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## DIMITRIOS VIKELAS: TOWARDS A RE-EVALUATION OF “BYZANTIUM” – PREREQUISITES AND INFERENCES

### 1. Introduction

It is probably necessary that this paper should be prefaced by certain preliminary clarifications which delimit more precisely its working hypothesis. Thus:

- (a) “re-evaluation” should be seen as an attempt to remove “undervaluation”;
- (b) the main weight falls upon the “prerequisites” and “inferences” of such an undertaking;
- (c) the field of research concerns the history of ideas;
- (d) the method is defined this time also as “historico-critical”;
- (e) as to Vikelas, I shall confine myself principally to his study *Concerning the Byzantines*;
- (f) the complex of causes which make up the state of affairs in society, domestic and international, has not escaped my attention.

### 2. On the “empire of decline”

I come straightaway to Vikelas’s text. To be more precise, this consists of three lectures which were delivered in 1873 “before the Greek Association of Marseilles”, and which were published in complete form in London in the following year. The declared *intentio auctoris* consists in the “dissemination of a more correct and more just estimation of the Byzantine world”.<sup>1</sup> This is in line with the motto on the cover: that is, the words of Constantinos Paparrhigopoulos, to whom, in any event, Vikelas refers frequently, about the need for “the sun of scientific accuracy to shine forth unclouded” “upon our medieval history”, since we peruse it “in the darkness of night or in the

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1. Dimitrios Vikelas, *Περὶ βυζαντινῶν μελέτη*, London 1874, p. 5.



midst of the densest of mists”.

The focusing of Vikelas’s interest is upon “certain general conclusions” with a view to re-examining “how we have been taught hitherto to imagine the Byzantine era” as an “empire of decline”. If, on the other hand, in the “course of general history” it is estimated that the “destiny” of Byzantium was the “preservation and conservation of civilization”, then the fact that “it fulfilled this mission to the good of a Europe being reborn”<sup>2</sup> cannot be undervalued.

It was Europe, moreover, which has shown itself unthankful, concealing “this ingratitude beneath unjust representations of a distorted history”<sup>3</sup> of Byzantium. Clearly, the lens is turning upon Montesquieu and Gibbon, who “contributed to this unjust assessment of the Byzantines”.<sup>4</sup> Their historiographical refutation is credited, apart from Paparrhigopoulos, to Spyridon Zambelios (who, in an attempt to outflank the “exclusive cult of Antiquity”, contributed to the countering of the underestimation of Byzantium),<sup>5</sup> George Finlay (1864), and A.N. Rambaud (1870).

### 3. Prerequisites and inferences

How is “Byzantium” (obviously under its later and now current name) defined, and, more particularly, how is it endowed with meaning? How much weight, and, more particularly, for how long a period, did the estimation of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* carry? The evidence has been collected and has been interpreted by the relevant bibliographical harvest, which, it should be noted, is uneven as to the second leg of its *acta*. Furthermore, the undertaking of having the “biased judgment of the West” on the “empire of decline”<sup>6</sup> withdrawn had a long duration and endogenous champions of a disdainful approach to the “Graeco-Roman Empire”, and to the Macedonians as “enemies of Greek freedom”. I leave aside the fact that the quarrels of the “chairs” have as their object the delimitation of “themes” (with the connotations which the Byzantine use of the term carries with it)

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2. *Περὶ βυζαντινῶν*, pp. 11, 12, 15.

3. *Περὶ βυζαντινῶν*, p. 15.

4. *Περὶ βυζαντινῶν*, p. 61.

5. See Panagiotis Noutsos, *Ιστορικών και φιλοσόφων ἐλεγχοί*, Athens 2008, p. 53.

6. *Περὶ βυζαντινῶν*, p. 14.



as to the “vernacular”, Byzantine/post-Byzantine, or Modern Greek linguistic and literary production, which extends to Cretan literature, and beyond that.

The early “chroniclers” (Elladios, Prokopiou, Voulgaris, Koraes, Koumas, Zaviras, etc.) of the intellectual production of the modern Greeks contributed to bringing out the self-sufficiency of modern Hellenism and, consequently, to the autonomous status of the constituent studies, as, at the beginning, they unwound the thread of the life of the “learned Greeks” and then reconstituted the historical horizon of the “*paideia*” or the “moral and intellectual change” which brought about the “rebirth of Greece”.

More specifically, for indigenous Greek thinking which re-thought its beginnings, the “Fall” of Constantinople— in contrast with Western European historiographical enterprises which resulted from an over-emphasis on the “Renaissance” and the “condemnation of the dark” Middle Ages,<sup>7</sup> and use (Cellarius 1688) 1453 as a milestone of the modern era—meant some four hundred years of enslavement and “most dense”<sup>8</sup> intellectual darkness. The “beginning in the increase in *paideia*”<sup>9</sup> is dated by a joint consideration of the educational and merchant marine “take-off” of the Greeks to 1720, whereas from another viewpoint (influenced by the anti-Byzantinism of Gibbon), the “rebirth of Greece”<sup>10</sup> is credited to the processes of transcending Byzantine and Ottoman barbarism.

Nevertheless, within the newly-constituted Greek state, “national” historiography, to which the study of its intellectual gestation was subordinated as an individual subject, with the starting-point of its conception constantly being transposed into the past, contrasted with the research schema of the “three stages” (“Antiquity” - “Middle Ages” - “Modern Times”). In the case, moreover, of the “*media aetas*”,<sup>11</sup> after the “revolution of the medievalists”, which was also sparked off by the Romantic movement, the “diachronic nature” of the Greek nation had to be conceived in such a way as to revalue the Byzantine period.

The School of Philosophy of the University of Athens, the country’s first, and at that time only, university, established in the closing decades of the

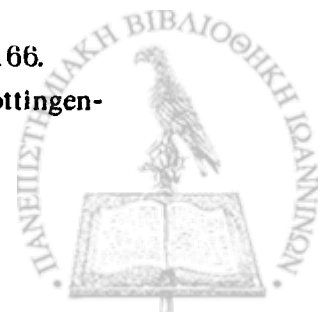
7. See Panagiotis Noutsos, *Ο Νομιναλισμός*, Athens, 1980, pp. 13-16.

8. Constantinos Koumas, *Ιστορία των ανθρωπίνων πράξεων*, Vienna 1832, p. 554.

9. Koumas, *Ιστορία*, p. 555.

10. See Panagiotis Noutsos, *Νεοελληνικός Διαφωτισμός*, Athens 2005, pp. 162-166.

11. Cf. A. Klempt, *Die Säkularisierung der universalhistorischen Auffassung*, Göttingen-Berlin 1960, p. 75.



nineteenth century the chair of “Medieval and Modern Greek Philology”, whose subject-matter and academic competence have been retained, in the synonymous form of the Section of “Medieval and Modern Greek Studies”, unchanged to the present day. Furthermore, the institutional distribution of academic knowledge, as brought about by the tripartite division of the School of Philosophy (1982/1983), to the independent Department of Philology cut off to a large extent, both in the educational and in the research field, Modern Greek studies from historical science, the social sciences, and philosophy, which are cultivated in two other departments of the same school. This observation forms a contrast with what happens, *grosso modo*, with the institutional contextualisation of Modern Greek studies in universities abroad.

Frequently, the historiographical revaluation of “Byzantium” has been a function of homologous research into the (Western) “Middle Ages”. In the purely historiographical sphere, that is, taking into account many other factors, noteworthy attempts at a direct—that is, based on the sources—knowledge of medieval philosophy made their appearance: these were inaugurated by Cousin (1836) and Remusat (1845) and continued by Haureau and Stöckl. The first two, in special monographs, confined themselves to Abelard, whose thinking was studied as the dawn of French thought. The second two, some decades later, using the earlier wealth of research, undertook to systematise and see from a holistic viewpoint the beginnings and evolution of philosophy in the Middle Ages.

Of course, these presuppose the more general trend to delimit the phenomenon of the “Middle Ages”—the term “*media aetas*” had already been brought into circulation by the humanists of the early sixteenth century—and to identify the basic phases of its historical development. Even before the “revolution of the medievalists”, as W.K. Ferguson termed the radical change in the approaches of the students of the history of the medieval period, had manifested itself, the threefold pattern of history (by which the bourgeois philosophy of History apotheosised the last stage—the “positive”) had been demythologised and the apprehension that the Middle Ages were “a mere interruption of history by a thousand years of general barbarism” had been revised. Within this framework, the technological, socio-political, and ideological *acquis* of the late Middle Ages, whose contribution to the shaping of the impetus of modern European society was enormous, were noted and assessed.<sup>12</sup>

Without Renieris having yet embarked upon a revaluation of the Middle

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12. See Panagiotis Noutsos, *Νεοελληνική φιλοσοφία*, Athens 1980, p. 16.



Ages in the East, with the exception of a reference to the differences in the Creed and the amalgamation of the two forms of "Catholicism" (particularly "in the face of their common enemy"—Protestantism), he shows an early osmosis with the re-orientation of historiography. I am referring to his *Philosophy of History* (1841), which, with the "apocalyptic" style of this "essay", seems to provide a cohesive "abstraction" of the vertebrae of world history, with express debts to Ancillon, de Boland, Chateaubriand, Constant, Madame de Staël, and Thierry, who were at the centre—or simply on the periphery—of the French Romantic movement and were subject to the counter-influence of like-minded Germans such as the Schlegel brothers and Savigny. At the same time, use was made, within the framework of this viewpoint, of the historiographical harvest from Machiavelli and Montesquieu to Maurer, Creuzer, and Müller, with the idea of "civilization" in its successive manifestations, and with the undisputed interpretative bipolarisation of "people" and "individuality", as a unit of reference.

Soon, in 1842, he was forced to clarify the historical particularity of Greece: the "man of politics" who avoids solving this issue "is like a seaman sailing on the Ocean without map or compass". With the demand that the parties should be elevated "to a higher level, where the struggle is not between men, but between divine ideas", Renieris pronounces that "Greece is by its nature, by its civilisation, by its historic mission, *West* and not *East*"; consequently, the "original" which it must imitate is Britain and France, and not Russia.

Together with this position, affirmation towards the metakenotic project of Koraes, of the "interpreter of the West to Greece", is distinctly expressed, and his anti-Byzantinism is fully adopted: "in the times of decline and corruption, under the Byzantines", the country "seemed to forget itself and be transformed into the opposite of itself", whereas now, "already reborn", it promises "to be afresh the leader of the West in the moral conquest and refashioning of the East". Such an expectation is interwoven with the proof of the "rotteness" of Fallmerayer's "assertions"—to the effect that, supposedly, between the Greeks and the Europeans "nature has erected an eternal dividing wall", which are encouraged by "the few champions of Byzantine ideas" by their programmatic position that "the Wall of China" should be raised "around Greece".<sup>13</sup>

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13. See Panagiotis Noutsos, «Ο Μάρκος Ρενιέρης ως πολιτικός διανοούμενος», in: Marcos Renieris, *Φιλοσοφία της ιστορίας* [1841], Athens 1999, pp. XXV-XXVI.



When Korais published *Ptochoprodromos* (1828;<sup>14</sup> see also Yakovakis 2004: 361 - 376), the lectures of François Guizot, leader of the ‘Doctrinaires’ movement, at the Sorbonne, on the history of “civilization”,<sup>15</sup> had already begun. As to the earlier writings of the French historian, the “citizen of Athens-Paris”, he made use of them at an earlier stage in the appraisal of the “Middle Ages” as “an iron age for the nations, except for the clergy and nobles, who alone enjoyed them as a golden age”, without, that is, having moderated his evaluation of the age of “illiteracy”. However, the “history of the Middle Ages” explains for him also why it is essential for the “clergy” to be removed “from politics”. He thus perceived that the road to Byzantium also led to the ‘third’ Rome, which he himself would be most reluctant to visit ...

It was only that in the twelfth century, poetry “gives an adequate picture” of the “common state of the whole nation”, and more particularly the “obstinacy of the common people in not entering into union with the Papists”. That is to say, it is a matter of the “superstition” (“if superstition ever brought forth anything good”) to which “we present-day Greeks owe our existence”.<sup>16</sup> This affirmative approach, moreover, to the late (Eastern) “Middle Ages” was ignored both by the “enemies” and the “familiar” of Korais.

#### 4. Instead of conclusions

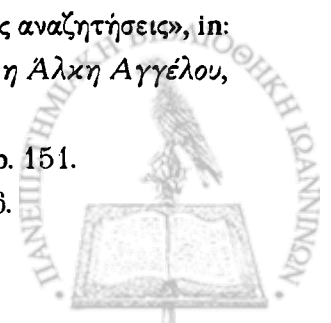
What did Vikelas himself do? Two years earlier than his *Concerning the Byzantines* he had prepared a lecture *Concerning the attempt of Adamantios Korais at the restoration of Hellenism*. More particularly, the turn towards the “great teacher of the Race” involved the need for the “fashioning of the spoken Greek language”. He had already spoken (21-3-1871), in the hall of the Greek School in London, of the history of the “spoken language”, with specific reference to *Ptochoprodromos*, *Florios*, *Velthandros*, etc. The closeness to Wilhelm Wagner and the other European hellenists who concerned themselves with the transition from late Byzantium to modern Greek literature is obviously perceptible—that is, with those who approached the issue of the “frontier”

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14. See Nashia Yakovaki, «Τα Πτωχοδρομικά του Κοραή: Μεσαιωνικές αναζητήσεις», in: University of Thessaloniki, *Τα άφθονα σχήματα του παρελθόντος. Μνήμη Αλκη Αγγέλου*, Thessaloniki 2004, pp. 361-376.

15. See Panagiotis Noutsos, *Στην αυγή του νέου αιώνα*, Athens 2002, p. 151.

16. For this citation of Korais see Noutsos, *Νεοελληνικός*, pp. 162-166.



on the criterion of the openings on either side, and not as "frontier guards" of established symbolic goods.<sup>17</sup>

Vikelas, however, in *Concerning the Byzantines* never discusses Koraes's ideas on the history of the Eastern "Middle Ages". Although the separation of Church and State had not yet been legislated,<sup>18</sup> he realises that the leeway for a positive evaluation of 'hierocracy' is minimal. On this point, moreover, he is unable to "quarrel with the opinion of Gibbon" on one of the principal causes of the "fall of Byzantium". The consequence of this is his agreement with what was unfolding in his own time: "We therefore cannot but look favourably upon those kings who have attempted to restrict monasticism in order to restore society".<sup>19</sup>

The main interest of Vikelas, who was in accord with "the historical plan, full of significance" of Paparrhigopoulos, turned towards the inclusion of the "Byzantine empire" as an "integral part of Greek history".<sup>20</sup> Of course, in this approach to "continuity", what comes to the forefront is what it "received" from antiquity and what it "handed on" to the modern world. With the idea of "character"<sup>21</sup> as his canvas, Vikelas contents himself with defining the "destiny" of Byzantium, in the outline of the "course of general history" as "the preservation and conservation of civilisation during the age of barbarism which we call the Middle Ages".<sup>22</sup> If, more particularly, it retained and "supplemented the legislation of Rome", the same also applies to the "lamp of ancient learning": "dim and sterile of any great achievements, but certainly retaining the light of the Greek intellect".<sup>23</sup>

The "preservation and conservation of all the genuine characteristics of Hellenism"<sup>24</sup> is dependent upon the linking of "nation" and "civilization" in such a way that "national characters" are formed by the different language

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17. See Panagiotis Noutsos, *Προστίψεις στο πεδίο της λογοτεχνίας*, Athens 2008, pp. 43-46.

18. Cf. I. Botouropoulou, *Séparation des Eglises et l'Etat en France*, Athens 2007.

19. *Περί βυζαντινῶν*, p. 90.

20. *Περί βυζαντινῶν*, p. 73.

21. Cf. Panagiotis Noutsos, *Κόμβοι στη συζήτηση για το έθνος*, Athens 2006, pp. 349-351.

22. *Περί βυζαντινῶν*, p. 14.

23. *Περί βυζαντινῶν*, p. 13.

24. *Περί βυζαντινῶν*, p. 34.



and civilisation which shapes it.<sup>25</sup> Within the framework of such a “gnosio-anthropology” Vikelas does not hesitate to impute to the “English character” the “theory of history” which is derived from “respect for the right of the stronger” and the “worship of power”.<sup>26</sup>

In conclusion, as to the period of “Frankish invasion and conquest”, Vikelas stresses that the “resistance of the Greeks, defeated to begin with” proves the “superiority of the Byzantines in that period of decline also”.<sup>27</sup> As regards the “folk” language, it is the “class of men of letters” which despises it by cutting themselves off from the “spirit of life” and the “modern movement of intellects”, that is, from the “characteristics of all flourishing and healthy national thinking”.<sup>28</sup>

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25. Cf. Noutsos, *Κόμφοι*, p. 350.

26. *Περί βυζαντινῶν*, p. 67.

27. *Περί βυζαντινῶν*, pp. 21, 93.

28. *Περί βυζαντινῶν*, pp. 119, 120.





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"BYZANTIUM" – PREREQUISITES AND INFERENCES

SUMMARY

This paper deals with the contribution of Dimitrios Vikelas to the re-assessment of "Byzantium", dwelling on the prerequisites and the accompanying inferences of such an undertaking. With *Concerning the study of the Byzantines* (1874) as a main point of reference, the *intentio auctoris* as to the reasons for and the manner of re-examination of the 'mission' of the 'empire of decline' is clarified. As to the prerequisites and the inferences of this re-examination, this paper undertakes a critical review of this thinking from Gibbon to Koraes and Renieris. In this way it can be more fully understood why Vikelas was interested in the transition from late Byzantium to modern Greek literature without engaging in a positive evaluation of the "hierocracy". More particularly, he integrates the Byzantine Empire as an "inseparable part" into Greek history, and as to "world history", propounds the "preservation and maintenance of civilization", whereas in terms of the country's history, he insists - by the linking of the "nation" and "civilization"—upon the preservation of the 'national character' of the Greeks.

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