

P. T. ANTONOPOULOS

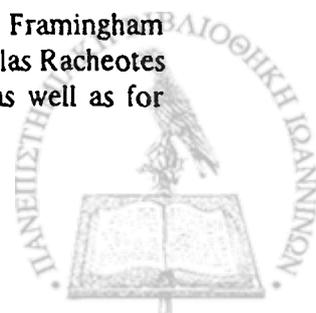
THE FLOW OF INFORMATION IN MEDIEVAL HISTORIOGRAPHY¹

If I were to ask a postgraduate researcher, collect all the information explicitly stated to have been personally witnessed by the author through such phrases as «I saw», «I heard», «I witnessed» etc. then I gather that he or she, would hardly be able to compile a single volume of it, having been requested to read through the whole of Byzantine historical literature. He would then be prompted to follow the same pattern of work by searching through the whole of medieval Latin, or western historiography. If he/she were able to read through it, I am sure that we would be faced with several volumes of data which are supposed to convey personal accounts. Apart from the very fact that western literature taken as a whole, could amount to ten times as much as Byzantine, there are a few other factors which will be analyzed in the course of this lecture. It is however, important to stress that these are related to forms of writing, time, social attitudes, educational standards, and the author's knowledge of the world.

Until around the year A.D. 1.000, Byzantine historical literature is divided into two main branches, professional history and chronography. These branches could well be said to be respectively complementing the two main pillars of the Byzantine state, the Roman heritage of its political existence, and the Christian perspective of the world.

The first thing we should bear in mind when we come to examine the work of professional historians, is that this work has not been *casually* composed, just for the sake of writing a history. It *must* serve a purpose, such as the description of emperor Justinian's wars by the historian Procopius

1. This is the text of a lecture given at Framingham State College, Framingham Massachusetts, on April 15 1992. I would like to express my thanks to Prof. Nicholas Racheotes and other members of college staff for inviting me to be their guest speaker, as well as for the hospitality they exhibited during my visit there.

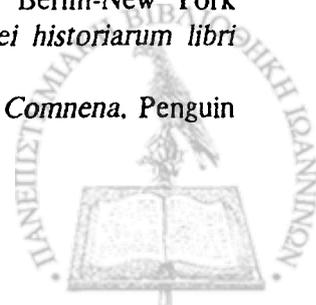


in the 6th century¹, the continuation of the work in a poetic manner by his successor Agathias², or the narration of the deeds of emperor Alexios I Comnenos by his daughter Anna in the 12th³. All these people share a higher than average social standing, and a higher than average level of education. This leads them write in a significantly polished form of Greek, which makes it difficult sometimes for the reader to follow exactly the historian's mind, but which has the advantage for the latter of hiding an ambiguous or sinister fact, behind clouds of rhetoric. The problem of the nature of education in Byzantium has not as yet, been effectively resolved, but it appears that a vital part of it was played by prose compositions in imitation of a particular ancient author, exactly as I had to do in England at school level, when I had to pass a paper on Greek and Latin prose composition so as to succeed in obtaining my respective school degree. When they come to compose a history, they must usually imitate a prototype. The most popular models in this respect are the classical historians Herodotus and Thucydides, but others such as Cassius Dio and Herodian were among the prototypes of historians between the 4th and 6th century. The degree of dependence on a prototype is still, and will be for a long time to come, a vexing problem, especially in cases where the prototype has survived only in part, or has completely vanished. Scholars have generally been only too willing to ascribe every single fact or phrase reported, on a classical original. The results of such treatment seem to me very precarious, simply, because we tend to overestimate the degree of the Byzantine historians' proficiency in their classical predecessors, which sometimes amounted to no more than a mere anthology of a particular author. If we follow such an approach, we may desist from reading them, regarding them as devoid of originality. It is far more positive to try and decode thier expressions, pick some important passages of ancient historiography that might have served as models, and attempt to enjoy what

1. The works of Procopius of Caesaraea have been collectively edited and translated by H. B. Dewing into English in the *Loeb Classics* series, volumes 1-7, 1914-1940. There is also a more recent translation of the works of Procopius by Averil Cameron, *Procopius. History of the Wars, Secret History, and Buildings*, New York 1967.

2. There is an English translation by Joseph D. Frendo, *Agathias, The Histories*. Translated with an introduction and short explanatory notes by Joseph D. Frendo, Berlin-New York 1975. The most recent edition is that by R. Keydell, *Agathiae Myrienei historiarum libri quinque*, Berlin 1967.

3. Translated into English by E. R. A. Sewter, *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, Penguin classics, 1969 repr. 1979.

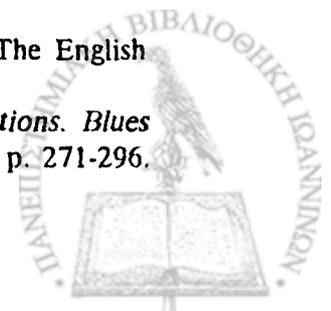


remains of their originality, which I can assure you, still continues to be abundant. The significance of such a topical approach can be illustrated by two examples. In A.D. 542, there occurred a plague which crippled several regions of the Empire, including Constantinople. Both medieval and medical historians studied the relevant passage in Procopius in their attempt to reach some conclusions as to the form and effects of the plague¹. A thorough comparison with the famous plague which devastated Athens and disabled the invading Spartan army in 431 B.C. shows however, that Procopius uses the famous description of Thucydides almost word by word, so no firm historical conclusions can be thus reached. On the other hand, the same author's description varies substantially from other sources of the period in the depiction of the famous Nika riot of A.D. 532². Procopius wishes to attribute the glory of its successful suppression to his own patron, the acclaimed general Belisarius, when it is evident that his, was not the most celebrated part. If this justifiably sounds biased treatment for someone who is inexperienced of the twists and points of emphasis of medieval historiography, it must be pointed out that Procopius represents the point of view of the upper class in that particular episode, and he can in this context, be considered original.

One of the most favourite techniques of both ancient and medieval historians, is the inclusion of speeches, put on the mouth of their protagonists. Their style can range from a relatively literary one, to a highly rhetorical one, irrespective of who is delivering them. The effect can be quite amusing when we have, say the king of the Vandals, or a Turkish chief, addressing their folk in exactly the same words that an Athenian general of the 5th century B.C. might use to stimulate the courage of his troops. In most cases the information offered within speeches is minimal, and even when it exists, it cannot be relied upon. Nevertheless, these speeches serve well the study of attitudes, principles and logic of argument. They are often the chief weapon (so we are told) of Byzantine diplomats. This can be illustrated by the following example. In 535, a Byzantine diplomat and would-be historian, Peter the patrician, visited the Ostrogothic court at Ravenna in Italy, and negotiated with king Theodahad

1. Procopius, *De bello Persico II*, 22-23, vol. 1, p. 450-470 (Loeb edition). The English translation is to be found in the opposite pages.

2. *ibid.*, book I, chapter 24, p. 218-236. See also Alan Cameron, *Circus factions. Blues and greens at Rome and Byzantium*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1976, chapter 10, p. 271-296.



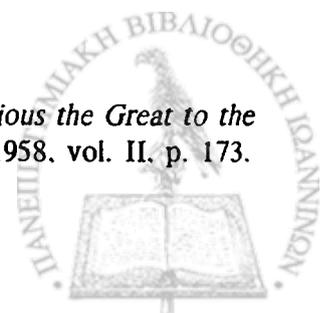
the terms under which he could be recognised by Byzantium as its ruler. This task had been made easier by the latter's involvement in the murder of his predecessor queen Amalasantha, who had adopted probyzantine policies, and was greatly esteemed in Constantinople. Theodahad, so we are told, was an adherent of Platonic philosophy and would have nothing to do with the qualities regarded as supreme by his race, of manly virtue on the battlefield. Being threatened with war on all fronts, Theodahad reached an agreement with Peter in the autumn of 535, but soon afterwards he recalled the Byzantine ambassador who was on his way to Constantinople. The following dialogue, quoted in a translation by J. B. Bury¹, took place between the two men.

«Suppose my terms do not satisfy Justinian, what will happen?» asked the king. «You will have to fight», said Peter. «Is that fair, my dear ambassador?» «Why not», replied Peter. «It is fair that every man should be true to his own character». «What do you mean?» «Your interest is philosophy» said Peter, «while Justinian's is to be a good Roman emperor. Observe the difference. It could never be seemly for a philosopher to cause death to men, and in such numbers; especially for a Platonist, whose hands should be pure of blood. Whereas it is natural that an emperor should seek to recover territory which of old belongs to his dominions».

It would be frustrating to trace a real knowledge of Plato in this argument which appears to be more closely connected to the ideals of the neoplatonists, but in any case we are told that after this little speech Theodahad swore to surrender Italy, if he were paid a substantial sum of money, promised a seat at the Constantinopolitan Senate, and offered permanent stay in Constantinople.

Another way of conveying mostly surplus information, is the technique of digressions. This has more in common with Herodotus, and follows a continuous tradition from the Hellenistic period onwards. This was made inevitable by the increase of the known world in all directions, and the improvement in geographical, historical and cultural knowledge of the distant parts within or outside the Empire. This trend became even more important when the actions of hitherto little-known barbarians came to the forefront

1. *A History of the later Roman Empire from the death of Theodosius the Great to the death of Justinian, A.D. 395-565*, vol. I-II, London 1923, repr. Dover 1958, vol. II, p. 173.



of their narrative. It was impossible for them to accommodate the amount of accurate or inaccurate information they had collected within the main framework of their narrative. Thus we have many long and interesting digressions, say on the description of Thule¹, a place identified with any country from Denmark to Iceland, and the paradox of the polar season, or a description of the coast and peoples who lived around the Black sea in the 6th century². But even digressions can be governed by the principles of personal sympathy, as it can be shown by the example of the historian Agathias, who makes an extensive and highly favourable digression on the Franks, who happened to be Orthodox Christians and therefore friends of the Empire, even though they proved themselves perfidious in several occasions³. But digressions also served as «relaxation reading» and bridged monotonous descriptions of battles or tactical moves. Some of the more talented of the early historians do care therefore, to incorporate a small anecdote, or local tradition in their narrative.

It is fair enough to say that in the process of time, the significance of digressions diminishes, as the perspective of historians becomes narrower. The absence of real historical works in the 7th and 8th century, has probably deprived us of much useful material regarding Slavs, Bulgars, Avars and Moslem Arabs. Only a small passage reminiscent of the past can be found in the 9th century historian Theophanes Confessor «on the ancient history of the Onogundur Bulgars and the Kotrigurs»⁴, while a 10th century treatise compiled by emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogennetus and known as the *De Administrando Imperio*⁵, has as its main topic the description of neighbouring and distant peoples with whom the Empire was in contact, cannot be regarded as a digression. The later continue to exist, but their

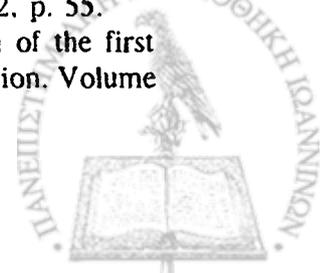
1. Procopius, *De Bello Gothico*, VI 15, vol. 3, p. 414-420. On the excursi of Procopius see also Averil Cameron, *Procopius and the 6th century*, Berkeley - Los Angeles 1985, p. 207-220.

2. The excursus on the Black Sea is in *De Bello Gothico* VIII, 1-6, vol. 5, p. 58-110.

3. See *Agathias* I, chapter 2-22, p. 11-39 and II, chapters 1-14, 40-59. Frensdorff's translation, p. 9-47.

4. The passage can be found in the records for annus mundi 6171. There is an English translation of the later and most important part of Theophanes by H. Turtledove, *The Chronicle of Theophanes: an English translation of anni mundi 6095-6305 (A.D. 602-813)*, with introduction and notes. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1982, p. 55.

5. Edited in two volumes by G. Moravcsik and R. Jenkins. Revised edition of the first volume in *Dumbarton Oaks Studies* I, Washington DC 1967, with English translation, Volume II, commentary, London 1962.



nature changes in the course of time. Thus, six centuries after the favourable comments of Agathias on the Franks, Anna Comnena will express dismay on the arrival of the «Frankish» crowds which accompanied the first Crusade on its way to Asia Minor via Constantinople¹. The year 1054 had seen the final rupture between the Orthodox and Catholic world. This took place at a time when polemics had gradually started to penetrate historical works. With the lapse of time, an increasing number of them as well as theological excursi against the West or the Moslems begins to emerge. It is only the appearance of the Ottoman Turks which led the last historians of Byzantium to embark upon detailed descriptions of that nation's history and habits.

Conditions in the West were far less favourable for any such parallels. To start with, once there was no Roman framework to induce historical writing, this had to concentrate in portraying the history of the various peoples who settled on the former territories of the western Roman state. Three examples will make this clear. In the 6th century, a Goth who became monk in Constantinople, Jordanes, wrote two works the *Gettica* and the *Romana*, in which he tried to present the story of his race, linking it up with the Roman world². This measure was not necessary for the Frankish historian Gregory of Tours, who wrote his *Historia Francorum* half a century later. The same can be said for the 8th century Lombard historian Paul the Deacon, whose *Historia Langobardorum*, is essentially free of Roman memories. I say essentially, because he wrote in Lombard-occupied Italy, and this meant that he could not be completely immune of either traces of the Roman past, or of the Papacy and the gradually developing medieval shape of the country. As time went on, there matured a literary class not hampered by linguistic barriers throughout western Europe. The effect of this was that only peoples outside this heritage, such as Greeks, Slavs and to some extent, Magyars, could be targets of possible excursi, and even these were to be made only if they were adverse to a particular historian's patron, as was the case with the 12th century court historian Otto of Freising, who saw the Byzantines adversely as they stood on the way of his patron Frederick I Barbarossa in fulfilling his ambition of universal imperial

1. *Alexiad* Books X-XI. Sewter p. 308-368.

2. For a detailed appreciation of the early medieval historians see now W. Goffard, *Barbarians as narrators*, Princeton 1988, who surveys Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede and Paul the Deacon.



recognition'. Broadly speaking, it could be thus said that whereas the majority of Byzantine excursi on strange peoples ranges from favourable to sympathetic, at least in the early period, similar excursi in the West are transgressed by an air of adversity, antagonism or hostility.

One other problem that faces the modern researcher in decoding the information supplied by both literary historians, and to a lesser extent, chronographers of Byzantium, is the correct interpretation of archaizing names assigned to various peoples, which point to an air of false continuity. Thus, the Magyars are described as Turks, Huns, Paions (a transliteration of the inhabitants of Pannonia, Roman name of present day Hungary), and Hungarians. Some of these epithets apply to more than one peoples, so it is essential to know each time which nation we are dealing with. Such prototypes lose all meaning in western medieval literature, so it is possible for them to mention the various nations as they are, without a deliberate distortion at that level. Surprisingly enough, I would like to draw attention to a positive consequence of this Byzantine tendency. The Magyars are labelled Turks, the Pechenegs or Cumans are Scythians, the westerners are Franks, Latins or Italians. Never will Magyars be called Slavs, something which shows that the Byzantines had more than a rudimentary understanding of the ethnological composition of the surrounding races, a fact amazing enough by itself.

One of the most intriguing questions particularly for Byzantine historians, is the accessibility they had of state archives. The subject is most irritating, since there is nothing to prove the systematic use of archives by such people as Anna Comnena, whose status and residence at court made it possible for her to indulge in such activities. Even if we decide that a historian had access to archives, we must then try to determine how far back could these archives extend, bearing in mind the frequent number and devastating force of such calamities as fires. The only really elucidating passage I know of in this context, is a fragment collected and incorporated in a 10th century encyclopedic work under the heading of *Excerpta de Sententiis*. It comes from the pen of the 6th century historian Menander Protector who, writing in the 590s, describes in detail what is perhaps, the most complete and accurate account of peace negotiations and conclusion of treaties that has come down to us from antiquity, a package of treaties concluded between

1. *Gesta Frederici primi Imperatoris libri duo*. In *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores* vol. XX, p. 116-301.



Byzantium and Persia in 562. Quoting from the text's translation by R.C. Blockley¹, this is what Menander has to say on his methodology.

Menander the historian says about Peter the envoy and Khosro: These were the arguments of both parties, and no further proposals were mooted about Suania.

I have no substitutions of vocabulary except that I have altered an excessively lowly expression into better Attic (according to my ability). For I do not wish to change the form of the exact words used which, in my opinion, were transmitted to me accurately, nor, by using polished expressions, to communicate the force of the rhetoric rather than what was said. This was especially so since I was describing a treaty between two such important states and their ruler.

If anyone wishes to know exactly everything that the Persian king and Peter said on that occasion, he should read them in Peter's collected writings, where there is written precisely what Khosro and the Roman and Persian envoys said and heard. The exact words of the speakers are reproduced, whether either side spoke with flattery or scorn, with irony, mockery or to slight. In short, all that the spokesmen for both states had to say on this important matter, as well as the manner of their presentation, is to be found there. The text fills a very large volume and is, I think, reliable, except that Peter, for the sake of his own reputation, has placed somewhat too much emphasis upon himself. In order that he appear to posterity as a very effective and convincing speaker who was able to bring around the unyielding and arrogant spirits of the barbarians. Since it is neither necessary nor appropriate that in writing history I become verbose or dwell too long upon one topic, the reader is referred to the full narrative of these matters in Peter's book. For if I wrote down everything which was contained on that parchment, the account of the treaty would suffice for the contents of a very large history. I have, therefore, selected from it what is necessary and have set it down briefly.

It is largely through this passage that Menander has acquired a good reputation among modern critics, especially as the book of Peter the patrician referred to, no longer survives. Before I am fully prepared to go

1. The History of Menander the Guardsman. Introductory essay, text translation and historiographical notes. Arca 17, Liverpool 1985, frg. 6 2, p. 87-89.

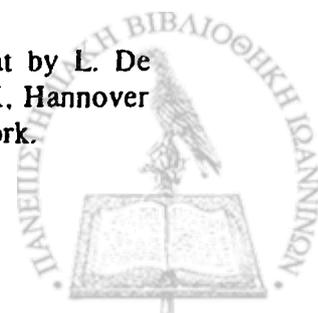


along with such an attitude however, I must point to the fact that the quality of abridgement in the long fragment describing the negotiations and treaties, not always at its best, could be largely the fault of Menander himself rather than the 10th century excerptors. It is very important to remember that what we regard as substantial, was not necessarily considered as such by the Byzantine writers, who attached far greater importance on speeches or the presentation on account of its style, of an otherwise trivial topic.

The question of accessibility of archives applies far less to western medieval literature than in Byzantium. This was due to the absence of an organised and stable court which continued to exist for many centuries, the long distance between author and archives, and the fact that a large part of the literary works was produced within the walls of monasteries. On the other hand, when stable courts were finally established, such as the Papal, the German, the French or the Norman in England, historians were able to use their material far more freely, due to the lack of linguistic barriers. This material comprised mainly of accounts of local events or contacts of a certain monarch with some other monarch, or the Pope. As their purpose became more and more the narration of the deeds of a particular region, event or monarch, this type of sources was sufficient to cover their needs. Nevertheless, as urban communities began to acquire a more independent standing, especially after the 12th century, their archives grew both in size and importance. These were easily accessible by local writers, and offered them valuable information as to a town's attitude towards a Pope, an archbishop, a king, an emperor, or a local dispute, as the example of the 13th century Dalmatian historian Thomas of Split, shows. In his *Historia Pontificum Salonitarum et Spalatinorum*¹, he not only refers extensively to ecclesiastical affairs of a local interest, but describes a royal reception under difficult circumstances, an imperial one, but also a conflict between Split and the neighbouring town of Trogir, which almost led to war between them². Also, the archives of the Italian city-states and especially those of Venice and Genoa, are of fundamental importance for the history of trade and shipping, as well as that of the eastern Mediterranean, for the period after the 13th century.

1. The most convenient edition of this work, even if not complete, is that by L. De Heinemann in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* series, *Scriptores* vol. XXIX, Hannover 1892 repr. Stuttgart 1975, p. 568-598. There is no English translation of this work.

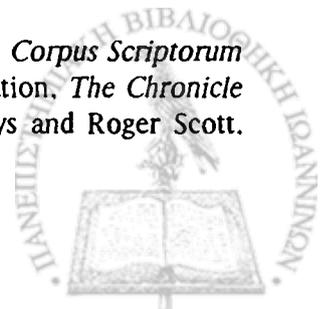
2. Thomas of Split as note 1, chapter 44, p. 596.



More typical of the medieval person than pure history, is a type of historical writing known as chronography. This is essentially a Bible-based account of world events, which, in its byzantine form that is the earlier and more characteristic, relies on the year being counted from the time of the creation, by the regnal indiction, and the reference to Popes or eastern Patriarchs. At a later stage the Christian year is also mentioned, but never surpasses that of the creation in frequency. It would be fair to say that chronographers were the counterparts of CNN staff in the middle ages. Their intention is to describe every happening within their grasp, concentrating on meteorological phenomena, such as extreme weather conditions, earthquakes, solar and lunar eclipses etc. This information has recently attracted the attention of both historians and scientists, since systematic projects are at last underway for the study of the history of climate in several parts of the world. Coupled with excavations and stratigraphic research, this material is expected to assist scholars respond to such questions as «the great gap» of the 7th and 8th century, when we are practically left with no first-hand information of life conditions and activities within the Byzantine Empire.

One other characteristic of Byzantine chronographers especially of the early period, is their attempt to impose Christian explanations and morality, deliberately distorting aspects of ancient history and mythology in such a way that nothing would seem extraordinary to a Christian mind, and implying that no feasible achievements were ever met by pagans, except perhaps in the case of Romans, since their history coincided with the nation's heritage. Instructive of this tendency is the example of the 6th century chronicler John Malalas's narrative of the Trojan war¹. Not only is the whole setting altered as to resemble more a medieval romance than an ancient epic tale, but all power of ancient deities becomes extinct, and their qualities are interpreted allegorically and through a filter of Christian morality. Thus the famous story of the «apple of discord» vanishes completely, giving its place to an argument according to which, Paris, as a result of his good education, presented an encomiastic speech to Aphrodite, saying that there is no greater goddess than her, neither Hera, nor Athena: and our chronicler continues, «for he said that Aphrodite is desire, and everything

1. Book V p91-142. The standard edition is still that by Dindorf in the *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* series, Bonn 1831. There is now an English translation, *The Chronicle of John Malalas: a translation by Elizabeth Geffreys, Michael Geffreys and Roger Scott*, (et al), Melbourne 1986, the relevant passage on p. 45-76.



springs out of that very desire. It is for this reason that they say that Paris passed judgment in favour of Aphrodite and against Hera and Pallas, and gave the apple, i.e. victory, to Aphrodite»¹. From the narrative that follows, it becomes evident that his main interest is a depiction of the characteristics of women captives and the bleaker side of the Trojan war heroes, so as to relegate their portrait in the minds of his Christian readership.

This highly subjective perspective however, penetrates into historical facts as well. The same chronicler depicts favourably the reign of emperor Commodus (A.D. 176-192), otherwise regarded as a negative one, simply because he allowed Olympic games take place in Antioch, the chronicler's native city, thus increasing greatly the income to its public treasury². On the other hand, the 9th century chronicler Theophanes the Confessor who wrote one of the most respected chronographies, is full of wrath for the very healthy financial measures of emperor Nicephoros I who ruled at the beginning of the century, simply because the latter was an iconoclast emperor, while Theophanes was a staunch iconophile, during one of the most destructive controversies that befell Byzantium in its long history³.

The actual location of chronographers is, compared with that of the professional historians, far more essential in the formation of their perspective. Thus for the above mentioned chronicler John Malalas, minor events in his native Antioch can be of greater value than events of greater significance elsewhere in the Empire. In his original frustration as first-time reader, the modern historian may be comforted by discovering a whole range of data hidden under these pages, which pay prove effective evidence in portraying social life, local politics, customs and ideology. There is however, one serious drawback: early chroniclers are extensively reproduced by their later counterparts. This means that in several cases that we would expect our information to be supplemented by fresh material, we face the procreation of the same stories, sometimes in the same words. This inclination towards a massive audience or readership is also reflected in their more popular and more colloquial style, especially in the early period.

The famous philosopher and historian of the 11th century Michael Pselos can be credited with a breakthrough, since his *Chronographia*, can be

1. The translation is mine.

2. Book XII, p. 283-315. English translation p. 151-171.

3. In Turtledove's translation, p. 158-175.

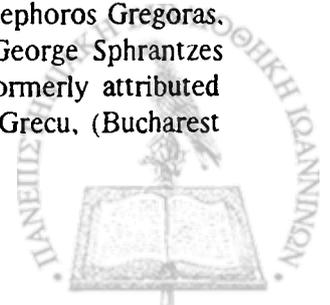


regarded as the earliest piece of modern historiography¹. Though entitled as a chronography, it has none of the features we should expect. It is a very humorous, vivid and skilfully biased description of his own times, just what we could call a chronicle in a modern sense, an account or the memoirs of someone intimate with a particular environment, i.e. the court. It would have been much to his dismay, if he had known that at approximately the same time, a similar genre was gradually finding its way among the «uneducated Latins», or Franks. The circumstances were of course, different. In Byzantium the accounts given were those of the personal career of the gentlemen who wrote them. This was largely due to historical circumstances, since the emergence of the Crusader states in the east, and the eventual capitulation of Constantinople to the Crusaders between 1204 and 1261, destroyed the illusion of the mighty empire with its impregnable capital. As the size of the Empire was gradually dwindling, the personal grasp of facts by writers increased. Thus such works as those of the 13th century historian George Acropolites, the 14th century Nicephoros Gregoras and John Cantacuzinos and the 15th century chronicle formerly attributed to George Sphrantzes², are personal accounts of their authors' career and life at court. Their administrative posts there, coupled with their inclusion in delegations abroad, all gave them the opportunity of a fairly accurate presentation of events in the surrounding world.

Nothing similar to the Byzantine chronography is to be found in the west. The term Chronicon, does describe events according to time sequence, but always based on a people's, leader's or town's deeds. When these were based on state or local records, as the case increasingly was after the 10th century, these took the name of Annales. The information supplied by them deals mainly with local dignitaries or the town's or monastery's relations with the central government, and also local events or invasions of local, proximal or more distant territories by either humans, or disease. Both

1. English translation by E.R.A. Sewter. *Michael Psellus fourteen Byzantine rulers*. Penguin classics, 1966 repr. 1979.

2. None of these authors has been translated into English. The standard edition for Acropolites is that by A. Heissenberg, Leipzig 1903 (ed. P. Wirth, Stuttgart 1978). For John Cantacuzinos' history the old edition of the *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* is still in use, ed. L. Schopen, vol. I-III, Bonn 1828-1832. The same applies to Nicephoros Gregoras, ed. L. Schopen, vol. I-III, Bonn 1829-1855. The authentic chronicle of George Sphrantzes (*Chronicon minus*) has been edited together with the *Chronicon maius*, formerly attributed to him, but now established as belonging to Makarios Melissinos, by V. Grecu, (Bucharest 1966).



chronology and sequence of events are generally confused, but it is possible to reconstruct them far more effectively than in the case of Byzantine writings, because the same facts may be included in several totally irrelevant sources which, in the case of barbarian invasions for instance, may help us follow their route, and thus time them more precisely. So it is possible for us to rule out the erroneous data supplied by a particular source, with regard to both chronology and event.

The chivalrous spirit which gradually affected the west, and the westerner's immensely greater chances of travel than those of his Byzantine counterpart, all helped create a far more developed form of personal accounts there, which culminated with the famous narratives of the Crusades and the Crusader states. In the later middle ages, these took an even greater personal form as the supreme naval powers of the time, Venice and Genoa, relied on reports sent by their officials both from Constantinople and their colonies. As time went on, their military and civil staff increased and often included younger members of the same noble families of the city-states, who left us valuable testimonies of major events they encountered, such as that of the Venetian Nicolo Barbaro on the siege of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453, who was lucky enough to escape on the eve of its sack¹.

Time is another factor that needs to be taken into consideration when an opinion is to be passed on a historical work. This is more apparent in Byzantine literature, in which there exists a deliberate attempt to block its revelation by a static form of writing, and in many cases by an attempt to produce a sense of continuity by relating contemporary races to ancient, irrelevant forerunners, as the example of John Malalas can demonstrate: in narrating the events of the Trojan war, he describes the Myrmidons of Achilles as «those who are now called Bulgars»², or by exactly the opposite means as stated above, Turks are referred to as Massagetans. Such attempts to eliminate the factor of time can have a positive aspect in that events that have taken place several centuries before, are portrayed with the ideology and conditions prevailing during the writer's own time, and they give us a far more accurate sense of current beliefs, than any other, more direct description. This same problem may affect western historical literature

1. Nicolo Barbaro, *Giornale dell'assedio di Costantinopoli 1453*, ed. E. Cornet, (Vienna 1856). Translated by J. R. Jones, *Nicolo Barbaro, Diary of the Siege of Constantinople* (New York 1969).

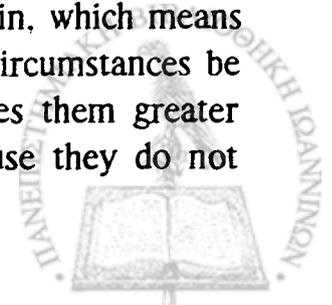
2. Book V p. 97. English translation, p. 48.



as well, but, as its lifespan is shorter than that of Byzantium, it is more a question of exaggeration or deliberate falsification of events to suit the requirements of a particular age or sovereign, rather than an attempt towards continuity, whose significance greatly diminishes after the 9th century. It is also important to point out that, although writers of later newcomers try to assign their heritage to an ancient or older cult, such as that of Magyar historians towards the Huns and Attila, they do not really assimilate themselves with them, because even though they allot to them various aspects of their culture or traditions, they are proud of their modern name and heritage.

Considering the question of social attitudes in a more general framework, we must conclude that it is more a perplexing than an assisting one. If we take medieval literature as a whole, we can easily discover that the vast majority of its representatives, is in some way attached to the higher social ranks, either via their career, status, or level of education. It is in the case of Byzantium that this problem poses a greater challenge, and especially with chroniclers, for within professional historians and later writers of the third, the memoir type of chronicle described above, dislike for the deeds and acts of working classes is only too obvious. Chroniclers however, that wrote chronographies of the second type, are as a result of their style and type of information given, believed to have written for the masses. This is certainly true for the most popular of them such as Malalas, or the 7th century anonymous *Chronicon Pascale*. Nonetheless, one of the most scholarly of emperors, Constantine VII Porphyrogenetus, prefers to quote the largest chunks of material explicitly stated to have been borrowed from an earlier source, from the chronicler Theophanes Confessor, who himself borrowed much of his material from earlier chronicles. Constantine makes this use in his most confidential treatise, the *De Administrando Imperio*, in which he instructs his son Romanos how to deal with the Empire's neighbours. We must therefore reshape our attitudes, no longer accepting that chronographies were written and esteemed by the masses only. This problem can thus find some plausible solution only by isolating the chroniclers' view on particular themes which are socially sensitive, and see if their message affects the higher or at least, the educated ranks of society.

For the west things are simpler, because western historians, no matter of what background, write for a readership that knows Latin, which means it has a minimum of education. Their works could in no circumstances be orally transmitted to a wider audience. This situation gives them greater flexibility if they tackle socially sensitive questions, because they do not

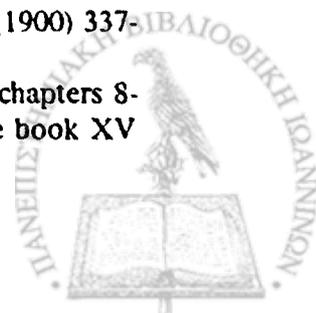


have to take sides. It is therefore quite natural to find a positive attitude towards the comonners of the author's locality, when works of a primarily local perspective, such as that by Thomas of Split mentioned above, are composed.

Turning to educational standards, it is important to forget our notion of an educated and an uneducated person and ponder more over the breadth of this education, as well as its dependence on Christian principles prevailing at a particular period, or social rank. For we must assume that even the humbler chronicler had had a minimum of elementary education. It has nevertheless, been argued with valid points that many of the lowly Byzantine chroniclers and especially Malalas, were far more educated men, and in the latter's case he is to be identified with a Constantinopolitan Patriarch, John Scholastikos¹. If a more conservative wing of Byzantinists to which the present writer belongs in this case, finds this view somewhat extreme, it could not be regarded as such to suggest that the daughter of emperor Alexios I Comnenos, Anna, who wrote her work in a highly antiquarian polished style, was perhaps not as educated as it might appear at first. Byzantine aristocrats that resided in a big cultural centre such as Constantinople, could take advantage of the presence of the best teachers of ancient literature, grammar, syntax and rhetoric. It is widely believed however, that the knowledge of ancient authors was to a great extent, superficial, as it was based on selected anthologies. Although some really sensitive passages can be found in Anna, she appears to lack curiosity and rather insensitive towards those who held a different opinion. She also declines to provide an explanation towards her intolerant attitude in the condemnation of the famous philosopher John Italos which she envisages with great joy, or the death of heretical leaders². In this respect we could say that the historians of the 6th century are more educated, even if their style is not so perfect. They do not lack an interest to intrude, collect and present information of lands and peoples far beyond their control. They still have the advantage of belonging to the one universal Roman Empire, rather than the Roman Empire of Byzantium, as opposed to the Holy

1. This view, rejected by modern scholars, was put forward by J. Haury, «Johannes Malalas identisch mit dem Patriarchen Johannes Scholastikos?», *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 9(1900) 337-356. See translation p. XXII.

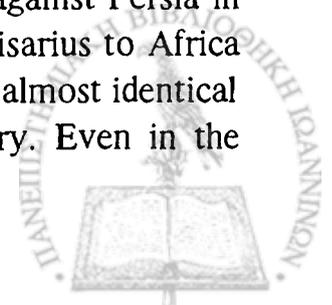
2. For the condemnation of the philosopher John Italos see *Alexiad*, Book V chapters 8-9, Sewter p. 173-180. For the burning of the leaders of the heretic Bogomiles, see book XV chapter 8-10, Sewter p. 496-504.



Roman Empire of Germany. The criteria therefore we must apply in determining a writer's education are in my opinion, more to do with his knowledge of the world, his perception of existing trends of ideology, a balanced view of Court and Church affairs, and a greater understanding of the action of peoples outside the Empire.

Conditions of western historians are in this aspect, very different. With the exception of the historians that lived in areas where Roman traditions were strong such as Italy, southern France and Spain in the 5th and 6th century, who could receive the customary classical education, all the others were educated in church institutions until a more organised form of secular education emerged in the 11th century. Although most of their works aim at presenting the deeds of a particular race, monastery, ruler or commune, they could all benefit from the universally acknowledged supreme position of Latin education throughout a vast area of Europe. Latin also had the advantage of less stylistic flexibility than Greek, which meant that for those chroniclers and historians who had no idea of the importance of rhetoric, it was much easier to communicate with each other. Several of them composed their work in monasteries which lay far away from their place of origin. This went a long way towards creating a more common heritage, and the modern scholar has to be quite experienced, if he tries to decipher only from a text's form of Latin, its author's origin. This is perhaps easier with western Slav or Magyar writers, who appear on the scene after medieval Latin had gone through its first phase, and whose languages were far less associated with that language than Germans, or Englishmen were. In the later middle ages, the formation of institutions of higher education known as universities in areas ruled by different princes, went a long way to promote scholarly competition, hence works of a higher standard, hence communication and contacts, hence travel.

It is this last question I would like to tackle now. It is characteristic that throughout Byzantine literature, the indications of writers that they have undertaken travel are very few, and in the existing cases, this venture is regarded as a miserable necessity to be avoided at all cost. This static feeling penetrates their writing as well as perspective of the world. In earlier centuries, military expeditions far away acted as the means of improving a writer's travel education. Thus, the 4th century Syrian historian Ammianus Marcellinus accompanied emperor Julian in his expedition against Persia in 362, and Procopius accompanied the Byzantine general Belisarius to Africa in 533, and to Italy after 536. But thereafter, writing became almost identical with residence in some urban environment, or a monastery. Even in the



last centuries of Byzantium's existence, when many of the writers had to undertake some travel as state-officials, they show little sensitivity and curiosity to absorb new incentives that they found in their locations of travel. In the west on the other hand, travel was largely a matter of life, either to reside at some well-known establishment far away, or in search of communication with other scholars, or to stay and work as some dignitary's employees. The universal use of Latin facilitated this trend, and the expansion toward new lands, first to eastern Europe and then to the levant, brought fresh impetus to the narration of things «unfamiliar» to a more curious readership. Besides the many valuable accounts surviving from the later middle ages, the inevitable deliberate or accidental distortion which received more than its fair share of the pie, went a long way towards retaining the animosity between Latins and Greeks, Latins and Slavs, or Latins and Moslems.

The observations made in the course of this paper lead us inevitably to consider the degree of sincerity on the writer's part, in supplying us with a particular piece of information as opposed to deliberate distortion. To the extent that this question can be answered, I would say that the vast majority of them coordinated their information with some religious, moral or historical conviction. They seriously believe what they say, and are trapped in this belief, just as we are in our fair or otherwise, criticism of them. It is important not to forget that even at the beginning of the modern era, Christopher Columbus discovered a new sea-route, travelled to a new land three times, and died in the sincere belief that he had discovered the «Indies». I can only feel sympathy for his shock, if he came to realise that I am addressing to you in this new land, «my American Audience!».



ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η ΡΟΗ ΤΩΝ ΠΛΗΡΟΦΟΡΙΩΝ ΣΤΗ ΜΕΣΑΙΩΝΙΚΗ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΟΓΡΑΦΙΑ

του

Παναγιώτη Αντωνόπουλου

Ο τρόπος με τον οποίο γίνονταν κατανοητά τα γεγονότα καθώς και η προοπτική με την οποία αυτά αντιμετωπίζονταν κατά τη μεσαιωνική περίοδο ήσαν τελείως διαφορετικοί σε σύγκριση με τη σημερινή εποχή. Ακόμη και κατά τη διάρκεια της μεσαιωνικής περιόδου, οι ιδιαίτερες συνθήκες κάθε τόπου έθεταν τις προϋποθέσεις για σημαντικές αποκλίσεις στον τρόπο ερμηνείας τους. Στο άρθρο αυτό, που αποτελεί το γραπτό κείμενο μιας διάλεξης που ο συγγραφέας έδωσε στο Framingham State College της Μασσαχουσέττης τον Απρίλιο του 1992, επιχειρείται η ανάλυση τού τρόπου ροής των πληροφοριών σε δύο επίπεδα. Σε ένα πρώτο επίπεδο εξετάζονται θέματα όπως τα διαφορετικά ήθη της μεσαιωνικής ιστοριογραφίας, το πνευματικό και κοινωνικό υπόβαθρο των συγγραφέων καθώς και οι θέσεις που αυτοί παίρνουν απέναντι στην κοινωνία που περιγράφουν, το επίπεδο της παιδείας τους και οι γνώσεις τους για τον απώτερο γεωγραφικό και ιστορικό κόσμο.

Σε ένα δεύτερο επίπεδο επιχειρείται μια γενική σύγκριση ενός Βυζαντινού ιστοριογραφικού είδους με το αντίστοιχο δυτικό, όπως επίσης τα πλεονεκτήματα και οι δυσκολίες που οι συγγραφείς είχαν να αντιμετωπίσουν σε κάθε περίπτωση. Το τελευταίο ζήτημα που αναλύεται είναι ο βαθμός ειλικρίνειας των συγγραφέων κατά τη διατύπωση και την υποστήριξη των θέσεών τους, καθώς συχνά παρέχουν λανθασμένες, αλλοιωμένες ή διογκωμένες αναφορές. Το γενικό συμπέρασμα που προκύπτει από τη συζήτηση αυτών των θεμάτων είναι ότι στη μεγάλη πλειοψηφία τους οι ιστορικοί του μεσαίωνα είναι ειλικρινείς στις πεποιθήσεις τους όταν παρουσιάζουν μία άποψη, είναι δε το ίδιο παγιδευμένοι όσο και ο σημερινός ερευνητής κατά τη διατύπωση τής κριτικής του.

