3**), depicting the final session of the First Council of Constantinople (381): in addition to the Gospel codex open on the throne – symbol of Christ's presence and presidency – there is, on a central table, another codex and two sealed rolls, almost certainly the *prōtotypa* and/or *isotypoi* of the acts of the Council.

A partially preserved *isotypos* on papyrus survives in Vienna (P. Vindob. G 3): a fragment of a roll from the late 7<sup>th</sup> century reproducing one of the originals signed by the participants at the Sixth Ecumenical Council (680-681)<sup>8</sup>. Theophanes Confessor records that in 767 an imperial notary publicly read charges against a deposed patriarch from a papyrus roll (*tomos chartou*)<sup>9</sup>. During the

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<sup>5</sup> MES., *Descr.* [8].19-20 (ed. Heisenberg): «ἕτεροι τοὺς χάρτας ἀγκαλοφοροῦντες καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς γεγραμμένα διὰ στόματος ἀπαγγέλλοντες τῷ πρότερον ἐντυπῶσαι ταῦτα ταῖς τῆς διανοίας πλαξὶ διὰ τῆς συνεχοῦς ἀναγνώσεως». Note the metaphor – already attested in Antiquity and mentioned earlier – that likens the act of inscribing letters into wax to that of engraving memories in the mind.

<sup>6</sup> MENCHELLI 2016 and MENCHELLI 2021.

<sup>7</sup> KRESTEN 2010.

<sup>8</sup> DE GREGORIO – KRESTEN 2009.

<sup>9</sup> THEOPH. CONF., AM 6259.

Council of Nicaea in 787, Patriarch Tarasios likewise read directly from the original roll – already a century old – part of the acts of the Council *in Trullo*<sup>10</sup>.

Papyrus rolls were also employed for the “festal letters” by which the Patriarch of Alexandria, in accordance with ancient custom, informed the other patriarchs of the date of Easter. Such epistles are known from literary references or through translations – for instance, Jerome’s Latin versions of Theophilus’ letters – and fragments of six originals are extant. One, dating to 421, is preserved in the *Istituto Papirologico “Girolamo Vitelli”* in Florence and has recently been edited; three others, preserved elsewhere and still on papyrus, date from the 8<sup>th</sup> century<sup>11</sup>. All are written in a distinctive majuscule script, generally termed “Alexandrian majuscule”, a designation ultimately derived from a passage in the *Vita Ignatii* by Niketas David of Paphlagonia<sup>12</sup>. According to this source, Photius, who had been deposed from the patriarchate, regained the favour of Emperor Basil I by fabricating for this parvenu ruler a fictitious genealogy. To enhance its credibility, he is said to have transcribed it on papyrus in «γράμματα Ἀλεξανδρῖνα» (a script little used in Constantinople and already endowed with an archaic aura) and then inserted the document into the cover of an old book, thereby producing a forgery with the appearance of great antiquity<sup>13</sup>. Although the anecdote is clearly malevolent towards Photius, it may preserve a kernel of truth: as patriarch, Photius would indeed have had access to the festal letters written in this script preserved in the patriarchal archive.

The *rotulus xylochartion* (“wood paper”, the Byzantine term for papyrus) was used in the imperial chancery until at least the 9<sup>th</sup> century, as shown by the so-called “Papyrus of Saint-Denis”, preserving the final twenty-one lines of the oldest surviving original letter of a Byzantine emperor<sup>14</sup>. All names are lost, but the recipient – very likely a Carolingian ruler – is urged to compel another king, of whom he is «father, lord, and protector», to join a military expedition. The most plausible datings are either 827 (more on this below) or the period 840-842, when Theophilos and Michael II sought Lothar I’s support against the Arabs.

The roll format for letters to foreign rulers persisted into later centuries, shifting from papyrus to parchment, as in the purple-dyed rolls written in gold sent by the Komnenoi to the popes and

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<sup>10</sup> LAMBERZ 2012.

<sup>11</sup> P.Horak 3 (year 711 or 722: *LDAB* 10250); *BKT* VI, pp. 55-109 (year 713 or 719: *LDAB* 194); P.Heid. IV 295 (eighth century: *LDAB* 6664). See STROPPA 2022.

<sup>12</sup> CAVALLO 1975.

<sup>13</sup> NICETAS DAVID, *Vita Ignatii* 89-90 (in SMITHIES – DUFFY 2013, pp. 118-121).

<sup>14</sup> Paris, *Archives nationales*, K 7 n° 17/3; see RONCONI 2021b.

currently preserved in the *Archivio Apostolico Vaticano*<sup>15</sup>. Chrysobulls from the imperial chancery were likewise issued in roll form: Gregory Pakourianos, in his 12<sup>th</sup>-century foundation act for a monastery in Bulgaria, mentions a *chrysoboullion xylochartion* he held in pledge at Constantinople<sup>16</sup>. Middle Byzantine chrysobulls on parchment rolls could exceed eight metres, though from the 11<sup>th</sup> century paper became increasingly common<sup>17</sup>.

The persistence of the *rotulus* – whether in papyrus, parchment, or oriental paper – had at least two causes. First, it was an ancient and prestigious format, conferring on the text a sacred and solemn aura. Second, it offered a strong guarantee of authenticity: unlike the codex, which could be altered by removing or adding leaves and quires (as will be discussed), a roll could only be tampered with by cutting the continuous strip, inserting *kollēmata*, and regluing or resewing them. To prevent such sophisticated forgeries, the joins of the *kollēmata* in rolls produced by the imperial chancery carried on the verso the formula «*tou epi tou kanikleiou*» (*of the keeper of the inkwell*), designating a high-ranking official responsible for writing materials and authentication – a counter-signature comparable to a modern notary's seal<sup>18</sup>.

Some rolls contained magical-religious texts. One 16<sup>th</sup>-century *rotulus* in the *Österreichische Nationalbibliothek* in Vienna, three metres long, made of six sewn parchment sheets and provided with partially damaged illuminations, holds four texts: one on the encounter between Archangel Michael and the demon Gylou; one on the *mandylion*; a list of magi; and finally an exorcism (on a later-added leaf). Part literary scroll, part phylactery, it was intended to safeguard one Antonios and his family, named in the *mandylion* text and in the exorcism<sup>19</sup>. Such rolls were hung in houses to ward off evil, especially to prevent Gylou from haunting cradles<sup>20</sup>.

Finally, liturgical rolls played a decisive role in Byzantium. On Lesbos, for instance, the Monastery of Ypsilou preserves some unedited 10<sup>th</sup>-century examples and Leimonos Monastery holds four<sup>21</sup>. These distinctive objects were essential to the liturgy and had a clear scenographic function. The Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai preserves parchment rolls from six to

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<sup>15</sup> AA. Arm. I-XVIII 402 and 404.

<sup>16</sup> GAUTIER 1984, ch. 33 (p. 127 l. 1782).

<sup>17</sup> RONCONI 2021c.

<sup>18</sup> OIKONOMIDES 1991, pp. 37-38.

<sup>19</sup> Vindob. suppl. gr. 116.

<sup>20</sup> PATERA 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Manuscripts 327-330, containing the *Liturgies* of Saint Basil and of John Chrysostom.

thirteen metres long<sup>22</sup>; smaller rolls (*kontakia*) containing hymns, though rarely surviving due to heavy use, appear in marginal drawings (e.g., Leimonos 18, f. 129r; see **figure 4**) and miniatures such as that in the *Menologion/Synaxarion* of Basil II (Vat. gr. 1613, p. 78): it depicts Romanos the Melodist miraculously inspired by the Virgin through a small roll placed in his mouth<sup>23</sup>.

Rolls and *kontakia* are also depicted in frescoes and mosaics, in the hands of Church Fathers, saintly theologians, and sometimes evangelists. From the middle Byzantine period onwards, the latter are shown almost exclusively as copying their own Gospels, which appear twice: first as a model – often a *rotulus* on a lectern – and then as the copy, a folio or codex on the evangelist's thigh. This anachronistic iconography (codices being rare in the evangelists' time) presents them not as authors but as copyists, transmitting a Word already fixed in a divinely originating model – often a roll, like those mentioned in the Ancient Testament and in the *Apocalypse*<sup>24</sup>. The type gained currency between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, amid intense politico-religious conflicts in which orthodox monastic circles exalted the copyist as «engraver of the Law of God, transcriber of the Word of the Spirit, not only for his own generation but also for the future»<sup>25</sup>. In that very period, theologians close to the patriarchate also studied the Qur'an, noting its presentation as direct divine dictation<sup>26</sup>. The convergence of ideological, political, and religious factors likely underlies this evangelist-as-copyist type, with the *rotulus* as model, in a context where writing and its iconographic representations became a weapon within Byzantium and in its encounters with Islam.

### 1.3. Understanding the Book and Documentary Ecosystem to Avoid Anachronisms

Familiarity with the Byzantine book and documentary ecosystem not only provides a more vivid sense of everyday life in the Empire, it also helps to avoid anachronisms and misinterpretations concerning major cultural phenomena. Ignorance of the material features of books and documents – together with the ways in which they were produced, preserved, and used – often leads modern observers to misattribute to the intellectual sphere phenomena that in fact belong to the material

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<sup>22</sup> MENCHELLI 2016.

<sup>23</sup> RONCONI 2021a, pp. 191-192.

<sup>24</sup> See for instance Ez 3.1. et Ap 10.8ff. On this topic, see RONCONI 2021a, pp. 225-226.

<sup>25</sup> In THEODORUS STUDITA, *Catechesis magna* 45.

<sup>26</sup> ULBRICHT 2023, pp. 221-244.

sphere, producing mistaken conclusions about the corresponding cultural systems. Two examples may suffice here.

Anyone who reads the two principal works of Photius of Constantinople is struck by a profound sense of alterity. The *Bibliotheca*, comprising 280 chapters and reviews of 386 texts, is certainly an extraordinary treasure, since many of the works it describes are otherwise unknown. Yet the reader's enthusiasm wanes when confronted with its lack of organisation – a sequence of largely independent chapters – together with its incompleteness: some reviews are mere sketches, and roughly half the work consists of little more than an amorphous heap of quotations. Even more disconcerting is the *Mystagogy*. This text, though fundamental for Orthodox theology and for the history of the schism between the Eastern and Western Churches, treats the procession of the Holy Spirit repetitively and inconsistently: the same concepts, episodes, and figures recur multiple times, sometimes with grave contradictions. Moreover, the interlocutor – addressed now as an individual, now as a group – is alternately cajoled and anathematised. Eminent scholars have explained these features as the result of Photius' unrestrained use of rhetoric, thereby reinforcing the prejudice that Byzantine literary taste is incompatible with modern sensibilities. This explanation is only partly valid. Recent studies of the compositional methods of the *Bibliotheca* and the *Mystagogy*, together with the reconstruction of the material characteristics of their prototypes, have shown that Photius never intended either work to be an “organic” whole. Both were, rather, dossiers without even a title: in the one case, notes and excerpts from his and his circle's readings; in the other, reflections on a theological problem he considered central. Only when these dossiers were copied – each time for identifiable reasons – did their contents become fixed, acquiring the appearance of stable texts. Yet they retained the incoherence and fragmentary nature proper to their origins, even though the transmission process tended, copy by copy, to normalise their external form. Later readers, forgetting this original character, wrongly assimilated them into the world of *belles lettres*<sup>27</sup>.

A second, more general example concerns a phenomenon at the intersection of book history and wider sociocultural history. Common perception holds that the Middle Ages – whether “Western” or “Eastern” – did not produce authors of stature comparable to those of Antiquity. This judgement partly reflects classicist prejudice, but it is true that many medieval and Byzantine authors explicitly theorised the rejection of originality. John of Damascus, with his celebrated statement «οὐδὲν δὲ ἐμοῦ

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<sup>27</sup> RONCONI 2023.

ἐρῶ» (*I shall say nothing of my own*), is the most famous instance<sup>28</sup>. Yet this attitude was not confined to ecclesiastical writers: it extended to chroniclers, poets, and other “lay” authors, who often preferred to compose by means of quotations – sometimes at great expense of time and labour – rather than to create works *ex nihilo*<sup>29</sup>.

This stance derived both from the veneration for tradition, inherited from Antiquity and magnified in Byzantium, and from the political-theological context: when supreme power was regarded as the expression of divine will and the emperor as Christ’s lieutenant on Earth, the written word risked deviating from the narrow path of orthodoxy, laboriously defined through doctrinal conflict. From Late Antiquity onwards, these factors transformed the perception of the author’s role and reshaped the relationship between composition and its social framework.

Nevertheless, a decisive role in this process was played by the codex, which became the standard vehicle for literary texts between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE. Its capacity, much greater than the roll, favoured the proliferation of anthologies – a quite widespread late-antique phenomenon aptly described by Armando Petrucci as «the spread of libraries without a library»<sup>30</sup>. Combined with the cultural factors outlined above, this proliferation weakened the very concept of authorship. Once the correspondence between book-unit and text-unit – typical of the roll, which normally contained a single work – was lost, attribution became increasingly problematic. In anthologies or miscellanies, incipits and explicits of individual works or parts of works often disappeared, together with the authors’ names. The result was a dilution of what Michel Foucault termed the «author function»<sup>31</sup>. The author, in other words, is not the «modern character» imagined by Roland Barthes<sup>32</sup>, but the product of a modern reinvention of an ancient category – a category attenuated between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, both East and West, and revived only in modern times through complex sociocultural processes<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> In IOH. DAMAS., *Dialectica sive Capita philosophica*, Prolog. and ch. 2.

<sup>29</sup> ODORICO 2011.

<sup>30</sup> In PETRUCCI 1986.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. FOUCAULT 2001.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. BARTHES 1968.

<sup>33</sup> RONCONI 2021a, pp. 121-125.

## 2. Manuscript Studies as a Field Discipline

### 2.1. The Complex Nature of the Manuscript and Its Stratigraphy

Just as a physician confronts the singularity of each patient, despite the shared anatomy and physiology of the species, so too each manuscript demands individualised investigation. To borrow Kant's distinction, it is a unique *artefactum*, not a serial *opus mechanicum* like the printed – or, in modern terms, digital – book<sup>34</sup>. The artisanal and inherently complex nature of every manuscript makes it a «total social object», since its production drew upon the labour of individuals from widely different segments of society.

The manufacture of writing supports – wood, linen, papyrus, parchment, and early paper – was organised in operational sequences (*chaînes opératoires* articulated on several levels, each entrusted to specialised crafts<sup>35</sup>), like for instance:

- transforming raw materials into writing surfaces (wood into tablets and polyptichs; *linum usitatissimum* into *libri lintei*; *cyperus papyrus* into *kollēmata* and rolls; animal skins into parchment sheets, later sewn or glued into rolls or stacked into quires; linen or hemp rags into sheets of paper);
- producing leather cases (in Greek *diphthera*; in Latin *paenulae*, *togae*, or more rarely *membranae*) for storing rolls; creating bindings, which in the medieval period sometimes gave coherence and stability to codices.

The technical expertise of these artisans – often illiterate – was transmitted orally and learned through the imitation of gestures. When these fragile lines of transmission were interrupted, the associated techniques were partially lost.

The near-total absence of written testimony on most of these *chaînes opératoires* reflects not only the illiteracy of the craftsmen but also the disdainful attitude of literate elites, who – at least until the early Middle Ages – tended to regard manual work as *opera servilia*. When they did describe such activities, they did so only rarely and by “translating” them into the elevated register of learned literature, replacing vernacular terms – many of which are now lost – with erudite paraphrases<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. KANT 2013, 1.3: *Abschnitt*, ch. 32 (p. 72).

<sup>35</sup> SELLET 1993.

<sup>36</sup> RONCONI 2021a, pp. 200-201.

Beyond its material dimension, however, the manuscript is also the vehicle of a text, generally composed by members of the literate elite but copied by individuals who might come from very different social backgrounds: a slave, a freelance calligrapher, a monastic scribe, or a bureaucrat who, alongside drafting official documents, might copy books for personal interest or supplementary income. In all cases, transcription required at least basic training in spelling and grammar – if not calligraphy – acquired through apprenticeship and formal schooling<sup>37</sup>.

All this pertains to the genetic phase of the manuscript. To reach us, however, each specimen has traversed centuries and diverse social contexts, accumulating alterations of every kind: physical damage, erasures, mutilations, additions, glosses, and restorations, caused by natural agents, animals, plants, and human hands. To the collector they appear as defects, and to some librarians as sources of vexation; yet to the manuscriptologist they are precious, just as scars are to a forensic pathologist. These traces provide vital clues to the object's trajectory over time, revealing above all its capacity to adapt to human interaction – an interaction that is seldom neutral.

For instance, diachronic marginal annotations may reveal the interests, cultural level, and sometimes even the identity of the annotators. Drawings shed light on daily objects, habits, and scenes, and occasionally on the technical details of complex artefacts such as buildings or ships (like in the case of the Leimonos ms. 28; see **figures 5a** and **5b**). At times, they reflect the imagination of individuals who handled the book, sometimes without being able to read it. Even stains, wear, and tears provide evidence of “alternative” uses: books and documents were displayed, carried in procession, kissed, deliberately mutilated, or ultimately restored.

As a «stratified social object» both in its genesis and in its later uses, the manuscript bears the imprint of successive interactions with individuals and groups, from the time of its creation to the moment it enters the scholar's hands. Like all pre-modern artefacts, it belonged to an economy that was not “linear” (make-consume-discard) but “circular”, based on sharing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing, and recycling materials for as long as possible. Restoration – whether graphic, ornamental, or material – was therefore intrinsic to books and documents, whose principal feature was precisely their capacity to be reused until they were no longer serviceable<sup>38</sup>. Manuscripts (especially books) that have never undergone restoration, or reuse, are rare. These two processes,

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<sup>37</sup> RONCONI 2021a, pp. 217-255.

<sup>38</sup> BIANCONI 2018.

though opposite in effect (the former aiming to preserve, the latter to sacrifice the text or the support), reflect the same cultural logic of optimising the long-term use of objects.

Not only was the practice of reuse intrinsic to wax tablets –where erasure made possible the substitution of successive texts – but it also applied to polyptychs, which were dismantled to allow the recombination of their tablets, as the workshop in which the Kellys polyptych was found clearly attests<sup>39</sup>. Rolls were often reused by reversing the rolling direction and writing on the exterior surface originally left blank: the most famous case is the rolls of (Ps.-?) Aristotle’s *Constitution of the Athenians*, inscribed on the reverse of papyrus rolls that preserve the financial records of an agricultural estate<sup>40</sup>. Likewise, Byzantine liturgical rolls were often opistographs (written on both sides). Some were designed so from the outset, with a single liturgy spread over both sides; in other cases, a later scribe – sometimes centuries afterwards – added a different liturgy on the blank *verso*.

The most striking form of reuse was palimpsesting: erasing or scraping off the original writing and reusing the support. Rarely applied to papyrus and only exceptionally to paper, the practice is relatively common in late antique and medieval parchment codices. Texts of immense value have resurfaced thanks to technologies that increasingly allow the recovery of erased scripts – the celebrated Archimedes Palimpsest (Baltimore, *Walters Art Museum*, Ms. S.N.) being a prime example. This 10<sup>th</sup>-century codex was recycled in the 13<sup>th</sup> century to make a prayer book<sup>41</sup>. In other cases, reused leaves originated from very ancient manuscripts, enabling the reconstruction of otherwise unknown features of early codices<sup>42</sup>.

### **3. A Complex Method for a Complex Object**

#### **3.1. Between Theory and Practice**

The foregoing considerations illustrate how closely theoretical reflection and practical “fieldwork” are interwoven in the study of manuscripts, whether books or documents. Manuscript studies, as a field discipline, must therefore rely on a complex approach – simultaneously multisensory, analytical-synergistic-stratigraphic, and evidential-reconstructive.

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<sup>39</sup> WOP – RIJKSBARON 1997.

<sup>40</sup> P.Lond. Lit. 108 (P.Lond. I 131).

<sup>41</sup> NETZ *et al.* 2011.

<sup>42</sup> FIORETTI 2016.

It is multisensory because the first encounter with a manuscript must allow the scholar to engage with the object through senses, initiating the “relationship” that will frame the entire analysis (cf. *infra* paragraph 3.2).

It is analytical-synergistic-stratigraphic because, after this initial encounter, the manuscript can only be studied through the specialised disciplines that examine its various components: bibliocodicology (the writing medium), palaeography (the script), philology and the history of textual transmission (the contents), and art history when decoration or illustration is present. Yet the analysis of individual components is not an end in itself: as in Theodor W. Adorno’s *Mikrologische Methode*, attention to detail should lead to a synthetic understanding of the artefact as a whole<sup>43</sup>. The codex must be grasped in terms of the interaction of its elements – support, text, script, and decoration. In practical terms, this means adapting to the book the stratigraphic method used in archaeology (cf. *infra* paragraph 3.3).

Finally, manuscript study is evidential-reconstructive, since its ultimate aim is to reconstruct the features of the original artefact and the successive phases of transformations it has undergone, starting from the state in which the object appears at the time of analysis (often fragmentary or altered by time and circumstance; cf. *infra* paragraph 3.4).

### **3.2. First, Multisensory, Approach**

The first “encounter” with a manuscript – whether in a national library, a monastic archive, a research institute, or a private collection – resembles the opening of an interview with a person. The initial moments must be devoted to forming a general impression. One begins by noting the environment in which the manuscript is preserved: a modern, technologically equipped library, where controlled humidity, temperature, and security guarantee its survival; a monastic library or storeroom; or a private house, where such safeguards may be lacking and deterioration may be more advanced. Equally important are the people who handle the object – their professionalism, care, and attentiveness.

The manuscript itself, however, is the true focus. Its external features are examined first, as one might note a person’s clothing. In the case of a codex, this means its binding and cover – usually the result of later interventions and therefore not part of the genetic phase (codices were often originally

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<sup>43</sup> ADORNO 1973, p. 400; ADORNO – HORKHEIMER 1985, p. 507.

unbound, with quires kept loose in a kind of dossier; the exceptions were luxury, liturgical, or official volumes). As physique and bearing contribute to a first impression of a person, so too the size and bulk of a manuscript are significant: large formats with wide margins and ample interlinear or intercolumnar spacing generally mark books or documents of high status. The reverse, however, is not always true: pocket-sized but luxurious manuscripts also existed, such as the small Ovidian rolls intended for aristocratic ladies' handbags, the illuminated medieval *Books of Hours*, or, to quote an interesting Byzantine case, the small-format Gospel now in Naples, written in a large 9<sup>th</sup>-century majuscule – perhaps produced for the personal use of Emperor Basil I, whose literacy was quite limited (Neapol. ex-Vind. Gr. 2)<sup>44</sup>.

Once this visual impression is secured, observation becomes more focused. As one might scrutinise a person's skin, hair, or gaze, so too the scholar examines the writing support (papyrus, parchment, paper, or occasionally linen, wood, or other materials), noting its quality and state of preservation. Visible traces of insect or rodent damage, stains from humidity, fire, or mould, colour changes, and pigment flaking in miniatures are recorded at once.

Just as in conversation the timbre, tone, and accent of a voice reveal origin and cultural background, so the sound emitted when the support is gently flexed between two fingers betrays the rigidity, thickness, and thus quality of papyrus, parchment, or paper. Like a person's scent, a manuscript's odour conveys information about its storage conditions: humidity, mould, or rodent contact each leave distinctive traces. Finally, touch – like a handshake – supplies information on the smoothness of the surface and the quality of its preparation.

This initial “epidermal” contact constitutes the first stage of the relationship between scholar and object. It must be followed by technical autoptic analysis, since manuscript studies are, in a sense, a forensic discipline. In fact, such an approach, which treats the manuscript as an articulated whole – physical, graphic, decorative, and textual – accords with Carlo Ginzburg's evidential paradigm: seemingly negligible details (minute graphic variants, slight material alterations, or textual corrections involving even a single letter) may reveal the cultural contexts in which the manuscript was produced, transmitted, or used. Yet to establish a hierarchy among these elements, a method capable of accounting for the object's stratification is required.

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<sup>44</sup> KURYSHEVA 2021.

### 3.3. Manuscripts and Stratigraphy

Every manuscript exhibits a primary stratification – comprising three fundamental “layers”: the material, the graphic-decorative, and the textual – and a secondary stratification, formed by the traces and alterations accumulated over time. This dual sedimentation calls for a stratigraphic approach, conceived not merely as a metaphor but as the genuine application of archaeological method to the study of manuscripts.

Some scholars aptly spoke of an archaeology of the manuscript book, considering it generally as the set of technical skills applied to the study of the materials and methods of book production<sup>45</sup>. The method proposed here is broader: it applies not only to books but to all manuscripts, including documents; it addresses not only the material genesis of the object but also its script, decoration, and text, as well as the successive transformations of its later history.

For illustration, one may turn to Edward Harris’s *Principles of Archaeological Stratigraphy*<sup>46</sup>. Like archaeological stratigraphy, manuscript stratigraphy entails a retrogressive reconstruction of layers – here material, graphic-decorative, and textual. To paraphrase E. Harris:

- all manuscripts are stratified;
- stratification must be analysed both technically and culturally to reveal its social implications;
- the primary object of stratigraphic study is human intervention, and secondarily the effects of natural, animal, or plant agents – especially when these prompted restoration;
- unlike archaeological sites, manuscript strata are not always progressive. Later interventions may occur out of sequence, sometimes retrogressively or haphazardly: while the work of the original copyists and decorators is necessarily anterior, later hands do not always follow chronological order (a later hand may intervene at the beginning of a polyptich, a roll or a codex, while an older addition appears at the end).

This approach, though newly formulated, has ancient precedents. On 13 November 680, during a council convened by Constantine VI, the *prototypon* containing the acts of the Third Ecumenical Council of Constantinople was subjected to detailed stratigraphic examination. The minutes record how a forgery was identified:

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<sup>45</sup> See for instance (for different nuances), LEMAIRE 1989, MANIACI 2002 and DEROLEZ 2018.

<sup>46</sup> HARRIS 1989.

In consulting and analysing the first volume of the acts, we noted that the first three quires had been added later, since their signatures did not correspond to those of the rest of the manuscript: the fourth quaternion was numbered 1 ( $\alpha$ ), the following 2 ( $\beta$ ), 3 ( $\gamma$ ), and so on. The handwriting, moreover, was also different<sup>47</sup>.

In practice, manuscript stratigraphic analysis unfolds in four main phases, three static and one dynamic:

- first, the structure of the object is analysed: dimensions, number, sequence, and composition of quires in a codex; the number, size, and joining of *kollēmata* in a roll; or the sequence and nature of tablets in a polyptych;
- second, scripts are examined: the number, order, and relationships among the hands, noting contemporaneity or diachrony on the basis of palaeographic criteria and reciprocal interactions. The same applies to decoration, which may be a later addition;
- third, the texts and images are analysed in their sequence and articulation;
- fourth, the results of these analyses are integrated. Particular attention is given to nodes – points where a change of hand coincides with a change of text, decoration type, or codicological unit (quire, leaf, *kollēma*, or tablet). Such nodes often signal that the sections derive from different exemplars. This is crucial: the transcription, within a single manuscript, of contents drawn from different models – when not reducible to mere diachronic sedimentation – typically bespeaks a far more elaborate intellectual activity than that presupposed by the straightforward reproduction of a single model.

In sum, every manuscript is a “sedimentary entity”, a stratified *lieu de savoir* in which materials, texts, images, and subsequent interventions are layered<sup>48</sup>. The goal of manuscript studies is therefore not mere description but the dynamic reconstruction of a book’s history, its exemplars, and the social environments in which it was produced and circulated – a task that illuminates past societies more effectively than description alone.

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<sup>47</sup> RIEDINGER 1990, pp. 40-42.

<sup>48</sup> JACOB 2014.

### 3.4. The Manuscript and its “Cultural Biography”

Once the “dynamic cartography” of a manuscript’s stratification has been reconstructed, an anthropological approach is needed to outline its “cultural biography”. Adapting the idea of Igor Kopytoff, this is the succession of values, functions, and meanings attributed to the manuscript across the *longue durée* by the different contexts it traversed<sup>49</sup>. In this perspective, the manuscript becomes the focus of a micro-historical analysis: much as in the *microhistoire* articulated by Jacques Revel and Carlo Ginzburg, the analysis centers on human actors, but does so obliquely, by way of the book or document, understood as possessing an autonomous biographical trajectory<sup>50</sup>. In fact, a manuscript is rarely inert. Even when unread, it could act – exerting symbolic or ritual influence on individuals and communities. Thus, over the centuries, every manuscript has lived multiple “lives”, shaped by the shifting contexts through which it passed. A single example may suffice.

The history of Paris. gr. 437, a defective yet crucial witness to the *Corpus Areopagiticum*, begins even before its copying, in a context far from Constantinople, where it was produced (see **figure 6**). In the 820s, Hilduin, abbot of Saint-Denis, north of Paris, sought to promote the apostolic dignity of his abbey. Although Gregory of Tours had recorded that Saint Denis arrived in Gaul only in the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century, and another legend connected him with Pope Clement I, the immediate successor of Saint Peter, Hilduin nonetheless secured a *Passio* that advanced a third version – one that served both his own purposes and those of Louis the Pious, whom he advised. In this account, Denis was identified with Dionysios, the Athenian converted by Saint Paul himself according to *Acts* 17:34. While Hilduin was engaged in his research, a Byzantine embassy arrived in Rouen on 17 November 824 to visit Louis the Pious. The mission was led by Theodore Krithinos, a high-ranking official of the Great Church of Hagia Sophia and a leading intellectual in Constantinople at the time. Krithinos seems to have become aware of the elaborate construct that Hilduin was devising. The following year, moreover, the emperor in Constantinople received a document – perhaps drafted by Hilduin himself – summarising the conclusions of a synod recently convened in Paris. At that meeting, the connection between Saint Denis and the Apostle Paul was reaffirmed, and two inadequately translated Latin excerpts from the *Corpus Areopagiticum* were cited. These fragments were extremely short, for in the west the *Corpus* appears to have circulated only in incomplete form. The Byzantines seized the moment. Having located a complete Greek copy of the *Corpus* in

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<sup>49</sup> KOPYTOFF 1986.

<sup>50</sup> GINZBURG 1976; REVEL 2010.

Constantinople, they swiftly prepared a manuscript – precisely the Paris. gr. 437 – and dispatched it to Louis, who received it at Compiègne in 827, just days before the feast of Saint Denis. Louis immediately organised a solemn procession to carry the book to the abbey-cathedral, where Hilduin welcomed it in the presence of a crowd of invalids and sick. That very night, according to Hilduin’s own testimony, nineteen people were healed by the book. Significantly, the text was not read – being in Greek, and only much later translated by Hilduin with modest results, in part because the manuscript itself was defective, perhaps through hasty copying. The miracles were thus attributed not to the content of the text but to the physical object itself: venerated, gazed upon, perhaps touched and kissed by the infirm as though it were a relic. Shortly thereafter, Hilduin himself described the manuscript as containing the *authentici libri* of Dionysios. It is therefore plausible that the Byzantine envoys presented – or that Hilduin at least construed – *Parisinus* as an autograph, and therefore as a relic. This interpretation is consistent with its features: the archaizing slanted ogival majuscule; its small dimensions (240 × 155 mm); the defective parchment; and the complete absence of decoration. All are atypical of a diplomatic gift and appear deliberately calculated to lend the book an aura of antiquity.

A combined analysis of the material, graphic, and textual characteristics of this manuscript, together with the testimonies attached to it, allows us to reconstruct a layered “cultural biography”. Conceived in Constantinople in the first quarter of the 9<sup>th</sup> century as a political instrument, it was sent west in 827 as a diplomatic gift, and there presented – or received – as a relic. At Saint-Denis, where it became the focus of miraculous cures, it also served as the exemplar for the first complete Latin translation of the *Corpus Areopagiticum*. Most importantly, it provided Hilduin with the *pièce maîtresse* for composing, in 834, his *Vita* of Saint Denis, in which “his” Denis was identified simultaneously as the first bishop of Lutetia, a disciple of Paul, and the author of the *authentici libri* sent from Constantinople.

The “incarnations” of Paris. gr. 437 did not end there. Removed in due course from the cathedral, it was preserved for centuries as a cherished object in the *Bibliothèque du Roi* (as attested, among other features, by its binding boards bearing the effigy of Louis-Philippe). Today it is housed in the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, where it exists both as a heritage artefact and as a research object. It is exhibited, catalogued, reproduced in scholarly publications, and disseminated worldwide through the *Gallica* portal. At the same time, it has acquired a commercial dimension, since reproductions may be purchased.

Nor is this the whole story. According to a bold but suggestive hypothesis by Michael McCormick, the Saint-Denis Papyrus – we have discussed earlier – was brought to the west by the very same embassy of 827, alongside the *Parisinus*. Now preserved in the *Archives Nationales*, the papyrus owes its name to its long sojourn at the abbey. Its preservation in original form is striking, given Carolingian archival practice, and may be explained by a now-lost passage attesting to the authenticity of the pseudo-relic that was Paris. gr. 437<sup>51</sup>.

#### **4. From Theory to Practice: Séminaires Itinérants and the IIPS**

As in all historical disciplines centred on material artefacts, the teaching of manuscript studies must combine theoretical reflection with practical engagement. A portion of this training must, of course, be delivered in the “traditional” academic format – university classrooms supported by high-resolution digital images. Yet manuscript studies remain above all a field discipline: only direct, multisensory contact with the object – not merely visual, as is possible remotely – ensures both the completeness of the analysis and the effective transmission of knowledge. Such contact enhances students’ attention and secures more lasting retention of what they observe.

Equally important, analysing manuscripts *in situ* – in the very institutions where they are preserved – offers an opportunity to observe the ecosystems of research and conservation (laboratories, libraries, monasteries, and private collections), and to learn from the professionals who care for them. These contextual elements shape scholarly outcomes and, in part, determine them<sup>52</sup>. Most of the manuscripts discussed in the preceding pages were examined autoptically in the framework of two training programmes.

The first is the seminar *Initiation itinérante à l’étude des manuscrits*, organised over three years at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS) in Paris<sup>53</sup>. It enabled some sixty master’s and doctoral students, colleagues, and auditors to work directly with books and documents preserved in the *Institut de Papyrologie de la Sorbonne*, the *Mazarine* library, the library of the *Institut de France*, the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* (sites *Richelieu* and *Arsenal*), the *Sainte-Geneviève*

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<sup>51</sup> On the story of Paris. gr. 437, see RONCONI 2024.

<sup>52</sup> LATOUR – WOOLGAR – SALK 1979.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. <https://enseignements.ehess.fr/2024-2025/ue/352>.

library, the *Archives Nationales*, and the *Département des Arts de Byzance et des Chrétientés en Orient* at the Louvre.

The idea of this itinerant seminar arose from the second programme: the *International Itinerant Palaeography School (IIPS)*. This training initiative, addressed to postgraduate students and auditors from various countries, allows participants – thanks to scholarships – to follow an itinerary founded on direct, hands-on engagement with manuscripts, in the very locations where they are preserved. Over the past decade, sessions have been held in Venice, Padua, Florence, Rome, Naples, Bari, and on the island of Lesbos, in libraries (e.g. the *Biblioteca Marciana* in Venice, the *Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana* in Florence, the *Casanatense*, *Vallicelliana*, *Corsiniana* of the *Accademia dei Lincei*, and *Angelica* in Rome, the University library of Padua, and the library of the Monastery of Leimonos), in research centres (the *Marcello Gigante Centre* for the study of the Herculaneum Papyri in Naples and the *Girolamo Vitelli* papyrological centre in Florence), and at archaeological sites (Pompeii, Herculaneum, and the Roman Forum).

In both the *séminaire itinérant* and the *IIPS*, training consists of successive encounters with manuscripts of different periods, types, and languages, and with the professionals responsible for them – scholars, conservators, restorers, and curators – within their institutional ecosystems, which may range from advanced laboratories and national libraries to traditional orthodox monasteries. Each manuscript is examined autoptically within its home institution, through a dialogue between visiting teaching staff and local personnel, in accordance with the methodological guidelines outlined here in paragraphs 3.1-3.3.

A pedagogy based on itinerancy is certainly more demanding than sedentary, classroom-based teaching (which remains indispensable at certain stages of training). Yet, despite the organisational complexity, these initiatives require relatively little funding. The *séminaire itinérant* entails no financial cost, while each annual session of the *IIPS* – which has been supported by *Université Paris Sciences et Lettres*, the *EHESS*, and the *Centre d'Études en Sciences Sociales du Religieux* – costs no more than ten thousand euros (for fifteen scholarship holders hosted free of charge for one week). Both initiatives presuppose, however, an active network capable of generating numerous contacts, agreements, and in-kind contributions. The *IIPS* in particular owes its success to the collaboration of many institutions: the *Hellenic Institute of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Studies* in Venice; the *École française* in Rome; the *Centre Jean Bérard* in Naples; the Monastery of Leimonos on Lesbos (which have hosted scholarship holders); Peking University (which has funded scholarships for Chinese

students and auditors); the *Collège de France*, the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, and the *École Nationale des Chartes*; the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*; the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki; and the universities of Cassino, Florence, Naples *Federico II*, Caserta, Rome *Sapienza*, and Padua (which have contributed teaching staff). Equally important have been the *Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, the archaeological parks of Herculaneum, Pompeii, and the Roman Forum, the *Marcello Gigante International Centre* for the study of the Herculaneum Papyri, the *Girolamo Vitelli* papyrological centre, and the libraries mentioned above (which have provided access to their collections).

## Conclusion

In a 1987 article entitled *Piccole, importanti ricerche poco costose (Small, Important, Low-Cost Research Projects)*, Armando Petrucci emphasised that research in the humanities – particularly in historical and philological fields – does not require large-scale funding<sup>54</sup>. He warned that programme-based financing tends to “mercenarise” scholarship: by binding inquiry to pre-defined results and deliverables, it deprives research of one of its essential characteristics, namely the ability to adapt methods, aims, and objects to the unforeseen developments that inevitably emerge in the course of investigation.

To this structural problem we must add another, more radical: the necessity – especially for younger scholars without permanent positions – of working on topics determined by others in order to secure the funding required to survive within the academic ecosystem. These themes are often set by national or international bodies which, in turn, follow the policy orientations of governments in office.

Petrucci proposed forms of “resistance”. They were largely ignored at the time; the reader may consult his words directly. To his proposals, and with due modesty, I would add another – particularly now that many of his most pessimistic forecasts have, in practice, been realised: namely, that manuscript studies should, whenever possible, be taken beyond the walls of the academy. This applies both in teaching – responding to the inclination of younger scholars, who are often fascinated by the materiality of history – and in dissemination, by striving to share research results with the widest possible audience, through publications not exclusively addressed to specialists.

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<sup>54</sup> PETRUCCI 1987.

Such undertakings are demanding, and academic historians are not usually trained for them. Yet what was once a desirable complement has now become a necessity.



Fig. 1: Berlin, Staatliche Museen, *Antikensammlung* 2285



Fig. 2: Berlin, Staatliche Museen, *Antikensammlung* 2285 (detail)



**Fig. 3:** Paris, *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, gr. 510 (p. 723)



**Fig. 4:** Lesbos, *Monastery of St. Ignatios* – *Leimonos* 18 (f. 129r, detail)



**Fig. 5a:** Lesbos, *Monastery of St. Ignatios* – *Leimonos* 28 (f. 2v, detail)



**Fig. 5b:** Lesbos, *Monastery of St. Ignatios* – *Leimonos* 28 (f. 68v, detail)

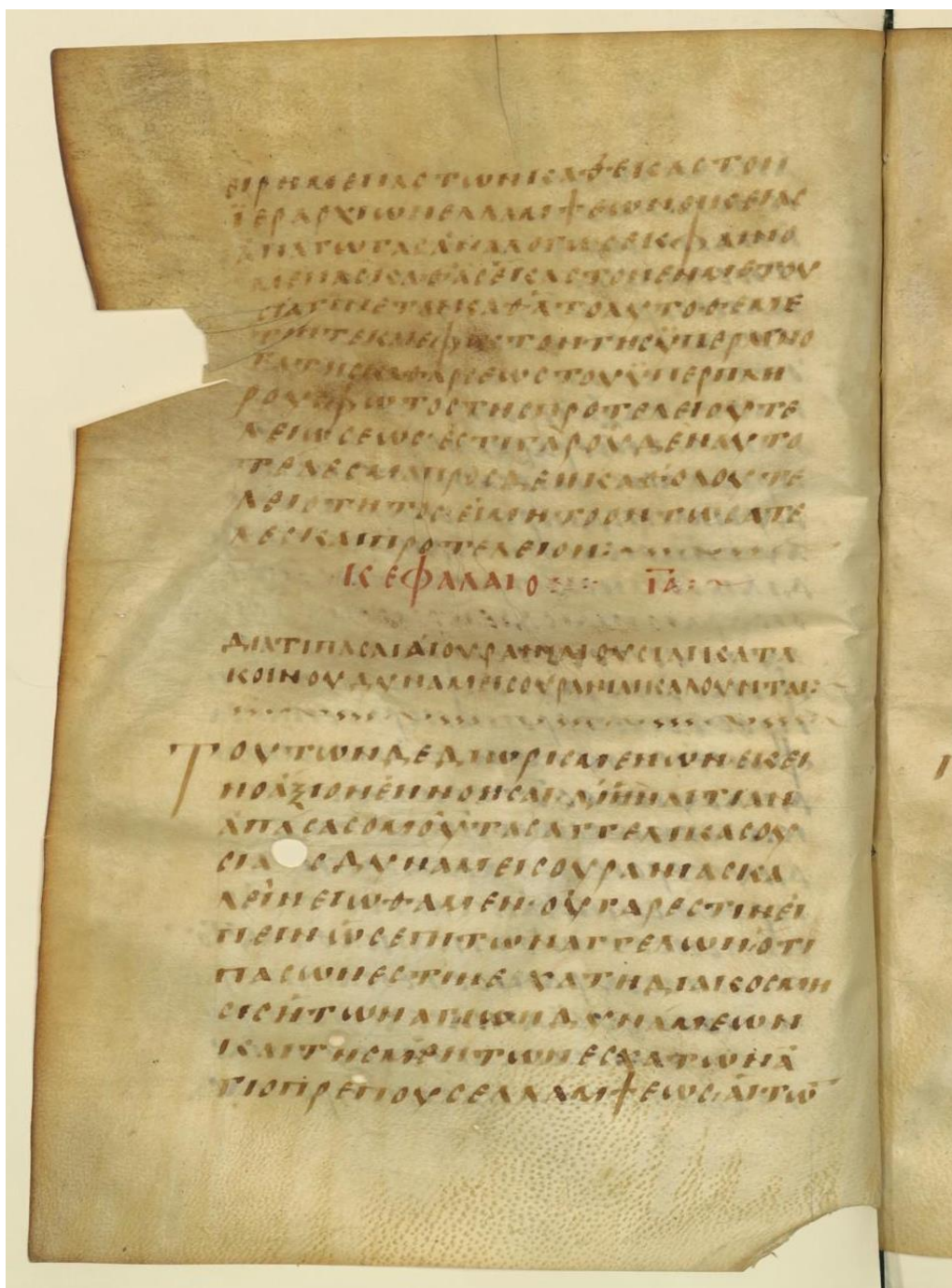


Fig. 6: Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, gr. 437 (f. 23v)

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## Balanced Multilingualism in the Humanities: Reflections on Byzantine Studies

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Boasting a strong academic tradition in various countries and holding significance for the histories of multiple national and regional communities, Byzantine Studies «is a multi-disciplinary and, perhaps most importantly, a multicultural field»<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, Byzantine Studies is also an exceptionally *multilingual* area of scholarship, yet this linguistic multiplicity has generally received little attention within the discipline. While language barriers, particularly the dominance of English, have occasionally been highlighted as a concern, no systematic research has been conducted on the matter<sup>2</sup>. This lack of interest is striking, given recent debates in the humanities and social sciences about language choice in academic discourse. Discussions on the subject have gained momentum due to the rapid rise of English as the dominant language in scholarship, particularly from the late twentieth century onward. While anglicisation has been most pervasive in the natural sciences, both the social sciences and humanities have also experienced a significant increase in English publications, with the social sciences becoming anglicised more quickly than the humanities<sup>3</sup>. Much ink has been spilled on the advantages and disadvantages of English as the dominant language of science and scholarship; however, comparatively little attention has been devoted to the effects of this trend in fields such as Byzantine Studies, which seem to maintain a relatively high degree of scholarly multilingualism<sup>4</sup>.

In this essay, I explore the concept of “balanced multilingualism”, which was introduced by Gunnar Sivertsen in discussions about language use in academia<sup>5</sup>. While additional research is

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. JEFFREYS – HALDON – CORMACK 2008, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. RUSSELL 2010.

<sup>3</sup> While language use in the sciences has been extensively studied, there has been less attention given to humanities scholarship. The research that does exist typically focuses on a single language within applied branches of the humanities. Nonetheless, research on language use within the field of classical archaeology is relevant to areas such as Byzantine Studies; see HEMPEL 2011; HEMPEL 2012; and HEMPEL 2013.

<sup>4</sup> A similar observation can be found in HEMPEL 2013, p. 277.

<sup>5</sup> See SIVERTSEN 2018.

needed, Byzantine Studies serves as a valuable case for examining and further refining Sivertsen's concept. Although too little research yet exists to provide statistics or definitive conclusions, my main goal is to offer food for thought and connect Byzantine Studies to the wider discourse on multilingual scholarship so that the field and the ongoing dialogue can mutually enrich one another.

### **Balanced Multilingualism**

Balanced multilingualism has become a key concept in discussions about effectively communicating scholarly findings. The idea was introduced by Gunnar Sivertsen, a Norwegian researcher who has published extensively, mostly in English, on research policy, particularly research assessment, as well as on bibliometrics and scientific publishing. He has worked to make the role of language in academia more visible and open to dialogue. Balanced multilingualism responds to two trends in academic discussions about language choice. One trend supports, or at least welcomes, the growing use of English as the primary language of international scholarly communication. The alternative trend champions the defence of other national languages in research communication. This latter movement is often driven by resentment towards the dominance of English, perceived bias against non-English literature within Anglo-American scholarship, and the negative labels native English-speaking academics sometimes give to non-English academic styles, like “verbose”, “chaotic”, and “clunky”<sup>6</sup>. Both approaches position languages as competing with one another. Balanced multilingualism, however, aims for languages to complement each other, acknowledging each one's affordances in communicating research to different stakeholders.

While there is no universally applied definition, Sivertsen elaborates on the concept in his 2018 paper:

balanced multilingualism is to consider all the communication purposes in all different areas of research, and all the languages needed to fulfil these purposes, in a holistic manner without exclusions or priorities<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> On the latter, see PÖCKL 1995. Pöckl clearly exaggerates by claiming that native English writers and readers are ethnocentric, as they are reluctant to engage with research articles that deviate from Anglo-Saxon norms. See also CLYNE 1991. Anglo-American scholars have sometimes been accused of ‘bibliographical chauvinism’, favouring English-language publications over others. See SOBRERO 2006, pp. 10-11.

<sup>7</sup> In SIVERTSEN 2018, p. 93.

Sivertsen also states that balanced multilingualism is «a basis for governing the tensions between strategies for internationalization and excellence in research on the one hand and strategies for societal relevance and participation on the other»<sup>8</sup>. Sivertsen's vision harmonizes with efforts to foster multilingual practices in science and scholarship, most notably the *Helsinki Initiative on Multilingualism in Scholarly Communication*, which primarily focuses on using multiple languages to disseminate and promote engagement with scholarship locally<sup>9</sup>. The *Helsinki Initiative* was anticipated in a 2016 pamphlet, written in German, by Jürgen Mittelstrass, Jürgen Trabant, and Peter Fröhlicher. Their discussion emphasizes practical measures to promote the use of multiple languages in international scholarship, ranging from multilingual training programs to a European publication index for non-English language publications<sup>10</sup>.

Discussions of balanced multilingualism often posit a distinction between an international academic language used in the global academic arena and national or native languages used within national communities<sup>11</sup>. The *lingua franca*, typically English, is then (either implicitly or explicitly) associated with international competition and research excellence, including publishing in top-tier international journals, international research projects, and participation in academic exchange across linguistic boundaries. In contrast, native languages are associated with making scholarship accessible locally, ensuring societal relevance, and fostering engagement with stakeholders and the public. This distinction serves as a valuable starting point for discussion. At the same time, examining the issue from the perspective of Byzantine Studies, a linguistically complex field, could provide additional insights that may also be applicable to other humanities disciplines. This examination seems particularly urgent in times of declining multilinguistic competence and the rise of international initiatives promoting multilingualism in science and scholarship, such as the *Helsinki Initiative*. While these efforts often focus on the “hard sciences”, they could learn from fields like Byzantine Studies that have traditionally – and thus far, persistently – remained multilingual. Simultaneously, humanities disciplines might seize this moment to reflect on their own language practices and assess how balanced they truly are.

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<sup>8</sup> In SIVERTSEN 2018, p. 91; see also SIVERTSEN 2019.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.helsinki-initiative.org>. For an interesting critique of balanced multilingualism and the Helsinki Initiative from the perspective of minority languages, see GRANGE 2024.

<sup>10</sup> See MITTELSTRASS 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Similar observation in HYNINEN – KUTEEVA 2020, p. 325.

Although balanced multilingualism pertains to several different areas of academic activity, the following pages will focus on how the concept can be applied to communicating the fruits of scholarly work, both within the international academic community and with national or local audiences, using Byzantine Studies as a starting point. The following section will first briefly consider the role of language in Byzantine Studies and sketch the languagescape of this field of studies<sup>12</sup>.

### The Languages of Byzantine Studies

Although comprehensive information on language use among Byzantinists does not exist, the traditional languages of international communication in the field – English, French, German, Italian, and, to a certain extent, Russian – remain actively used. Historically, French and German reflect the important contributions of French and German scholars in shaping Byzantine Studies from the discipline's early stages in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The presence of Italian and Russian points to the traditionally strong scholarly interest in Byzantine culture and history within Italy and Russia – the former because of its historical ties to the Byzantine world from the very beginning, and the latter through its connection with Orthodox Christianity. These four languages are well represented in major publication venues in the field.

Illustratively, most leading journals adopt a multilingual approach. All important journals in the field, except for *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, which publishes only in English, provide scholars the opportunity to publish in multiple languages<sup>13</sup>. Two journals offer publication in four languages, and five offer five language options. Three journals have published articles in at least six languages. All journals offer English as a publication option<sup>14</sup>. Despite the significance of Slavic languages for the

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<sup>12</sup> Sivertsen mainly concentrated on research assessment and funds allocation, yet pedagogical practice and teaching represent another area where language use is the subject of intense debate. On research assessment, see SIVERTSEN 2016. On pedagogical practice, see CAVAZOS 2015.

<sup>13</sup> *Scandinavian Journal of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* also generally only accepts articles in English, although they once made an exception and published a paper in French. This was confirmed to the author in a personal correspondence with Prof. Vassilios Sabatakakis (7 March 2025).

<sup>14</sup> The following journals were taken into account: *Bizanzio e l'Occidente*\* (2 languages: Italian, English); *Byzantion Nea Hellás*\* (5: English, French, Greek, Portuguese, Spanish); *Byzantina*\* (5: English, French, German, Greek, Italian); *Byzantina Symmeikta*\* (5: English, French, German, Greek, Italian); *The Byzantine Review*\* (2: English, German); *Byzantinoslavica: Revue internationale des études byzantines* (4: English, French, German, Russian); *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* (2: English, German); *Byzantion: Revue Internationale des Études Byzantines* (5: English, French, German, Italian, Spanish); *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*\* (1: English); *Erytheia: Revista de Estudios Bizantinos y Neogriegos* (2: English, Spanish); *Estudios bizantinos*\* (2: English, Spanish); *Néa Póμνη: Rivista di Studi Bizantinistici* (6: English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Spanish); *Parekbolai: An Electronic Journal for Byzantine Literature*\* (5: English,

field and the field's relevance to the Slavic world, most major journals rarely publish Slavic-language work. Nonetheless, Byzantine Studies boasts *Византийский временник* (*Vizantijskij Vremennik*), a primarily Russian-language journal established in 1894 and one of the discipline's oldest. This journal is recognized as a leading publication in the field, also within Anglophone scholarship<sup>15</sup>. At first glance, the availability of multilingual work in all but one major publication within the field suggests that internationalization and research excellence extend beyond English, despite the language's increasing prominence. For rough comparison, Del Rio Riande and Vilchis calculated that 65% of journals listed in the *Directory of Open Access Journals* (DOAJ), covering open access journals in all disciplines and 89 languages, publish in only one language. Meanwhile, 21% publish in two languages, 9% in three, and a mere 5% in four or more languages<sup>16</sup>. 98% of bilingual journals accept English as one of the two languages, highlighting its status as the academic *lingua franca*. Compared to these numbers, Byzantine Studies performs well in terms of multilingualism. The field's main languages appear to coexist, not competing but rather representing different scholarly traditions within the field. However, appearances can be misleading. As we shall see later, there is reason to suspect that the sheer presence of multiple languages in the field does not necessarily indicate *balanced* multilingualism.

Research on multilingualism in science and scholarship predominantly focuses on written outputs. Oral communication, such as papers, panel discussions, and presentations, remains largely unexplored, even though these form a main channel of academic exchange<sup>17</sup>. How does Byzantine Studies address this issue? Once again, due to the lack of statistics, we must rely on anecdotal, yet telling, evidence. The *International Congress of Byzantine Studies*, the field's main conference, embraces work in multiple languages, including English, French, Italian, German, and occasionally Greek<sup>18</sup>. This approach allows participants from different national traditions to present in the scholarly language they find most comfortable. Interestingly, language choice transcends nationality,

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French, German, Greek, Italian); *Revue des études byzantines* (4: English, German, Italian, Spanish); *Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Neellenici* (6: English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Spanish); *Vizantijskij Vremennik* (at least 6: English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Russian). Half of these journals are available in some form of open access policy, as indicated by an asterisk.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. JEFFREYS – HALDON – CORMACK 2008, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. DEL RIO RIANDE – VILCHIS 2024.

<sup>17</sup> There is, by contrast, extensive literature on multilingualism in educational settings and teaching. For a recent contribution, see the articles collected in KUTEEVA – KAUFHOLD – HYNINEN 2020.

<sup>18</sup> See the abstracts of the previous edition of the conference: FARINA – DESPOTAKIS 2022.

as evidenced by the latest conference program, where German scholars present their work in English or French, while participants from Bulgaria and Greece may choose to speak in German. In the absence of comprehensive data and insights into motivations, it remains challenging to understand the reasons behind Byzantinists' preference for one language over another and to assess the true balance of the field's apparent multilingualism.

Studies in other academic fields may provide insights into the possible motivations for using different languages, even though they cannot be directly applied to the specific case at hand. A study on language choice in translation studies, for instance, revealed that a significant majority of respondents (87.5%) indicated that their decision to publish in a foreign academic language stems from the desire for their research to have greater visibility and impact internationally<sup>19</sup>. Recent research further suggests significant variation in the motivations behind language choice, both between and within academic fields, local institutions, and national contexts<sup>20</sup>. Reasons can be personal, strategic, or tactical. Personal reasons involve a lack of proficiency in the academic register of one's native language or long-term residence and work in a foreign country<sup>21</sup>. Strategic and tactical reasons include adhering to criteria set by national academic evaluation systems or aligning with the specific academic community scholars wish to engage<sup>22</sup>. This variability underscores the need to conduct carefully differentiated, field-specific surveys, which currently do not exist for Byzantine Studies and most other areas in the historical humanities.

### **The International Arena: Monolingualism vs. Multilingualism**

So far, our discussion has centred on sketching the use of traditional languages of scholarly communication within the international academic sphere of Byzantine Studies. We have observed that the field – at least on its face – maintains a multilingual academic landscape, with its publication venues and flagship conference accommodating the discipline's traditional languages. At least in theory, then, the availability of multilingual publication venues in the field helps mitigate two major

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. SCHNELL 2024, p. 177.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. KULCZYCKI 2018.

<sup>21</sup> See SCHNELL 2024, pp. 177-178. For native speakers of traditional academic languages, especially English, it may be difficult to imagine how scholars can lack sufficient proficiency in the academic register of their native, usually smaller, languages. See, however, OESTERREICHER 2004, explaining how the declining use of a language for academic purposes negatively impacts its suitability for scholarly expression.

<sup>22</sup> On the difference between strategies and tactics in language choice, see CURRY – LILLIS 2014.

concerns that scholars have raised regarding the dominance of English in academic discourse. It is important to clarify at the outset that these concerns are not inherently tied to the use of English; in principle, they affect all academics who employ a dominant academic language that is not their native tongue to communicate their findings, whether it be English or any other language.

First, research suggests that the dominant use of English in academia disadvantages non-native English speakers and scholars from regions that provide less training in academic English. Amano and her team documented the disadvantages faced by non-native authors. Their study of over 900 environmental scientists revealed that these authors incur higher financial and temporal costs when publishing in English. For non-native speakers with low English ability, reading articles was estimated to take nearly twice as long as for native speakers. Writing requires a median of 50% more time for non-native authors with moderate English proficiency. They moreover incur financial and time costs for manuscript copyediting, while those who do not have the means to have their texts proofread by professionals see their papers, on average, rejected more often due to language issues<sup>23</sup>. This burden has been termed the “Non-Native English Tax” and has sometimes been considered a form of “linguistic injustice”<sup>24</sup>. Once again, such results cannot be generalized across different fields. For instance, scholars in the humanities, particularly those specializing in languages, are likely to possess greater proficiency in managing the English language.

Secondly, a more philosophical – and hence more controversial – argument against academic monolingualism is that it diminishes epistemic diversity and leads to an academic monoculture. The main idea is that languages are essential to producing knowledge and that separating knowledge from its specific linguistic articulation results in some form of epistemic loss. The concept of epistemic loss may seem abstract at first. How can it be understood, and how does it manifest in practice? To understand, we must clarify ideas about the epistemic role of language, which underlie concerns about this loss. The fundamental assumption here is that different academic languages imply diverse modes of producing, organizing, and structuring knowledge, sometimes referred to as culture-specific “intellectual styles” after the Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung<sup>25</sup>. These “styles”, imparted through academic training programs, arguably impact how academics construct their arguments and shape how they analyse paradigms, generate hypotheses, form theories, and define parameters.

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<sup>23</sup> For the statistics and the details, see AMANO 2023. For a more personal perspective, see RODRIGUEZ MEDINA 2019.

<sup>24</sup> For the Non-Native English Tax, see GOBBO – RUSSO 2020, p. 199. For the notion of ‘linguistic injustice’, see SOLER 2021. See also the contributions gathered in CARLI – AMMON 2007.

<sup>25</sup> GALTUNG 1981.

Accepting the existence of culture-specific styles thus implies that writing in one language can unlock different modes of knowledge production compared to writing in another. Many of us who work with multiple languages will intuitively recognize this, even if we hesitate to subscribe to Galtung's somewhat speculative categories of "Saxon", "Teutonic", "Gallic", and "Nipponic" styles. Galtung's experiential generalizations have, however, been partially confirmed by empirical comparative analysis, primarily conducted for English, German, and French academic writing.

Research has explored how the varying training of students within these three language communities has led to different ways of constructing and evaluating academic texts. The differences are evident in the varying ways in which academics trained in different languages create the relationship between reader and writer, develop their authorial voices, maintain coherence in their texts, use metalanguage, structure paragraphs, name agents, and critique other works, to name some constitutive elements of scholarly discourse<sup>26</sup>. To give just one concrete example: by English standards, German academic discourse is sometimes considered "digressive". This view at least partly stems from the fact that, unlike in English academic writing, digression is an accepted practice among German-speaking scholars, known as the "Exkurs". Although there is no direct equivalent to the "Exkurs" in English, such digressions in German academia fulfill well-defined and widely recognized functions, such as providing theoretical or historical background, qualifying previous statements, or engaging in argumentation with another author<sup>27</sup>.

Against this background, the dominance of a single language within academia implies a reduction of research traditions available for producing knowledge, which is generally regarded as disadvantageous<sup>28</sup>. While few categorically oppose English on its own merits, some argue that it lacks the linguistic features inherent in other traditional academic languages, making it unsuitable to serve as a dominant, let alone the sole, academic language. The German linguist Winfried Thielmann, for example, has argued that English has distinct characteristics that restrict its capacity for conceptual structuring compared to languages like German, French, and Russian. According to Thielmann, unlike these languages, English is an "isolating" language that relies more heavily on word order and auxiliary words rather than inflection. He suggests that this reliance on «invariable words» makes

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<sup>26</sup> For a modern discussion, see SIEPMANN 2006. Accordingly, multilingual practices have been deemed fundamental to scholarly creativity and essential for interdisciplinary work. On this, see STEFFEN 2015; FRATH – GARCÍA – CARLOS 2017.

<sup>27</sup> CLYNE 1987, pp. 213-214.

<sup>28</sup> For this line of argument, see, for example, BERTHOUD 2022 and GAJO – PAMULA-BEHRENS 2013.

English less flexible and precise as a tool for scientific description<sup>29</sup>. Some critics have moreover warned that the use of a single language as an academic *lingua franca* may lead other languages to fall behind in developing a scholarly vocabulary or to phase out their academic *Ausbaubestand*, to use the German term: the linguistic resources that language communities have cultivated over decades or even centuries to engage with complex academic subjects<sup>30</sup>. For some, forcing academics, directly or indirectly, into using one single language therefore amounts to a form of «epistemic injustice»<sup>31</sup>.

This type of criticism of academic monoculture carries particular weight in constructivist and culturalist views of scholarly knowledge, which emphasize that knowledge is positively shaped through language<sup>32</sup>. This idea contrasts with the traditional linguistic scepticism present in philosophy and science, which views human languages as obstacles to true knowledge rather than as tools for understanding<sup>33</sup>. Arguments in favour of multilingualism can also be critiqued from the perspective that knowledge is translatable into any language and can be shared in English, as long as all participants are proficient enough to discuss and understand complex ideas. They have moreover been criticized for overstating the impact of English or indulging in “linguistic sentimentality” – an irrational attachment to one’s native language, potentially limiting international communication and collaboration. Alternatively, advocates of multilingualism have been challenged for merely paying lip service to the ideal of using multiple languages while actually concealing an underlying monocultural Anglo-American dominance – a critique primarily voiced in the Francophone world<sup>34</sup>.

Regardless of these criticisms, the least we can say is that by embracing other major academic languages such as French, German, and Russian, Byzantine Studies theoretically reduces at least two potentially negative effects of a monolingual academic culture that have been highlighted in the scholarship: linguistic injustice, which disadvantages non-native speakers of English or any other standard academic language, and epistemic loss resulting from an intellectual monoculture that does not recognize alternative ways of knowledge production.

Nonetheless, the actual balance of multilingualism within Byzantine Studies has yet to be thoroughly examined. To illustrate this point, let us briefly revisit the earlier question of language

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<sup>29</sup> See THIELMANN 2019.

<sup>30</sup> See OESTERREICHER 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. ADEMA – ARBUCKLE – ORTEGA 2024.

<sup>32</sup> For a general discussion, see, e.g., GOBBO – RUSSO 2020.

<sup>33</sup> See the discussion of TRABANT 2021.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, GOHARD-RADENKOVIC 2012, as well as the contributions collected in ADAMI – ANDRÉ 2015.

choice in journals. While many journals allow authors to publish in multiple languages, further examination shows how these options are actually used and how the languages are distributed within and across journals. For example, over the past decade, *Byzantina Symmikta*, which welcomes publications in five languages, has published most of its articles in Greek (47.2%) and English (43.2%), followed by German (4%), French (3.2%), and Italian (2.4%). While *Vizantijskij Vremennik* has published articles in at least six languages over its long history, recent issues (2016-2024) show an overwhelming prevalence of Russian (97.3%), with very few articles in English (2%) and French (0.7%). Discrepancies between the languages offered and those actually used, along with the distribution of languages across journals and over time, may reflect each publication's intended readership and the authors' academic and cultural backgrounds. More detailed statistics on this matter would be helpful and could prompt important questions about the communication channels and networks within the field, both within and beyond the medium of the academic journal.

To what extent do different language groups within the discipline interact and engage with each other's work? For instance, at multilingual conferences, is there genuine exchange between language groups, or does linguistic stratification occur? How is this reflected in cross-linguistic citations in Byzantine publications? Do authors writing in English cite relevant literature in other languages, and vice versa? How is the use of English evolving in relation to use of the field's other languages, and how do these trends compare to those in other humanities fields? Do non-native users of the traditional languages feel disadvantaged compared to native speakers? Do Byzantinists need more organized multilingual practices?

These questions, too, await concrete answers, but research on linguistic practices in related fields suggests potential directions that these answers might take. For example, studies in classical archaeology indicate that the presence of multiple languages – for that field, English, German, French, and Italian – does not necessarily equate to balanced multilingualism within the discipline. Language barriers persist, and with the international decline in proficiency in German and Italian, scholars publishing in these languages find their work less widely received than that of their peers who write in English. Furthermore, German and Italian seem to be predominantly used by native speakers of those languages, rather than by international scholars<sup>35</sup>. One might wonder if a similar situation applies to the languagescape of Byzantine Studies. The primary concern may perhaps be not the

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<sup>35</sup> See HEMPEL 2011; HEMPEL 2012. Similarly, a survey of linguists in ten Central and Eastern European countries indicates that, although there is a preference for multilingual journals, researchers are not necessarily equally multilingual: MIRONESCU – MOROȘANU – BIBIRI 2023.

immediate threat of monolingualism but the rise of an increasingly *unbalanced* multilingualism, in which certain languages lag in their connection to international scholarship, causing their users to feel increasingly marginalized in the international arena.

### **Language, Regional Relevance, and Accessibility**

The previous pages centred on the languages scholars use to communicate their research findings to colleagues within the international academic community. Another important aspect of balanced multilingualism, as Sivertsen emphasizes, involves ensuring local relevance and accessibility for potentially interested stakeholders. Byzantine Studies yield insights pertinent to numerous local, regional, and national communities, including those in Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania, and Armenia. Studies show that English proficiency varies significantly across Europe, a pattern that also holds true for the other traditional languages of Byzantine Studies outside their native contexts. People are less likely to seek out or read research literature in English, French, or German if these are not their native languages and they lack adequate training in them. The statistics do not bode well in this regard. For example, in Greece, 51% of the population speaks English as a foreign language, while German and French are spoken by 7% and 6%, respectively. In Bulgaria, 29% of the population speaks English, while German and French are spoken by only 5% and 3%. Meanwhile, in Romania, French fares slightly better at 7%, with 25% speaking English and just 2% speaking German. Across the European Union, 47% of residents speak English as a foreign language. This is followed by French at 11% and German at 10%. EU-wide, knowledge of Italian (3%), Russian (3%), and Greek (0%) as foreign tongues is negligible<sup>36</sup>. To ensure research results from Byzantine Studies are accessible, therefore, they should ideally also be communicated in the languages of the relevant communities.

In discussions of multilingualism in scholarship, attention often concentrates on language choice when balanced multilingualism should actually encompass more considerations<sup>37</sup>. Writing in native or non-standard academic languages does not automatically make research accessible and relevant to national audiences. Research dissemination involves tailoring the content to suit the cultural and educational context of the audience and ensuring that complex ideas are conveyed clearly and meaningfully. This may require adjusting the style, examples, and references used to better

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2024, pp. 19-20.

<sup>37</sup> For an insightful discussion, see HYNINEN – KUTEEVA 2020.

resonate with local norms and knowledge. Additionally, effective dissemination might include engaging with local media or educational platforms to reach a broader audience and spark public interest. It is neither possible nor desirable to apply this level of adaptation to all research produced within a field, but methods are available to enhance the accessibility and discoverability of specialized research in Byzantine Studies.

One pragmatic approach to the issue involves crafting reader-friendly summaries in the language of the stakeholding community, accompanied by metadata and search terms in that language. This strategy helps interested non-academic readers find the publication easily and understand its main arguments. For instance, a scholarly article on the Byzantine-Bulgarian wars written in French could include a summary and metadata in Bulgarian and Greek. This approach would enhance the article's discoverability for interested parties in Bulgaria and Greece, such as journalists, teachers, and local historians. These readers could then understand the main points and determine if a full translation is worthwhile. Conversely, publications in non-standard academic languages can broaden their reach by including abstracts in English, as is sometimes currently done.

Artificial intelligence offers significant advantages in this respect. Digital applications can facilitate the creation of summaries by analysing academic texts and producing simplified versions that convey the main ideas. They can also assist in accurately translating these summaries into the language of the target community. Furthermore, AI tools can enhance metadata creation by suggesting relevant search terms through content analysis. These capabilities streamline research accessibility, saving time and resources while expanding the reach of academic work. Once academic publications are findable for non-academic stakeholders and their contents can be understood in outline, stakeholders can decide whether they want the piece translated, using either AI or human translation, though the latter requires resources that might not always be available. At the same time, promoting multilingualism with digital tools poses certain challenges, as the digital infrastructure is largely Anglocentric and requires adaptation for non-English contexts<sup>38</sup>. The monolingualism of the digital medium has been acknowledged by the *Multilingual Digital Humanities* initiative, a loosely-organized international network of scholars using digital humanities tools and methods on languages other than English<sup>39</sup>. The network aims to mitigate the impact of online monolingualism, particularly

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<sup>38</sup> See DONY – KUCHMA – ŠEVKUŠIĆ 2024. Non-English literature on Digital Humanities has been found to be cited less than English literature: DEL RIO RIANDE 2022.

<sup>39</sup> <https://multilingualdh.org/en>.

Anglocentrism, by exchanging best practices for working with multi-lingual and multi-script data<sup>40</sup>. Regarding efforts to make scholarship more widely available, some important initial steps towards multilingual accessibility of research have already been taken by the *GoTriple* project, «a multilingual platform tailored for the in-depth exploration of *Social Sciences and Humanities* (SSH) research»<sup>41</sup>. The platform allows users to find research papers in multiple languages by using search terms in various languages. While *GoTriple* accommodates the major working languages of Byzantine Studies (except Russian), it has not yet incorporated Byzantine Studies as an academic field<sup>42</sup>.

But why, one might object, should non-academic interested parties settle for just abstracts? Why should they be content with research articles they can find but cannot fully read because of a language barrier (or a paywall, for that matter)? This seems to unfairly shift the burden and responsibility for gaining access to knowledge of interest. After all, much of the research presented in English or other traditional academic languages is financed by collective national funding bodies to which interested, non-academic readers have contributed<sup>43</sup>. Therefore, they arguably have a right to full access to research findings in their own language. In this regard, however, paywalls and lack of open access to publicly funded research, along with scarce resources for disseminating findings to non-academic audiences, pose a greater barrier to equitable access to knowledge.

### Concluding Reflection

For Sivertsen, it is crucial to «consider all the communication purposes in all different areas of research, and all the languages needed to fulfil these purposes, in a holistic manner without exclusions or priorities»<sup>44</sup>. Here, we have briefly examined language use in two domains of research communication: international dissemination and national, non-academic outreach. To foster a more sustained awareness of language use in academic research, a comprehensive understanding of all facets of research – encompassing production, dissemination, and outreach – is essential. This

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<sup>40</sup> See <https://multilingualdh.org/en>; the website is available in seven additional languages. On the problem of monolingualism online, see now also the contributions collected in VIOLA – SPENCE 2023.

<sup>41</sup> <https://project.gotriple.eu/gotriple-platform>.

<sup>42</sup> See <https://www.gotriple.eu>. GoTriple enhances research accessibility by automatically classifying content in 11 languages, using the TRIPLE Vocabulary to tag over 3,300 social sciences and humanities concepts in 12 languages and offering a user interface available in multiple languages, including English, Italian, and French. A plaidoyer for a European multilingual research database can be found in GAWLITTA 2022.

<sup>43</sup> This point is emphasized by GAJO 2013.

<sup>44</sup> SIVERTSEN 2018, p. 93.

understanding includes identifying the necessary languages for these purposes and strategizing the implementation of their use. Before the concept of balanced multilingualism was established, the linguist and anthropologist Rainer Enrique Hamel developed an insightful framework that outlines the various components of research work, their communicative requirements, and the languages they might involve<sup>45</sup>. This framework may be usefully adapted to streamline our thought about where, how, and why which languages can be best employed. It would also allow us to move away from the notion, explicit in Sivertsen's understanding of balanced multilingualism, that no hierarchy or priority should exist among the languages used. If based on functional considerations, prioritizing one language over another in certain circumstances might do no harm, provided that language users are articulate about both the benefits and potential drawbacks of their choices.

As the discussion so far has shown, the particularities of balanced multilingualism remain to be explored, especially within the historical humanities and their specific multilingual challenges. Byzantine Studies would make an interesting case study, as this field spans a diverse range of countries and institutional settings while bringing together scholars from varied backgrounds in history, art history, linguistics, and literature. The work of Karl Gerhard Hempel on classical archaeology and Bettina Schnell in translation studies could prove to be valuable models. A case study would do well also to address oral communication within research contexts and to re-evaluate how language choices for non-academic dissemination and outreach are integrated.

A clearer understanding of its internal academic language landscape would benefit Byzantine Studies, as it would any other discipline within the humanities. As English becomes increasingly dominant, it is fair to ask how much Byzantine Studies is affected by linguistic homogenization. It is clear that Byzantine scholars generally have more languages at their disposal than many of their colleagues in other humanities disciplines. For various academic languages to be effective, they must be used internationally or at least be understandable beyond their native speakers. Do upcoming generations of Byzantine Studies students have sufficient language skills to sustain the field's linguistic and epistemic variety? This question becomes particularly urgent at a time when, across Europe, language training is being deprioritized even at established institutions with long traditions of language and literature studies. If overall language skills diminish, academic communities with multilingual traditions risk losing connections with their academic heritage. Such a disconnect could result in information loss and scholarly oblivion. Therefore, a multilingual field like Byzantine

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<sup>45</sup> See HAMEL 2011; HAMEL 2013.

Studies could benefit from a more concerted discussion about the languages used, and not used, within the discipline.

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## **Vlad (III) Draculea sconfigge i Turchi (1462) negli storici bizantini del trapasso: Ducas, Critobulo e Calcocondila**

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1. Le vicende di Vlad (III) detto Draculea, il “figlio del Drago”, o “del Dragone”, per distinguerlo dall’omonimo padre Vlad (II) Dracul, “il Dragone”, o “insignito dell’ordine del Dragone”, *voivoda* dei valacchi tra gli anni 1456-1462 e poi 1474-1476, sono ben riassunte nel lavoro di Matei Cazacu<sup>1</sup>, oggi che disponiamo della pubblicazione di un *Corpus* di documenti editi e inediti che lo riguardano<sup>2</sup>. Tuttavia, alla documentata e serrata ricostruzione della sua vicenda storica pubblicata da Gianfranco Giraudo nel 1972 va dato il merito di averla inserita nel quadro geo-politico dei Balcani nella seconda metà del secolo XV, con particolare attenzione allo sforzo di sopportare l’urto delle armate turche, ma anche della importanza del lato economico della vicenda, cioè della lotta per il controllo delle rotte commerciali che dall’Occidente portavano in Oriente attraverso il tratto finale del Danubio e del suo sbocco nel Mar Nero<sup>3</sup>, oltre ad aver fornito la loro versione russa, la *Povest’ o Drakule Voevode*<sup>4</sup>, pagine che risulteranno influenti nel complesso, e a volte tormentato, processo di formulazione della ideologia politica russa nel momento in cui, tra Ivan III Vas’ilevič (1440-1505) e Ivan IV Vasil’evič *Groznyj* (1537-1584), il Gran Principato di Mosca si avviava a divenire *carstvo*<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Queste comprendono: la sua elezione, i suoi debiti e i suoi rapporti controversi verso gli ungheresi, da un lato, e verso i Turchi, dall’altro, le vicende dell’attacco a contingenti turchi nel 1462 in seguito al rifiuto di pagare per intero il tributo dovuto alla Porta, la dura reazione del Sultano, gli scontri durissimi lungo il Danubio, il tradimento dei suoi ed il voltafaccia di re Mattia Corvino, la prigionia a Buda, il ritorno in Valacchia nel 1476, nel frattempo, la “orchestrata” creazione di un “mostro” (Vlad Draculea diviene Țepeș, l’“impalatore”) attraverso la diffusione di libelli illustrati diffamatori. Cf. da CAZACU 2006, alla versione aggiornata CAZACU 2017. M. Cazacu firma, tra altri autori romeni, i contributi del numero monografico dedicato a Vlad Țepeș (cf. CAZACU 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Ci si riferisce al «Corpus Draculianum» (cf. BOHN 2018 e ANNAS – PAULUS 2020): si tratta del passo tratto dai Commentarii di papa Pio II, di passi della *Chronica Regum Romanorum* di Thomas Ebendorfer e di altri documenti tedeschi del secolo XVI.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. GIRAUDO 1972, cap. 2 e GIRAUDO 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Dopo la traduzione curata da GIRAUDO 1969, si veda DINI 1995.

<sup>5</sup> In questo senso, cf. GIRAUDO 1972.

2. In principio vi è la notizia relativa alla campagna militare estiva condotta dai cavalieri Valacchi guidati dal *voivoda* Vlad detto Draculea, contro le truppe turche del sultano Mehmed II *Fātih*, il Conquistatore, registrata nell'anno dalla fondazione del mondo 6970, secondo il computo bizantino, ovvero il 1462, da parte del Ducas, di Critobulo di Imbro, di Laonico Calcocondila e, anche se in maniera più incerta, dallo Sfranze (gli storici dell'ultimo periodo della millenaria vicenda della *Basileia* dei Romani, coloro che registrano gli eventi che riguardano la sua dissoluzione territoriale, dalla fine del secolo XIV alla presa di Costantinopoli del 1453, seguita da quella di Trebisonda, nel 1461, fino alla definitiva conquista del Peloponneso, la Morea veneziana, e di tutta la penisola Ellenica entro il 1465).

In primo luogo, il Ducas, impiegato al servizio dei genovesi Gattilusio e dunque avvezzo al mondo multietnico e multiculturale delle isole dell'Egeo, focalizza la sua attenzione sulla inesorabile avanzata turca in *Romània*, senza accettare assolutamente il nuovo dominio, considerandolo, anzi, come il regno dell'Anticristo, manifestazione della inesorabile volontà divina di punire i peccati dei cristiani, interrompendo la propria cronaca proprio nell'anno 1462 dopo aver descritto la feroce determinazione con la quale Vlad mette in atto strategie coraggiose di combattimento contro contingenti tanto superiori per numero e mezzi, anche sfruttando il vantaggio di muoversi a proprio agio in un territorio tanto impervio: una strategia che costringerà il sultano Mehmed, sempre definito *tyrannos*, l'opposto di *basileus*, l'Anticristo, a ripiegare verso Adrianopoli, non senza «danno e vergogna»<sup>6</sup>.

La *Historia* di Michele Critobulo (m. 1470), che copre il periodo 1451-1467, è tutta incentrata sulla figura di Mehmed II, questa volta pienamente accettato come nuovo *basileus* dei Romani e al servizio del quale l'autore si propone, ottenendo nel 1456 la nomina a governatore dell'isola di Imbro: per lui l'avvicendamento degli imperi (*translatio imperii*) è il naturale frutto della *Tyche* che regola le vicende storiche<sup>7</sup>. Il suo racconto della vicenda di Vlad (*Dràkulis*) non differisce da quello del Ducas per quanto riguarda la prima metà, perché poi vi aggiunge altri particolari, completando il quadro: nel pieno dello scontro con i contingenti turchi, il *voivoda* viene abbandonato da gran parte

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<sup>6</sup> Michaelis Ducae, *Historia Byzantina* 45, pp. 343,19 – 345,20 (ed. Bekker); Ducas, *Istoria Turco-Byzantina* 101, p. 81 (ed. Grecu), con ulteriori interventi al testo in CHARALIS 1997. Sul Ducas, come per gli autori bizantini del trapasso citati di seguito, sono ancora fondamentali le pagine di MORAVCSIK 1958, pp. 247-251, mentre, risultano assai generiche le note di KARPOZILOS 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Critobuli Imbriotae, *Historia* 4.10,1-10,9, pp. 166-168 (ed. Reinsch). Sulla sua visione della storia, con aggiornamento bibliografico, si veda TÓTH 2017.

dei suoi e costretto a rifugiarsi in Ungheria dove però viene imprigionato<sup>8</sup>. Particolari che derivano dalla lettura di una fonte turca: sia Critobulo sia Calcocondila, per far scorrere la loro narrazione storica, ricorrono ampiamente ai modelli classici costituiti da Erodoto e Tuciddide, ma la descrizione così vivide dello scontro tra i contingenti turchi e i cavalieri valacchi di Vlad non può non essere frutto di informazioni di prima mano.

Il resoconto più interessante si legge nell'opera storica di Laonico Calcocondila (ca. 1423 – post 1463: 1470?), una *Ἀπόδειξις ἱστοριῶν* che si interrompe nel 1463. Anche Laonico – greco di origine probabilmente ateniese (il padre faceva parte della cerchia del duca di Atene, il fiorentino Antonio Acciaiuoli), già allievo di Giorgio Gemisto Pletone presso la corte dei *despoti* della Morea, a Mistrà, cugino di quel Demetrio (m. 1511) che visse e, dietro l'interessamento del Bessarione, poté lavorare in Italia insegnando greco prima presso lo *Studium* di Padova, dal 1463 al 1475, quindi presso quello di Firenze –, pur considerando, alla pari del Ducas, il dominio turco come la manifestazione di una punizione divina per i peccati dei cristiani, accettò di collaborare e di mettersi al suo servizio, ottenendo incarichi di natura amministrativa e guadagnando la possibilità di viaggiare e stringere relazioni, cosa che gli permise, per quanto riguarda la notizia che qui interessa, di attingere a fonti turche e notizie di prima mano<sup>9</sup>. Probabilmente apparteneva – come Tursun bey, altro importante testimone di queste vicende<sup>10</sup> –, alla cerchia di Mahmūd pāšā, nato Angelović, appartenente alla più alta aristocrazia bizantina di origine serba<sup>11</sup>, convertito e divenuto *beylerbey* della *Rumelia*, cioè governatore della regione balcanica, per il quale Laonico non nasconde la propria ammirazione, evidente attraverso più di un passo<sup>12</sup>: un episodio particolare delle vicende, in generale in gran parte ancora da studiare, che, tra assimilazione o annientamento, coinvolsero molti umanisti bizantini che si misero al servizio dei nuovi signori<sup>13</sup>.

Al termine del IX libro, il penultimo dell'opera, quella che conobbe la maggior diffusione tra quelle viste finora, si legge la versione più lunga, particolareggiata e completa (il rapporto tra gli

<sup>8</sup> Critobuli Imbriotae, *Historia* 4,10,9, p. 168 (ed. Reinsch).

<sup>9</sup> Sull'autore si veda KALDELLIS 2014.

<sup>10</sup> La sua vicenda è descritta da BACQUÉ – BERNARDINI – BERARDI 2007, pp. XVII ss.

<sup>11</sup> Si veda, seguendo l'indice dei nomi, le numerose citazioni in BACQUÉ – BERNARDINI – BERARDI 2007. Per SETTON 1978, p. 238, egli era cugino di Giorgio Ameruze, *protovestiaros* presso la corte di Trebisonda (1400-1470), già unionista nel 1438-1439, quindi sostenitore della necessità di dialogo coi Turchi, autore di un *Dialogus* sulla unicità delle fedi in un unico Dio indirizzato al Sultano: cf. DE LA CRUZ PALMA 2000. Altre fonti in STAVRIDES 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. CAZACU 2019, pp. 238 ss.

<sup>13</sup> Come punto di partenza, cf. CARILE 1985 e CARILE 1987.

effettivi delle forze in campo, ad esempio) delle “imprese” di Vlad, figlio di *Dràkulis*, e dei suoi valacchi, segno della impressione che queste dovettero destare, per qualsiasi motivo, in quel particolare *milieu* di militari, diplomatici e umanisti<sup>14</sup>. Lo storico, soprattutto, riconosce al *voivoda* un piano politico interno coerente che gli doveva apparire familiare, pensando alle vicende dell'impero dei Romani tra i secoli XII e XIII (l'ascesa dei Comneni e delle altre famiglie di origine anatolica grazie alla carriera intrapresa nell'esercito): liberarsi della classe dei boiari proprietari terrieri, ingombranti perché troppo legati per motivi economici, agli ungheresi ed ai transilvani, nonché assai poco interessati ad un qualsiasi ideale di indipendenza comune e quindi scarsamente propensi a riconoscere la forza della unità nazionale come valore, per sostituirli con una nuova classe di signori delle armi, a lui subordinati e legati da vincoli di fedeltà e di conquiste da compiersi *manu militari*<sup>15</sup>.

Solo Giorgio Sfranze, infine, di solito assai informato in quanto diplomatico e umanista al servizio del *despota* Tommaso Paleologo presso la corte di Mistrà fino alla definitiva conquista turca, tra 1461 e 1465, non sembra essere interessato allo scontro avvenuto nell'anno 6970 tra il *voivoda* della Valacchia e i Turchi, limitandosi a riportare la notizia nella maniera stringata propria dello stile annalistico: «la primavera dello stesso anno '70 il sultano partì per la Grande Valacchia e stroncò la rivolta contro di lui»<sup>16</sup>.

Infine, rimangono passi di brevi cronache che nulla aggiungono a quanto si è andati raccogliendo: dalla così detta Cronaca di Stefano Magno, zibaldone di cronache e documenti veneziani<sup>17</sup>, ai frammenti raccolti ed editi dallo Schreiner<sup>18</sup>.

3. Se Vlad, il figlio del “Dragone”, al di là delle vicende militari e dello schieramento delle truppe, si fosse guadagnato in questa occasione l'epiteto di *Țepeș*, l'“impalatore”, non sappiamo: negli storici bizantini non esiste un giudizio morale sulla sua personalità, bensì si sottolinea la sua feroce determinazione, il valore di stratega ed il coraggio dimostrato nel combattimento, e la scelta

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<sup>14</sup> Laonici Chalcocondylae, *Historiarum demonstrationes libri decem*, pp. 498,20 – 506,15 (ed. Bekker), quindi II, pp. 250,1-266,9 (ed. Darkó).

<sup>15</sup> Chalcocondylae, *Historiarum demonstrationes*, p. 500,12 ss. (ed. Bekker); CAZACU 2019, p. 241.

<sup>16</sup> Georgius Sphrantzes, *Chronicon* 42,3, p. 173 (ed. Maisano); anche in MAISANO 2008, p. 203.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. HOPF 1873, pp. 155-156.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. SCHREINER 1975, nn. 63,19, p. 476; 69,49, p. 536; 70,25, p. 546; 116,1, p. 685; II, p. 501.

di abusare del supplizio dell'impalamento non sembra suscitare alcun risentimento particolare. Caratteristica, questa, che torna in altre fonti contemporanee, quali la *Cronaca turca*, ovvero le *Memorie* di un giannizzero al servizio di Mehmed II, Konstantin Michailović di Ostrovica, che visse in prima persona le operazioni lungo il Danubio: l'autore, forse perché è un soldato esperto o forse a causa della sua storia personale di bambino rapito alla sua famiglia ed alla sua terra, deportato a Costantinopoli per divenire giannizzero, più che sulla efferatezza insita nelle azioni di rappresaglia a scopo "dimostrativo" ordinate prima da Vlad ai danni di Turchi catturati e degli ambasciatori della Porta (nasi mozzati, impalamenti), quindi dal massacro di cittadini inermi valacchi ordinato da Mehmed una volta occupato il loro territorio, nel capitolo XXXIII, *Sul voivoda valacco signore della Bassa Moldavia*, si sforza di sottolineare il peso decisivo dello sforzo sostenuto dai giannizzeri, al prezzo di notevoli perdite, nel quadro dei sanguinosi scontri contro i cavalieri valacchi<sup>19</sup>.

Si riscontra cioè lo stesso atteggiamento tenuto dalle fonti nei confronti delle imprese di Tamerlano di qualche decennio prima, quando, nel 1402, aveva fermato i Turchi nella piana di Ankara: se pur impressionati per via della implacabile determinazione e spietatezza dimostrate, la notizia venne accolta come un segno di salvezza per la cristianità che si sentiva già pressata dalle armate del sultano Bāyezīd I, la "Folgore"<sup>20</sup>. In questo senso, come allora, i *potentiores* cristiani occidentali dovettero accogliere la notizia della vittoria dei valacchi nel 1462, come dimostra la testimonianza del viaggiatore inglese, pellegrino in Palestina, William Wey, il quale narra di essersi trovato a Rodi quando udì le campane delle chiese dei Cavalieri Ospedalieri suonare il *Te Deum* in ringraziamento per quel segno ricevuto della benevolenza divina<sup>21</sup>.

I passi scelti – che, per completezza di informazione, andranno collazionati con i dispacci inviati al Senato veneziano e con altri documenti<sup>22</sup> –, vanno letti dunque nel quadro del clima che si venne creando in seguito alla conquista di Costantinopoli (1453) e alla perdita di tanti territori appartenenti alla *România*, e quindi alla montante paura di una ulteriore avanzata turca verso le coste della penisola italica, a Sud, e verso il cuore dell'Europa, a Nord; la notizia della campagna di Vlad dell'estate del 1462 assume un valore particolare di motivo di speranza, perché dimostrava come e quanto i Turchi non fossero invincibili. Valore che contribuiva ad aumentare il carico di letteratura che accompagnava

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. GIAMBELLUCA KOSSOVA 2001, cap. 33, pp. 107-111.

<sup>20</sup> Considerazioni stimulate dalla lettura di BERNARDINI 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. DAVEY 2010, p. 118.

<sup>22</sup> Come la lettera inviata da Niccolò Sagundino, inviato dalla Repubblica di Venezia presso la Porta tra 1461-1462 (cf. CASELLI 2017, p. 619), datata 1462, giugno 28: cf. LJUBIĆ 1896, p. 217. Si veda anche SETTON 1978, p. 238 n. 25.

il progetto di una grande crociata (*bellum sacrum*) proposto dalla Curia pontificia romana durante gli anni di Niccolò V (1447-1455), Callisto III (1455-1458), Pio II (1458-1464), Paolo II (1464-1471) e Sisto IV (1471-1484), tra letteratura profetica (a cominciare dagli *Oracula Leonis*), descrizioni dell'assedio di Costantinopoli, *threnoi* o *lamentationes*, racconti di leggendarie imprese belliche intraprese contro il Turco, propaganda religiosa, trattati di carattere etno-geografico, *exhortationes* ai *Principes*, *praecepta*, *exempla*, dossier di informazioni utili raccolte sotto la forma di resoconto di viaggio a Costantinopoli e in *Romània*, riprese di trattati militari, *strategikà* e studi sulla potenza militare dei Turchi<sup>23</sup>.

Nel 1459 papa Pio II, che già nelle *Epistolae* aveva elogiato il voivoda Vlad (II) Dracul, il padre di Vlad (III), per il ruolo svolto come mediatore tra i potentati cristiani e i Turchi giocato in occasione della cattura di *maiores* (tra i quali, lo stesso cardinale Cesarini) in seguito alla disastrosa sconfitta subita dalle forze cristiane a Varna nel 1444<sup>24</sup>, aveva convocato la Dieta di Mantova per la organizzazione della crociata nel 1459 e, nel 1462, la stessa Curia pontificia e Venezia avevano già versato una cospicua somma al re d'Ungheria perché si decidesse a raccogliere un esercito e marciare contro i Turchi: la preoccupazione di conservare l'equilibrio di delicati rapporti politici ed economici bloccavano però tanto Mattia Corvino quanto Venezia<sup>25</sup>, all'interno di un quadro dominato piuttosto che, o al di là degli sforzi compiuti in senso contrario da papa Pio II, dalla evidente volontà di non rischiare di rompere il fragile equilibrio nell'area balcanica, appena sufficiente a garantire la salvezza dei rapporti commerciali: *realpolitik* che poche concessioni sapeva fare ad un futuro che non fosse quello di garantire la cura dei propri *negozi*<sup>26</sup>.

Esemplari, in questo senso, appaiono i *Diari* del senatore della Serenissima Repubblica Domenico Malipiero, estesi all'inizio del Cinquecento. L'anno 1462 è sempre più caratterizzato dal clima di preoccupazione che la situazione della *Romània* desta nel Senato, per quanto i Turchi dimostravano di poter *danizar* i possedimenti *da mar* (con le parole di Vittor Capello, Capitano Generale *da mar*: «... i luoghi maritimi della Signoria è in manifesto pericolo di capitar in man de Turchi, se no se fa maggior provision...»), quando, tra la consueta dovizia di particolari e dettagli

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. VESPIGNANI 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. IOSIPESCU 2017 e CÎMPEANU 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Si veda NEMETH – PAPO 2011, con la bibliografia precedente.

<sup>26</sup> Quadro dipinto nel tuttora insostituibile SETTON 1978, pp. 199 ss. e in particolare 238-241. Cf. anche CARILE 2008, p. 42. In tema di crociata vs. *realpolitik* dei *Maiores* italiani, si veda VESPIGNANI 2017, pp. 19 ss., e VESPIGNANI 2018, nonché le note alla pubblicazione della edizione critica approntata da DAMIAN 2017, pp. 411-419.

circa le operazioni navali decise, la loro preparazione e il loro costo in ducati, tipica dei diaristi veneziani tra secondo Quattrocento e primo Cinquecento, e proprio nel punto in cui si narra come Mehmed si preparasse ad attaccare Negroponte, si legge:

ma ‘l Turco è stà chiamà in Valachia in difesa del fratello del Signor Viacola, che è stà scazzado da esso Signor Viacola; e condotto l’esercito in quella provincia, Viacola se ghe ha opposto con potente esercito, e l’ha rebatudo gagiardamente...<sup>27</sup>.

In poche righe il diarista riassume la versione originaria data dagli storici bizantini con quella elaborata successivamente, ma in questo caso non è un dato importante: si tratta soprattutto della registrazione di un episodio considerato degno di nota solamente per il fatto che giunge al momento giusto per distogliere i Turchi dai loro pericolosi piani di «venir a danni» dei Veneziani.

4. Il processo di “costruzione” delle fonti teso a trasformare il *voivoda* valacco Vlad Draculea nel grottesco mostro di crudeltà contraddistinto dall’epiteto *Țepeș*, l’“impalatore”, già presente, per rimanere nel campo delle fonti turche, nella *Storia* di Tursun bey, redatta tra 1488 e 1495<sup>28</sup>, venne dunque messo in atto nel breve spazio di un anno o poco più dagli avvenimenti dell’estate 1462, perché il risultato è già evidente nelle pagine che Enea Silvio Piccolomini, papa Pio II, dedica al personaggio nei *Commentarii*, estesi dallo stesso pontefice tra la primavera del 1462 e il mese di giugno del 1464, due mesi prima della morte (avvenuta il 15 agosto)<sup>29</sup>.

Il ritratto di Vlad offerto da Pio II presenta tre novità, fondamentali per denunciare quanto il processo di costruzione di un sadico tiranno le cui gesta sono contraddistinte da indicibile crudeltà, fosse già praticamente completato: prima, un elenco di orrori ed efferatezze commessi ai danni di sudditi e nemici («Iohannis Dragulae atrox nequitia et natura immanis...»), di seguito, il testo della lettera inviata al sultano nelle quali gli si offriva la Valacchia, prova del suo tradimento della cristianità e causa della sua cattura da parte del re d’Ungheria Mattia Corvino («Iohannis Dragulae immanis atque nefanda crudelitas eis que in regem Hungariae deprehensa perfidia et tandem captivitatis») – quest’ultimo esempio di creazione di un clima di sospetto di eccessiva “vicinanza” ai Turchi che presto impareranno a praticare anche Venezia e Genova, alimentando di proposito ciascuna una *leyenda negra* per mezzo della quale diffamare l’altra, secondo un gioco che, agli inizi

<sup>27</sup> Cf. LONGO 1843, pp. 11-12. Sul Malipiero e i suoi *Annali*, cf. GULLINO 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. BACQUÉ – BERNARDINI – BERARDI 2007, pp. 150-160.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. TOTARO 2008.

del Cinquecento, apparirà ormai ben riconoscibile allo Spandugnino<sup>30</sup> –, infine, il lapidario giudizio morale sull'uomo («magno et honesto vir corpore et cuius species imperio digna videatur, adeo saepe differt hominis ab animo facies!»)<sup>31</sup>.

Conosciamo quella che dovette essere la fonte di papa Pio II: un testo inviato al pontefice dall'umanista dalmata Nikola (Cattaro, Kotor, 1427-1428 – Roma, 1480), frutto del materiale raccolto tra 1461 e 1464, quando era vescovo di Modruš (da cui Nicolaus Modrussensis) e *legatus* pontificio per gli affari della crociata nelle terre di Dalmazia, Bosnia (alla cui caduta in mano turca assistette nel 1463), Valacchia e Ungheria (1461-1464), adoperandosi senza riserve per contribuire a rendere il progetto della Curia pontificia una realtà concreta, poi pure confluito in una opera storica scritta più tardi, tra 1472 e 1473, quando è impegnato a svolgere altri importanti incarichi che papa Sisto IV gli ha affidato, tra Venezia e la Porta, il *De bellis Gothorum*, descrizione personalizzata delle vicende dei Goti, assimilati alle popolazioni slave e nobilitati rispetto alla fama negativa di “barbari” nemici dei Romani in cui l'Umanesimo italiano li aveva relegati<sup>32</sup>. Nikola aveva incontrato personalmente Vlad Draculea quando questi era prigioniero di re Mattia Corvino nelle carceri del castello di Buda<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Theodorus Spandugnis, *De la origine deli imperatori Ottomani...*, nel ms. Parisinus It. 881, f. 29, edito in SATHAS 1890, p. 167,25.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. TOTARO 2008, pp. 2156-2164.

<sup>32</sup> Il brano, si legge nel codice ms. Vaticano Corsiniano 43 E.3, ff. 1v-11r, ed è edito da MERCATI 1924. Sulla vicenda di Nikola, si vedano NERALIĆ 2003, FILORAMO 2012 e ŠPOLJARIĆ 2019.

<sup>33</sup> L'incontro, ad interrompere la solitudine ed i pensieri di Vlad durante la prigionia, è immaginato dallo scrittore romeno Marin Mincu (1944-2009) nel romanzo storico *Il Diario di Dracula* (trad. it. 1992).

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## Divinare a Bisanzio: “interpretazioni” ai *Salmi* e cocomanzia

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Anche nella cristianissima Bisanzio si ricorreva alla divinazione<sup>1</sup>. Non c'è nulla di strano: gli abitanti dell'Impero Romano d'Oriente, infatti, non erano certo immuni dalla paura e dalla speranza, quei «tiranni della vita umana» che, come diceva Luciano di Samosata<sup>2</sup>, da sempre sono e sempre saranno per gli uomini i principali stimoli a cercare di vedere nel proprio futuro e a rivolgersi alle arti mantiche. Non c'è però da stupirsi, d'altro canto, nemmeno del fatto che nel medioevo greco si cercasse di rivestire il più possibile di una rispettabile patina cristiana i vari sistemi di predizione, che spesso costituivano evoluzioni e adattamenti di pratiche pagane<sup>3</sup>. Accantonati gli *Homeromanteia* che ancora in età tardoantica utilizzavano i versi dell'*Iliade* e dell'*Odissea*, selezionati con lanci di dadi, per ottenere illuminazioni profetiche, a essere adoperati erano i libri sacri, e in particolare i *Vangeli* e il *Salterio*<sup>4</sup>. Si parla, dunque, di bibliomanzia<sup>5</sup>.

La forma più semplice e quasi spontanea di divinazione consisteva nell'aprire il libro a caso. Si leggeva il primo versetto in cui ci si imbatteva, e si cercava di trarne un auspicio. Pare che fosse nota come *lachnisterion* ed è attribuita anche a santi, come Daniele lo Stilita, e a imperatori come Eraclio e Andronico II Paleologo<sup>6</sup>. Per quest'ultimo, in particolare, lo storico Niceforo Gregora ricorda come il sovrano, che durante il conflitto che a partire dal 1321 lo contrappose al nipote Andronico III «non trovava una via d'uscita e non sapeva cosa dovesse fare e dove reperire una soluzione al problema», si convinse che per individuare un rimedio ai suoi guai avrebbe dovuto aprire il *Salterio* e trarre ispirazione dal primo versetto in cui si fosse imbattuto, cosa che effettivamente fece<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Per una primissima introduzione alla divinazione bizantina si vedano almeno KOUKOULÈS 1948, pp. 155-218 e TROMBLEY – KAZHDAN 1991.

<sup>2</sup> La citazione viene da *Alessandro o il falso profeta*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Sulle origini e lo sviluppo della divinazione cristiana, si veda l'ottima messa a punto di CHILDERS 2020, pp. 31-42.

<sup>4</sup> Si veda MALTOMINI 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Sulla bibliomanzia a Bisanzio ancora utile KOUKOULÈS 1948, pp. 158-160.

<sup>6</sup> Il riferimento è al celebre episodio riferito da Teofane, *Cronografia*, p. 308.14-16 (ed. de Boor), in cui Eraclio decise di svernare in Albania (il riferimento è alla regione caucasica) dopo aver consultato così i *Vangeli*. Per altre attestazioni agiografiche e secolari, si veda l'ampia rassegna di FILIMON 2019, pp. 273-277.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Niceforo Gregora, 1.358.5-18, nonché FILIMON 2019, p. 277.

Nel corso del tempo, però, si svilupparono forme più articolate. Per quanto riguarda nello specifico il *Salterio*, a partire dall'XI secolo sono attestati manoscritti in cui ogni salmo è accompagnato da un *marginale* che veicola un'affermazione profetica che costituisce una risposta alla domanda, muta o espressa a voce alta, dell'interrogante. Altri manoscritti, nella medesima epoca, riportano queste affermazioni, dette *hermeneiai* o *prosermeneiai* («interpretazioni», quasi si trattasse di un sunto del contenuto profetico di ciascun salmo), in una lista a parte. E c'è anche un'evoluzione della modalità di interrogazione. Il numero della *prosermeneia*, infatti, può non corrispondere a quello del salmo in cui ci s'imbatte ad apertura di libro, ma a quest'ultimo occorre sommare una cifra, nel caso specifico sei, per trovare il numero della predizione che risponderà alla nostra *enthymesis*, ovvero la «cogitazione», la preoccupazione, il desiderio o la curiosità che abbiamo in mente. Si trova qui *in nuce* una strategia che ritarda il momento della rivelazione, finalizzata ad accrescere l'aspettativa e a rendere il rituale più misterioso ed elaborato, e conseguentemente più autorevole agli occhi di chi lo consultava. Lo stesso rimbalzo tra un numero e l'altro si trova del resto, per quanto con un grado di elaborazione ben maggiore, nelle cosiddette *Sortes Astrampsychi*, di origine antica ma anch'esse cristianizzate in epoca bizantina<sup>8</sup>, e in tanti altri libri di “sorti” orientali e occidentali, fino ad arrivare a elaboratissime cinquecentine come il *Triumpho di Fortuna* del ferrarese Sigismondo Fanti (stampato da Giacomo Giunta a Venezia nel 1527), in cui per arrivare alla risposta alla propria domanda (scelta da un elenco precostituito) il lettore-postulante viene fatto saltare da una pagina all'altra, in una modalità che per certi versi ricorda quella dei cosiddetti *librogame*, con non meno di cinque passaggi.

Per quanto non ufficialmente sdoganate dalle autorità ecclesiastiche bizantine, le forme di divinazione basate sui testi sacri del cristianesimo erano tuttavia tollerate, anche con l'idea che servissero a tenere i fedeli lontani da veggenti e indovini in odore di paganesimo e diavoleria<sup>9</sup>. Ed è interessante pensare che i più antichi tra i manoscritti che riportano le *Hermeneiai* ai *Salmi* sono contemporanei, per esempio, a Michele Psello. Non è dato sapere cosa pensasse di queste pratiche il “console dei filosofi”, avvezzo a ben altri livelli di speculazione, ma al contempo curioso (per quanto non senza paternalismo e condiscendenza) anche di fatti folklorici e credenze popolari<sup>10</sup>. Però è un dato di fatto che anche queste manifestazioni mantiche fanno parte di quella che fu l'“enciclopedia

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<sup>8</sup> Su di esse si veda almeno NAETHER 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Si veda in particolare CHILDERS 2020, pp. 43-48, con particolare riferimento ad Anastasio Sinaita, *Quaestiones et responsiones* 57.

<sup>10</sup> Si vedano almeno SCHREINER 2005, p. 89 e KALDELLIS 2006, pp. 45-47.

culturale” dei Bizantini. E di grande interesse, dunque, sono i dati che emergono dall’analisi dei responsi. Per quanto spesso volutamente ambigue, con l’uso di termini generici come *pragma* («questione», «faccenda», «cosa»), le “interpretazioni” talora lasciano trapelare qualche premura o preoccupazione particolare, che sembra rispondere ad alcune delle stesse domande veicolate nelle liste delle *Sortes Astrampsychi* citate in precedenza. I postulanti chiedevano se un malato avrebbe riacquisito la salute, se avrebbero avuto successo o fortuna, se dovevano intraprendere una certa azione, se qualcosa era vero oppure no (si può pensare a richieste, attestate anche da altre pratiche oracolari, relative all’identificazione di una certa persona come autore di un qualche misfatto, oppure all’accertamento dell’infedeltà di un coniuge). Il riferimento a un «dono» (*xenion*) che dovrebbe garantire il successo potrebbe essere un’allusione, se non alla corruzione, alla diffusa pratica di accompagnare petizioni e appelli con appropriati omaggi<sup>11</sup>. La patina cristiana, peraltro, è evidente – oltre che nella pressoché obbligatoria preghiera iniziale – nei frequenti richiami a Dio e nelle esortazioni al pentimento, alla pazienza e alla sopportazione come chiave per arrivare ai risultati. Anche l’accento posto, nei responsi positivi, sulla «luce» (φῶς) e sulla «gioia» (χαρά), non sembra avere paralleli nei testi di origine pagana (in particolare, le già citate *sortes Astrampsychi*) e rispecchia verosimilmente la frequenza di questi termini, spesso in posizione enfatica, nell’innografia bizantina<sup>12</sup>. D’altro canto, la preponderanza di responsi positivi pare allineare queste *Hermeneiai* a una caratteristica frequentemente riscontrata in questi sistemi divinatori precostituiti, che dovevano la loro fortuna anche a una funzione consolatoria e tranquillizzante (per quanto non mancassero responsi meno positivi, se non del tutto negativi, che comprovavano la “serietà” del mezzo e rendevano d’altro canto ancora più apprezzabili i vaticini rincuoranti<sup>13</sup>).

Per tutti questi motivi, non sarà forse del tutto inutile fornire qui la traduzione di una versione particolarmente rappresentativa di queste “interpretazioni”, contenuta nelle primissime pagine (seguite poi dal testo del *Salterio* vero e proprio) del manoscritto Washington (DC), *Dumbarton Oaks*, 3 (Diktyon: 70822), datato al 1084 e proveniente dal monastero athonita del Pantokrator, che costituisce la base dell’edizione di Georgi Parpulov<sup>14</sup>. Si tratta, per quanto ne so, della prima traduzione completa in italiano, e forse in una lingua moderna.

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<sup>11</sup> Si tratta delle cosiddette *syntheiai* o “sportule”: cf. CHEYNET 2008, p. 153.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. FOLLIERI 1966, pp. 28-32 e 82-85.

<sup>13</sup> Sull’uso di questi meccanismi nelle produzioni oracolari si vedano almeno le riflessioni di STEWART 2019, p. 193.

<sup>14</sup> Il riferimento è a PARPULOV 2014; l’edizione del testo (sulla quale è stata esemplata la traduzione italiana) si trova alle pp. 310-315.

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***Veritiera rivelazione di ciò che si ha in mente, se la si attua con fede***

*Se nel tuo cuore hai un qualsivoglia pensiero, o devi intraprendere una faccenda, apri il Salterio a digiuno e recita il Trisagion con calma. Metti il dito sul salmo che ti uscirà, o meglio sul suo numero, e da quel numero contane altri sei, in modo che in totale siano sette, e leggi il settimo: qualunque cosa dirà, considerala certa. Però ti devi accostare con fede.*

*Interpretazioni per i Salmi:*

1. *Come Giuseppe, sei stato ritenuto degno di grazia per la tua pazienza.*
2. *Dall'afflizione giungerai alla gioia.*
3. *La questione non è seria.*
4. *Aspetta a fare ciò che vuoi.*
5. *Questa cosa non procede, non si verifica.*
6. *Hai una buona idea, fai pure ciò che desideri.*
7. *Ti aspetta un buon risultato che porterà molta gioia.*
8. *La gioia arriverà quando meno te l'aspetti.*
9. *Ti attende una grande gioia, e un guadagno*
10. *La faccenda si realizzerà rapidamente.*
11. *Ci saranno momenti difficili, ma arriverà la gioia.*
12. *È superbo, ma tu fingi, per ottenere ciò che ne consegue.*
13. *Se farai un dono, avrai la meglio.*
14. *Credi con tutto il tuo cuore, e si realizzerà.*
15. *Ti attende una lunga vita fruttuosa.*
16. *Vi è un ostacolo.*
17. *La faccenda avrà buon esito.*
18. *Ci sono grande gioia e plauso in serbo per te.*
19. *Dio ascolterà la tua preghiera.*
20. *Vi sono molti nemici, ma non ti danneggeranno.*
21. *Dal dolore si arriverà alla gioia.*
22. *Come il sole sorge, così anche la tua questione verrà alla luce.*
23. *Sopporta la pena, è destino che ti salvi.*
24. *Prega Dio e non ti preoccupare.*

25. *La tua questione verrà alla luce.*
26. *Muta il tuo proposito.*
27. *Prega dal profondo della tua anima, e Dio ti ascolterà.*
28. *La faccenda si realizzerà con fatica.*
29. *Ciò che desideri non può essere concesso.*
30. *Dall'afflizione si arriverà alla gioia.*
31. *La faccenda che t'interessa si realizzerà.*
32. *Dio avrà cura di te, non ti preoccupare.*
33. *Ciò che hai in mente, si realizzerà.*
34. *Pentiti per non soggiacere alla tentazione.*
35. *La faccenda che t'interessa si realizzerà.*
36. *Non farti prendere in giro, non si realizzerà alcunché.*
37. *Ciò che desideri adesso, non avrà luogo.*
38. *Dal dolore si arriverà alla gioia.*
39. *La questione che suscita il tuo interesse è difficoltosa.*
40. *Fai ammenda per il male compiuto.*
41. *Prega, e ciò che desideri avrà luogo.*
42. *La faccenda ha una gran luce.*
43. *La tua questione verrà alla luce.*
44. *Non preoccuparti, la faccenda che t'interessa si realizzerà.*
45. *Per te c'è in serbo una grossa faccenda.*
46. *C'è del vero nella questione.*
47. *Ciò che serbi nel cuore è destinato alla gioia.*
48. *La faccenda che t'interessa si sta mettendo in moto ed è concreta.*
49. *Muta il tuo volere.*
50. *La faccenda nasconde un inganno.*
51. *La faccenda finirà bene.*
52. *Per adesso, ciò che desideri non avrà luogo.*
53. *Avrà luogo tra qualche giorno.*
54. *Intraprendi qualche altra cosa.*
55. *Tra poco verrai ricompensato.*
56. *C'è qualcosa di buono in serbo per te.*

57. *Qualcosa di nascosto sarà rivelato.*
58. *La questione di cui si dibatte è falsa.*
59. *La faccenda è nascosta.*
60. *Da una grande preoccupazione si giungerà alla gioia.*
61. *Questa cosa non avrà luogo.*
62. *La faccenda andrà a finire bene.*
63. *Ciò che pensi non è vero.*
64. *Non mutare il tuo proposito!*
65. *Sarai fortunato in questa faccenda.*
66. *Non parlare di quella faccenda, perché ti accadrà.*
67. *Si tratta di una faccenda odiosa.*
68. *Non mentire, perché ne risulterai danneggiato.*
69. *La questione che t'interessa è luminosa.*
70. *Prega Dio e il malato guarirà.*
71. *Dio ti concede la gioia.*
72. *Nel momento del dolore, prega Dio ed Egli provvederà a te.*
73. *Susciterai a tuo danno lotte e tribolazioni.*
74. *Ciò che hai in mente, avrà luogo tra poco.*
75. *Se ti affretti, ciò che desideri si realizzerà.*
76. *Non parlare di quella faccenda, perché c'è già chi ti aiuta.*
77. *Sottomettiti e sarai esaltato.*
78. *Ciò che hai in mente è inconsistente.*
79. *Qualcosa di nascosto sarà rivelato.*
80. *Dio ti aiuterà, non temere.*
81. *La tua questione verrà alla luce.*
82. *Non fare niente o danneggerai la situazione.*
83. *Ti causerà molti processi.*
84. *Non temere, tra qualche giorno ci sarà sollievo.*
85. *Avrai aiuto in ciò che mediti.*
86. *Non esitare a riferire la faccenda.*
87. *Porta pazienza e ne trarrai vantaggio.*
88. *Abbi fede, vedrai che accadrà.*

89. *Qualcosa di nascosto sarà rivelato.*
90. *Devi ragionare su ciò che desideri.*
91. *Avrai successo in quella faccenda.*
92. *Quella faccenda che t'interessa è dura e suscita opposizioni.*
93. *Avverrà davvero, senza alcun dubbio.*
94. *Attendi, perché gioirai.*
95. *Ci si sta prendendo cura della faccenda che t'interessa.*
96. *Sii sottomesso e ciò che desideri si realizzerà.*
97. *Sarai indeciso sulla faccenda.*
98. *Ci si sta prendendo cura della faccenda.*
99. *Non essere indeciso in questa faccenda.*
100. *La faccenda ti risulterà gravosa.*
101. *Abbi timor di Dio e per te ci saranno buone speranze.*
102. *Se sopporterai e pregherai, per te ci saranno buone speranze.*
103. *La faccenda che t'interessa suscita opposizioni.*
104. *Pentiti e la faccenda andrà in porto.*
105. *Sostieni la faccenda e arriverà a compimento.*
106. *Dall'afflizione si arriverà alla gioia.*
107. *La faccenda che t'interessa andrà bene.*
108. *La faccenda ti andrà bene.*
109. *Per te sono in serbo successo e plauso.*
110. *Non crucciarti, c'è scampo per te.*
111. *Vi sarà una buona occasione.*
112. *La faccenda che t'interessa ti riserva gioia.*
113. *Avrai successo: la questione è accompagnata da verità e favore.*
114. *Il tuo desiderio non si avvererà.*
115. *Questa faccenda ti riserva crucci.*
116. *Prega Dio e verrai esaudito.*
117. *La faccenda ti riserva gioia e onore.*
118. *La faccenda che t'interessa è positiva e ne trarrai gioia.*
119. *La faccenda nasconde un inganno.*
120. *La faccenda è negativa.*

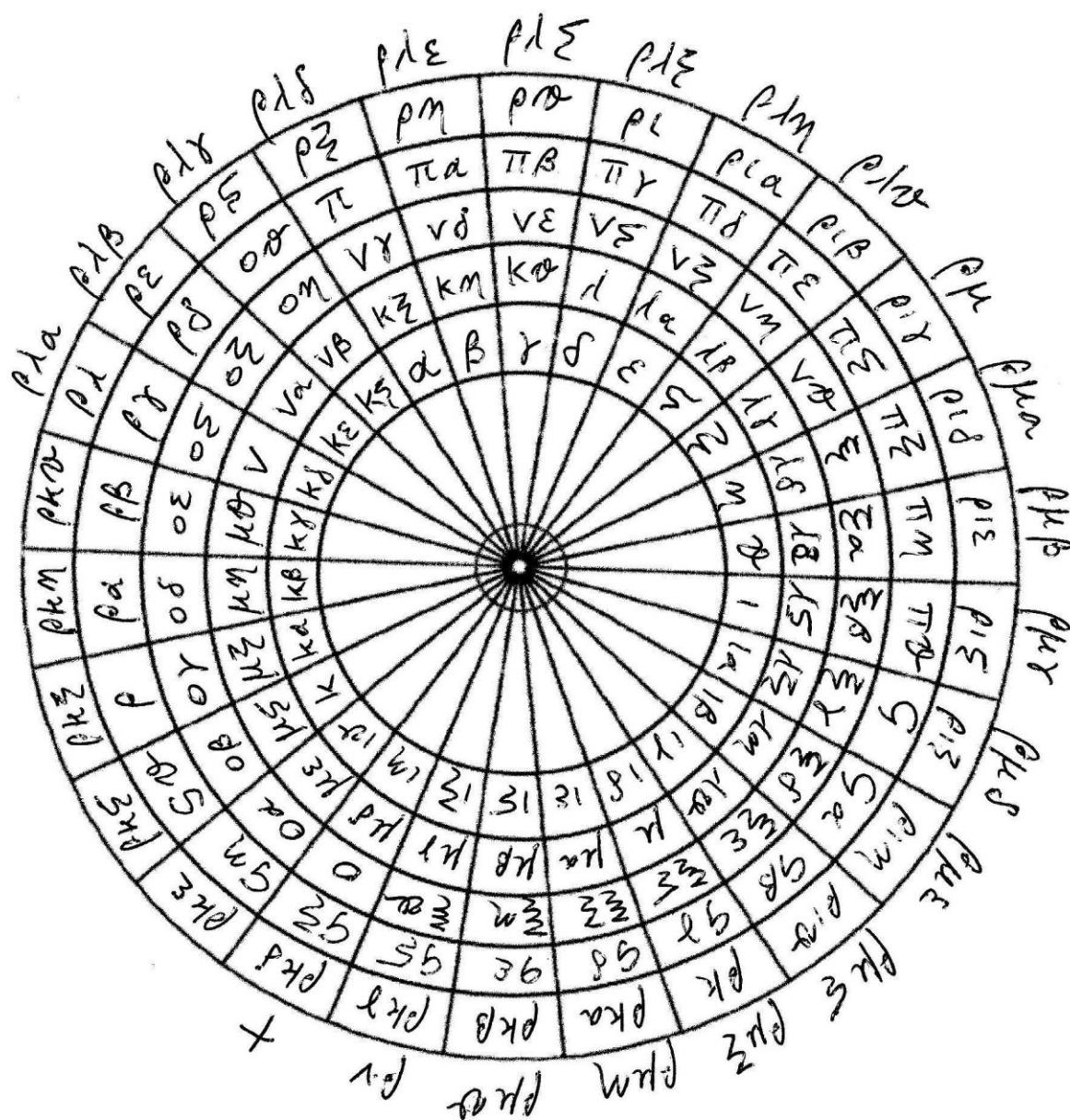
121. *Sarai fortunato.*
122. *Non farti confondere, altrimenti cadrai.*
123. *Ti attende un guadagno inaspettato.*
124. *La faccenda ti riserva profitto.*
125. *La faccenda è salda e giungerà a compimento.*
126. *Una gioia inattesa è in serbo per te.*
127. *La faccenda si realizzerà con fatica.*
128. *Dall'afflizione si arriverà alla gioia.*
129. *Pentiti e ciò che desideri si avvererà.*
130. *La faccenda che t'interessa non si realizzerà.*
131. *Attendi, perché al momento non avrà luogo.*
132. *Un grande plauso è in serbo per te.*
133. *Non crucciarti: otterrai ciò che desideri.*
134. *La faccenda sta altrimenti.*
135. *Prendi la tua risoluzione con sicurezza: si avvererà.*
136. *La faccenda non si avvererà.*
137. *Mettici mano rapidamente e andrà bene.*
138. *La cosa che t'interessa è libera.*
139. *La tua volontà si avvererà presto.*
140. *La situazione è brutta: è come prendere a calci un pungolo.*
141. *La faccenda necessita pazienza.*
142. *La faccenda che t'interessa giungerà a compimento.*
143. *Il successo è a portata di mano.*
144. *Dio esaudirà le tue preghiere.*
145. *La questione è evidente.*
146. *Mettici mano rapidamente e andrà bene.*
147. *Successo e gioia ti attendono.*
148. *La faccenda ha oltraggi in serbo per te.*
149. *La faccenda ha gioia in serbo per te.*
150. *La faccenda si compirà tra poco.*

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Al termine della traduzione si può osservare come l'evoluzione delle *Hermeneiai* ai *Salmi* in un *rhiktologia* vero e proprio<sup>15</sup>, in un “libro della sorte” ormai definitivamente scisso dal *Salterio* e legato semplicemente a un numero casuale, già avviata nel manoscritto di *Dumbarton Oaks* (dove, come si è detto, i responsi sono tutti raggruppati insieme prima del testo dei *Salmi* veri e propri), sembra compiersi in un manoscritto della prima metà del XV secolo conservato a Oxford. Nel codice Barocci 111 della *Bodleian Library*, infatti, al f. 205v è conservato quello che viene chiamato ὁ κύκλος τῆς [sic!] Ψαλτῆρος, «il cerchio del Salterio». Si tratta di una sorta di ruota divisa in caselle che contengono i numeri da 1 a 150, riportati ovviamente in lettere (per cui per esempio α = 1, β = 2, ζ = 6, ι = 10, κ = 20, ρ = 90, ριβ = 112 e così via). Questa “ruota” in realtà non è accompagnata da istruzioni, ma paralleli con “ruote” o meccanismi simili fanno supporre che qui ci si possa trovare di fronte alla conversione delle *Hermeneiai* in un testo di cocomanzia, ovvero la divinazione tramite un chicco (κόκκος, appunto) di grano o un legume che veniva gettato sul disegno e, in base alla casella in cui finiva, forniva il numero della predizione<sup>16</sup>. Quasi una sorta di *roulette ante litteram*, un generatore di numeri casuali che però, più che al gioco d'azzardo, era finalizzato a ottenere predizioni. Anche in questo caso, è sembrato interessante fornire una riproduzione di questo *kyklos* in modo da permettere a chi vorrà di prendere conoscenza diretta pure di questa forma di divinazione bizantina.

<sup>15</sup> Sui *rhiktologia*, letteralmente «libri dei dadi» (da ῥίπα, «dadi», legato al verbo ῥίπτω/ρίχνω, «gettare»), si veda almeno CHILDERS 2020, pp. 38-40.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. CHILDERS 2020, p. 42; per la definizione di «cocomanzia», si veda MEGAS 1958, p. 209. Esempi di “ruote” dichiaratamente cocomantiche, variamente legate alle Sortes Astrampsychi, si trovano nei manoscritti Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria, 3632, f. 285r, del XV sec.; San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Real Biblioteca, Φ. II. 14 (Andrés 211), f. 2r-v (istruzioni e ruota), del XV sec.; Città del Vaticano, BAV, Barb. gr. 13, f. 30v (con istruzioni ai ff. 31v-32v), del XVI sec.; sul legame che unisce questi manoscritti, v. Sortes Astrampsychi, II, ed. R. STEWART, Monachii et Lipsiae 2001, pp. XI-XII.



Elaborazione grafica dell'autore a partire dal f. 205v  
del manoscritto Oxford, Bodleian Library, Barocci 111 (prima metà del XV secolo)

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## **The Digitisation of Byzantine Gold Coins Discovered in China\***

*Jianchang Liu – Qiang Li (Northeast Normal University, Changchun)*

The term "Digital Humanities" (hereafter *DH*) is used to describe the process of integrating computational methods with traditional humanities research. In China, this interdisciplinary approach to historical studies has been predominantly applied to Chinese history, with particular emphasis on prosopography databases (such as *China Biographical Database*<sup>1</sup>) and geographical history by using *GIS* system<sup>2</sup>. However, the transition to world history, which encompasses Byzantine studies, is still relatively slow in China. It is a field historically underrepresented in Chinese academia due to language barriers and limited sponsorship, though recently it has been gradually gaining momentum through the *International Byzantine Seminar Lecture Series (IBSLS)* and fast development of auxiliary disciplines like numismatics<sup>3</sup>. Currently, several studies on the academic use of *DH* methodology in the field of world history have been published in Chinese, including East Asia studies<sup>4</sup>, Assyriology<sup>5</sup> and other fields<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, it is in need of further development, and Byzantinists in China are committed to making a contribution on the international stage.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cbdb/home>. This is a prosopography database held by Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University, Institute of History and Philology of Academia Sinica, and Peking University.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.srhgis.com/dtcx>. This is called *Silk Road Historical Geography Information Open Platform*, held by Prof. Ping Zhang (张萍) and her team at Capital Normal University.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://ihac.nenu.edu.cn/IHACOINS.htm>. This project is held by Prof. Sven Günther at IHAC, Northeast Normal University.

<sup>4</sup> Prof. Wei Miao (苗威) and her team at Shandong University have progressed lot on the database. Their research focuses on East Asian frontiers, ancient history of Northeast Asia, and the digitization of East Asian ancient books.

<sup>5</sup> Prof. Changyu Liu (刘昌玉) and his team at Zhejiang Normal University have applied a project aiming to build a database on the cuneiform and seals in ancient Mesopotamia (<http://wx.xdsxds.com/layout/home>).

<sup>6</sup> The members of IHAC at Northeast Normal University organised a seminar for *DH* in Classics (report available at <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-151035>); the World Conference of Classics in Beijing (6-8 November 2024) also mentioned the *DH* in Classics, but for Byzantine studies there is only limited applications on academic analysis.

Consequently, as specialists in the field, the scholars at the *Institute for the History of Ancient Civilizations (IHAC)* have been engaged in the process of collecting historical information in the form of images of Byzantine coins discovered in China, aiming to build an XML-based and TEI-compliant standard database in English and Chinese under the *Epidoc* system<sup>7</sup>. This paper therefore explores the ongoing development of *DH* in Byzantine studies in China, focusing on the efforts being made at *IHAC* and the confronted challenges. Nevertheless, the utilisation of *DH* in this field, particularly in the development of digital databases for Byzantine coins in China, reflects a growing interest in expanding China's engagement with Byzantine history.

### **I. Byzantine gold coins discovered in China: history and research**

It is beyond doubt that the Byzantine Empire and China, the great powers of Middle Ages, participated in the system of connections across Eurasia, called the “Silk Road” by scholars. The Roman-Byzantine coinage, in particular the Byzantine coinage under discussion, was renowned as the “Dollar of the Middle Ages” and used as a currency along the trade route<sup>8</sup>. As a consequence, the discovery of Byzantine coins in China and their significance in Byzantine studies merit further consideration and research, which will undoubtedly provide invaluable insights into the economic and cultural interactions between the Byzantine Empire and China. The discovery of these coins in China has prompted interest among Chinese scholars, initially from archaeologists, then historians specialising in ancient China, and subsequently from Chinese Byzantinists. A great deal of discussion and research has been conducted on this topic. Additionally, numerous international historians have devoted considerable attention to these noteworthy discoveries, publishing a substantial body of research on the subject. Their work encompasses a comprehensive range of topics related to Byzantine coins discovered in China<sup>9</sup>.

The discovery of Byzantine gold coins in China represents a significant development in historical research, particularly in the field of numismatics, since the first coin was found in 1897<sup>10</sup>. The initial contributions to the field of Byzantine numismatic studies in China were made by Nai Xia

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<sup>7</sup> In this paper the word “discover” only relates to the coins unearthed in China rather than coming to China through auctions, collections, and other means of circulation, which are less important for academic studies.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. LOPEZ 1951.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. LI 2015, p. 282 n. 15.

<sup>10</sup> A solidus of the Constantine V (741-755) was discovered and published in 1897: see ZEIMAL 1991, p. 169.

(夏鼐), who obtained a Ph.D. in Egyptology in the UK before returning to China to engage in Chinese archaeological research. Between 1959 and 1977, he published three groundbreaking articles on Byzantine gold coins discovered in China, providing detailed descriptions and analyses. His contributions laid the foundation for subsequent research in this field<sup>11</sup>. Another prominent archaeologist, Bai Su (苏白), conducted a comprehensive statistical analysis of Byzantine coins discovered in China by 1986<sup>12</sup>. From the late 20<sup>th</sup> century into the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the discovery of Byzantine coins in China increased, leading to a significant rise in scholarly interest and the publication of numerous reviews and statistical studies. Based on these developments, Zhiqiang Chen (陈志强), Ying Lin (林英), Xushan Zhang (张绪山) and Feng Luo (罗丰) have written many articles on Byzantine gold coins discovered in China. And Yunyan Guo's (郭云艳) doctoral dissertation and subsequent publications offer an exemplary synthesis of existing research on this subject, along with insights into potential avenues for further inquiry<sup>13</sup>. The aforementioned papers collectively constitute a robust academic foundation upon which our digitisation project is based.



**Graph I:** Image of gold coin by Justin I, discovered in 1996, at Guyuan (固原), China<sup>14</sup>

Byzantine coins found in China serve not only as economic artifacts but also as cultural markers of interaction between East and West. Their discovery highlights the presence of traders, diplomats, and perhaps even missionaries along the Silk Road and eventually in China. From an academic standpoint, these coins are invaluable for understanding the spread of economic influence, and analysing the complexity of ancient trade networks<sup>15</sup>. They are also a source for the interpretation of

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<sup>11</sup> See XIA 1959; XIA 1961; XIA 1977.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *ENCYCLOPEDIA* 1986, pp. 676-677.

<sup>13</sup> See GUO 2022, pp. 7-16.

<sup>14</sup> See GAO – XIA – LI 2025, p. 119.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. ZHANG 2005.

the cultural importance of intermediary ethnic groups<sup>16</sup>. In sum, recent studies have re-evaluated the significance of these coins, with Chinese and international scholars collaborating to provide a more nuanced understanding of their historical context<sup>17</sup>. The re-examination of these coins has also stimulated interest in using digital databases to store and analyse numismatic data. However, due to language and collection location issues, this approach has been so far limited. Therefore, with the development of digital humanities technology, it is timely to create such a database<sup>18</sup>. This will not only strengthen the connections between our Chinese and the international Byzantine academic communities, but also contribute Chinese strength to international Byzantine studies and demonstrate the level of research in Byzantine studies in China.

## II. From material to digitisation: Methods, functions and current situation

The Byzantine gold coins, often referred to as *solidus* or *nomisma*, was made from nearly pure gold, reflecting the wealth and stability of the Byzantine Empire's economy. These coins contain much historical information, which has been interpreted by historians as a sign of political-cultural propaganda. Consequently, they constitute a valuable source for historians seeking to gain insight into the historical context surrounding the coins. In addition, the coins discovered along the Silk Road are beyond doubt carrying significant information across the Eurasia<sup>19</sup>.

*SigiDoc*, a project in sigillography developed under the *EpiDoc* framework<sup>20</sup>, is one of the most important *DH* projects in the field of Byzantine studies<sup>21</sup>. With the firm collaboration between *IHAC* at the Northeast Normal University and the University of Cologne, it was decided that the encoding method of our database should be aligned with these existing databases in order to facilitate broader usage. Seals, which contain information that is largely analogous to that found on coins, serve as an ideal example for this approach. Thus, under their guidelines, the XML based structure allows scholars to encode historical inscriptions with comprehensive metadata, textual transcriptions,

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. GUO 2022, pp. 338-384; see also GE 2015.

<sup>17</sup> See LI 2015.

<sup>18</sup> There are some databases which have collected some data about Byzantine gold coins discovered in China, but their information is limited and has some faults (see, e.g. <https://byzantinefind.units.it/viewer.p/83/3852/types/all/geo>).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. LI 2016.

<sup>20</sup> See <https://epidoc.stoa.org/gl/latest>.

<sup>21</sup> See the *Sigidoc Guidelines: Byzantine Seals in TEI-XML (Version 1.1)*, edited by A. Sopracasa and M. Filosa (<https://sigidoc.huma-num.fr/>).

translations, and associated scholarly commentary on coins, and the digitisation makes these historical documents more accessible for research, preservation, and analysis<sup>22</sup>. It guarantees a high degree of interoperability, thereby fostering collaboration and data sharing among scholars engaged in the numismatic study of Byzantine history<sup>23</sup>.

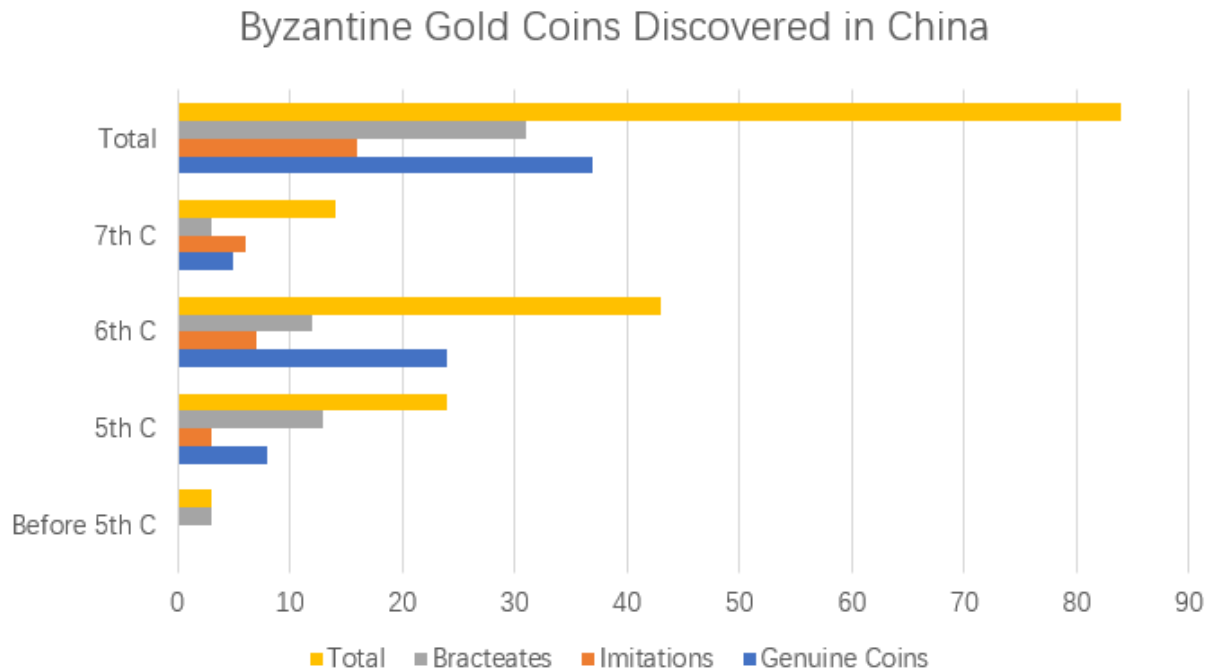
The collaborative project between *IHAC* and the University of Cologne has significantly advanced through continued workshops and lecture series aimed at further developing the XML-based digitisation of Byzantine coins. From 18 to 21 September 2024, a workshop co-organised by Prof. Dr. Claudia Sode and associate Prof. Dr. Qiang Li (李强) was held that focused on refining the technical aspects of the digitisation process using *Sigdoc* systems. The participants have already made much progress after this workshop; in addition to it, Qiang Li has initiated a new course aimed at training students in Digital Humanities and Byzantine studies, particularly focusing on XML encoding and database construction. These courses are designed to recruit and train a capable student team to assist in the ongoing development of the Byzantine coins discovered in China database. Through hands-on training and involvement in research, students gain experience in metadata standardisation and digital project management, contributing to the growing field of *DH* in Byzantine studies. This educational initiative not only provides support for the current project but also aims to cultivate a new generation of scholars in China who are proficient in both Byzantine history and digital tools.

The Byzantine gold coins found in China are currently being sorted based on a synthesis of previous academic papers, monographs, archaeological reports, and museum information. The current results show that the Byzantine gold coins found in China are mainly concentrated in the 4<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, that is, the period when the Byzantine, the Sassanid Persian, the Turkish, and the Chinese empires flourished. The following graph has been created to illustrate this historical information:

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. FILOSA – SOPRACASA – STOYANOVA 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. RENEAR – DUBIN – SPERBERG-McQUEEN 2002.



**Graph II:** Information about Byzantine gold coins discovered in China<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, an XML data template has been constructed for the database, based on the digital methods presented at the workshop in Cologne. The template will contain not only the relevant academic and archaeological information about the coins themselves, but also images and academic commentary. What is special is that we will use Dumbarton Oak's “Athena Ruby” font to reflect the original state of the inscription, especially for the bracteates and imitations<sup>25</sup>. Then for the bibliography, we established a list of sources and used an index to facilitate users to search these documents. All this information will be bilingual (English and Chinese) eventually.

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. GUO 2022.

<sup>25</sup> See <https://www.doaks.org/resources/athena-ruby>.

```

<?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?>
<?xml-stylesheet type="text/xsl" href="G22.xsl"?>
<?xml-model href="http://epidoc.stoa.org/schema/latest/tei-epidoc.rng" type="application/xml"
schematypens="http://relaxng.org/ns/structure/1.0"?>
<TEI xmlns="http://www.tei-c.org/ns/1.0" xmlns:xi="http://www.w3.org/2001/XInclude" xml:lang="en">
  <teiHeader>
    <fileDesc>
      <titleStmt>
        <title>Imitation discovered from the Zhongshi Daode Tomb in the Shi family cemetery in Guyuan, Ningxia,
1981</title>
        <editor>Jianchang Liu</editor>
        <funder>IHAC</funder>
        <respStmt>
          <name>Jianchang Liu</name>
          <resp>Vice-Director</resp>
        </respStmt>
      </titleStmt>
      <publicationStmt>
        <authority>NENU</authority>
        <idno type="URI">Links</idno>
        <availability>
          <licence target="http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">Licensed under a Creative Commons-Attribution
4.0 licence</licence>
        </availability>
      </publicationStmt>
      <sourceDesc>
        <msDesc>
          <msIdentifier>
            <idno type="ID">I3</idno>
          </msIdentifier>
          <physDesc>
            <objectDesc>
              <supportDesc>
                <support>
                  <material ana="#material.metal" ref="https://www.eagle-
network.eu/resources/vocabularies/material/">Gold</material>
                </support>
                <objectType>Imitation</objectType>
                <dimensions>
                  <dim type="diameter">20mm</dim>
                  <dim type="weight">4g</dim>
                </dimensions>
              </objectDesc>
            </physDesc>
          </msDesc>
        </sourceDesc>
      </teiHeader>

```

**Graph III:** An exemplary model of the XML file<sup>26</sup>

We use the *IHAC* website to link the database information to *IHACOINS* and present it as a sub-column<sup>27</sup>. The sub-column will include project introduction, advisory board and coin information. We use a simple website and information presentation format, and users can read the XML information we store from the hyperlink. The interactive website is still under development, and more interactive measures will be added later. To further enhance the project's accessibility and impact, a Chinese edition of the *Epidoc* guidelines is being developed in collaboration with the University of Cologne. These guidelines will provide step-by-step instructions on using the *Epidoc*

<sup>26</sup> Provided with Oxygen XML (edited by Jianchang Liu, 2024).

<sup>27</sup> See [https://ihac.nenu.edu.cn/ENGLISH/IHACOINS/ByzCoinInCHN\\_EN.htm](https://ihac.nenu.edu.cn/ENGLISH/IHACOINS/ByzCoinInCHN_EN.htm).

system for the digitisation of Byzantine inscriptions, ensuring that Chinese scholars and students can actively engage with the project. By making these resources available in Chinese, the project aims to promote broader participation from the academic community in China and enhance the global scope of Byzantine digital studies.

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Imitation</b></p> <p>Imitation of Theodosios II found in Gansu</p> <p>Imitation of Athanasios I discovered in Xi'an</p> <p>Imitation discovered from the Zhongshi Daode Tomb in the Shi family cemetery in Guyuan, Ningxia, 1981</p> <p>Imitation of Anastasios I discovered in the Western Wei Luchou Tomb in Xixian New District, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 2017</p> <p>Imitation of Anastasios I discovered in Tang tomb in Shangzhou, Shaanxi</p> <p>Imitation of Anastasios I discovered in Tang tomb in Shangluo, Shaanxi</p> <p>Imitation of Anastasios I discovered in the Astana Tombs in Turpan, Xinjiang</p> <p>Imitation of Justinian I found in</p> | <p><b>OBV Face (Editorial)</b></p> <p>Dominus Noster Theodosius pius felix Augustus</p> <p><b>REV Face (Editorial)</b></p> <p>Victoria Augustorum</p> <p><b>EXE Face (Editorial)</b></p> <p>Constantinopoli obryzum</p> <p><b>DIPLOMATIC</b></p> <p><b>OBV Face (Diplomatic)</b></p> <p>DNTHEODO-SIVSPFVC</p> <p><b>REV Face (Diplomatic)</b></p> <p>VICTORI-AAVCCC</p> <p><b>EXE Face (Diplomatic)</b></p> <p>CONOB</p> |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

**Graph IV:** Current model of the Database

Despite the progress that has been achieved, the advancement of *DH* in Byzantine Studies in China continues to face a number of challenges. The most significant one is the difficulty in obtaining the most up-to-date information regarding the location of these coins, which are often stored in museums or private collections. This lack of transparency makes it challenging to collect high quality images. The language barrier restricts the number of researchers who can contribute to and benefit from digital projects, particularly the archaeologists, who gain access to the coins before the Byzantinists, but lack sufficient language proficiency to decipher their inscriptions. Consequently, the identification of certain coins remains problematic. Furthermore, the lack of funding for such projects persists, as Byzantine Studies remains a relatively niche field within Chinese academia.

The present state of our database is indicative of both its potential and its constraints. We have currently collected detailed information of 37 genuine Byzantine gold coins discovered in China, ranging from Theodosius II to Heraclius, with the largest number of them being gold coins from period of Anastasius I, with later addition on bracteates, imitations and even Sassanian Coins. In addition, there are many Byzantine gold coins discovered in China, which are kept in Chinese coin museums, but due to the lack of specific finding information, it is not certain whether they were

definitely discovered in China, so they are currently not within the scope of our collection. Notwithstanding the considerable headway made in the standardisation and cataloguing of materials, a number of challenges remain. The database's metadata includes fields such as the artefact's origin, historical period, physical description, and related scholarly works. However, further refinements are required to enhance searchability and user interactivity. Another crucial step is the incorporation of network analysis tools to examine the social networks and cultural exchanges that occurred along the Silk Road. The mapping of these interactions in digital form will facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the part played by monks, traders and diplomats in the formation of the political and religious landscape of Eurasia. This will be finished with the interdisciplinary collaboration at Northeast Normal University.

Another area in need of development is the inclusion of 3D models and interactive features, which would facilitate engagement with the artefacts in novel ways for scholars. The ongoing collaboration with international partners, such as the University of Cologne, has proved invaluable in addressing some of the issues that have arisen. However, further work is required to fully realise the database's potential. In the future, there are a number of promising avenues for further development of *DH* in Byzantine studies in China. One such avenue is the expansion of the database to include a broader range of materials, such as Syriac manuscripts, religious relics, and architectural data on Nestorianism in China. This would facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of Byzantine culture and its impact<sup>28</sup>.

## Conclusion

The development of digital humanities for Byzantine studies in China is still in its early stage, but the progress made thus far is encouraging. The construction of digital databases for Byzantine coins and seals is enabling Chinese scholars to establish the foundations for more extensive research and international collaboration. The remaining challenges, namely language barriers, funding shortages and technical limitations, must be addressed to ensure that *DH* can fully realise its potential in Byzantine Studies. As the field continues to grow, the integration of advanced digital tools, including network analysis, 3D modelling and interactive data visualisation, will provide new ways of understanding Byzantine history and its connections to China.

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. LIN 2024.

By engaging with this subject, Chinese scholars are not only enhancing global comprehension of Byzantium but also influencing the future of digital humanities in world history studies.

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