The Origin of Byzantine Studies

by Mathieu Couderc

It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that Byzantine studies acquired their official scientific and academic status, after a long process involving rigorous selection of the documents that have survived to the present day.

Reviewed: Anne-Marie Cheny, *Le cercle des byzantinistes. Comment bibliothécaires, savants et voyageurs inventèrent Byzance (XVI^e^-XIX^e^ siècle)*, Paris, Belles-Lettres, 2024, 304 pp., €20.

Anne-Marie Cheny takes us on a journey through the twists and turns of the collection effort that brought to light the importance of Byzantine studies since the sixteenth century. Centering on the work of passionate individuals who often remained in the shadows of history, this book aims to reposition these scholars within their rich intellectual contexts. This study is supported by a meticulous presentation in which written documents are thoughtfully paired with illustrated plates—a key editorial choice for readers—but which also reflects the material significance these documents held for collectors.

From Ancient Rome to the Eastern Roman Empire

The book spans the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century. It thus begins at a time when manuscripts from the ancient Byzantine world were being collected by Renaissance Western Europe and influencing the thinking of humanists. These

documents were mostly written in Greek (and occasionally in Latin) and served to further the knowledge of a language that most European scholars had not yet fully mastered. The author explores the transition from intellectuals exclusively focused on the remains of the ancient Roman world to a field of study dedicated to an Eastern Empire whose unique characteristics were not immediately discernible.

This history is also one of naming. The subtitle explores how "Byzantium" was "invented"—as opposed to the Eastern Roman Empire, which endured for nearly a millennium after the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century. In fact, the terms "Byzantine Empire" and "Byzantine" were coined by these scholars to describe a society that saw itself as purely Roman. These thinkers thus gradually came to regard this historiographical subject as a distinct scholarly field separate from the rest of Roman history, bridging the gap between the ancient heritage and medieval Christian influences.

The circuitous path taken is that of a discipline that blossomed thanks to the efforts of antiquarians, who helped Byzantine studies gain recognition before sparking both scholarly (for example, the creation of the chair of Byzantine studies at the Sorbonne, entrusted to Charles Diehl in 1899) and popular enthusiasm (for example, French stage actress Sarah Bernhardt triumphing in the play *Théodora* in 1910). It is, ultimately, the story of the judgment passed on an empire so difficult to classify.

The opening of the book focuses on a key figure among these intellectuals, Charles Dupuy, who laid the foundations for Byzantine studies in the sixteenth century. The author resituates the scholar within the intellectual context that sparked his passion for collecting Byzantine manuscripts, going beyond a simple biography. She focuses on Dupuy's family and friends (such as the support of Cardinal Ippolito d'Este), who instilled in him a love of antiquity and a desire to seek out documents from the Roman era. Access to the major libraries of his time enabled him to refine his knowledge. Dupuy acted like a true antiquarian; he showed a keen curiosity as a professional expert in these ancient objects, particularly rare and original written documents.

In this chapter, Anne-Marie Cheny makes a point that she regularly returns to in her analysis: Byzantine studies stem from misinterpretations of documents that were believed to be Roman and ancient, when in fact they were not. Byzantine studies thus also came about as a result of misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Because of these errors, certain documents were preserved before being gradually reexamined

and better understood. These were the early days when the circle of Byzantinists first formed.

Knowledge transfer through selection

The book then examines the important link between the teaching of the Greek language, which developed in Western Europe in the fifteenth century, and the search for manuscripts. In the wake of the tragic events that befell the Byzantine world—the loss of the last Greek territories in Asia Minor and Greece, and the siege of Constantinople in 1453—there arose a desire to preserve the ancient Roman culture that Byzantium was believed to have upheld for many centuries. Thus, the last great Greek scholars and professors of the fifteenth century—namely Manuel Chrysoloras (1355–1415), Demetrios Chalkokondyles (1423–1511), and Janus Lascaris (1445–1535), acted as transmitters of the Greek language and conveyors of ancient texts to a Western audience increasingly thirsty for knowledge. Manuel Chrysoloras was a close associate of the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaiologos (1391–1425) who served his sovereign as a diplomat and renowned professor of Greek in Florence, Milan, and Paris. Demetrios Chalkokondyles was also a highly esteemed professor of Greek in Italy, where he emigrated shortly before the fall of Constantinople. He was a member of an important circle of Greek scholars in exile, including Cardinal Bessarion (1403–1472). His work was primarily focused on preserving Byzantine Greek culture (through, for example, a grammar and an edition of Homer). Finally, Janus Lascaris, also a scholar, entered the service of King Louis XII of France and helped establish the first libraries containing original Greek manuscripts, such as the one in Blois.

These scholars were soon succeeded by Western travelers such as Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq (1522–1592), who decided to go directly to the East to seek out manuscripts, since the Byzantine Greek tradition had dried up by the end of the fifteenth century. These travelers were usually aware of the importance of their missions: they collected and sent back to the West everything they could find, even if it meant occasionally mistakenly uncovering texts that had no relation to what their patrons wanted. During these collection efforts, it was inevitable that selections would be made. Consequently, it was primarily classical and theological texts that interested sixteenth-century scholars. Some texts (medical treatises, charters, or accounting records) were deemed of interest by these researchers and set aside. In letters exchanged with his patrons, Busbecq expressed his belief that most of the documents

found were not rare; even so, to be on the safe side, he sent them to his sponsors. However, many of the manuscripts unearthed were anything but trivial. For example, one of the finds was a register from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, which is considered priceless today.

From this period onwards, European humanists, particularly printers, began to make use of the knowledge contained in these manuscripts; they realized that these rediscovered documents were rare and fragile, and needed to be published to prevent their contents from being lost. These manuscripts were also a vital source of business for certain printers specializing in the publication of ancient texts. Thus, the author examines the close, albeit tumultuous, relationship between two figures of the European Renaissance: the philologist Hieronymus Wolf (1516-1580) and the banker Anton Fugger (1493-1560). Wolf is known for authoring a *Corpus Historiae Byzantinae* that all scholars interested in Byzantine history (such as Dupuy and, later, Peiresc) kept in their libraries. This Corpus was a collection of chronicles dating from the fourth to the fifteenth century, most of which were still little known in Europe. This work, and Wolf's broader philological output, was made possible by the financial support of the banker Fugger, a crucial contribution since he funded printers such as Johannes Oporinus and Henri Estienne, who published classical texts (Isocrates, Demosthenes, Dionysius of Halicarnassus) and Byzantine texts (Joannes Zonaras and Nicephorus Gregoras) that Wolf had unearthed, annotated, and commented on.

Cheny demonstrates that this search for manuscripts lies at the heart of the intellectual reflections and exchanges that underpinned the philhellenism of sixteenth-century intellectuals. Led by Hieronymus Wolf, they all became Hellenists by studying these texts. They were constantly on the lookout for new discoveries and were adept at applying a critical eye to them. Similarly, they became experts in the authentication of manuscripts, meticulously analyzing what rendered a document authentic or not. Along with their patrons, they contributed to the editing and translation of these rare and fragile documents

From Peiresc's work to the emergence of Byzantine studies

The next two chapters are devoted to the book's central figure: Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580–1637), who played a pivotal role in establishing Byzantine

studies as an increasingly independent discipline. This humanist from Provence influenced the greatest scholars, who would carry on his work of editing, translating, and critiquing ancient literary works discovered by his envoys in the East. Of particular note is his painstaking effort to build what was an unparalleled library. His network of correspondents and special envoys fostered the exchange of information and knowledge about the Byzantine Empire. Although readers may occasionally struggle to follow the text as it shifts between Peiresc's biography and an analysis of his intellectual work, it is important to note that from this point on, Byzantine studies became a historiographical field in their own right, paving the way for the subsequent work of figures such as Charles Dufresne (1610-1688) and Guillaume du Vair (1566-1621). The first was a grammarian and philologist in the service of Louis XIV who published numerous Byzantine works (notably a monumental *Historia Byzantina*). As president of the parliament of Aix-en-Provence, a clergyman, and Keeper of the Seals under Louis XIII, he supported Peiresc's work, introduced him to Parisian parliamentary circles, and, with his considerable influence, helped him collect medieval Greek manuscripts. Above all, it was Peiresc's system for classifying manuscripts—organized around clear and relevant categories (theology, philology, history)—which, while drawing on older methods, facilitated the work of analyzing, comparing, and critiquing the documents.

Furthermore, the work of Peiresc and his contemporaries made it possible to use discoveries (especially in the field of theology) to influence the controversies of the time (reminiscent of the religious crisis that Christianity faced from the sixteenth century). Peiresc's work therefore stands as a monumental achievement, and the author brilliantly demonstrates this.

Finally, the political authorities were no strangers to this quest for manuscripts—quite the contrary. Often acting as patrons, princes aspired to build the most distinguished and prestigious libraries. In this regard, the efforts of the French royal court in the mid-seventeenth century were exemplary. Led by philologists such as Henri Valois, the France of Louis XIV invested in the acquisition of rare Oriental manuscripts, competing at the same time with Italy. Thus was formed the *Byzantine du Louvre*, a major collection of Byzantine documents assembled from 1648 onward, bringing together the works of key figures in Byzantine history such as John Zonaras and Nicetas Choniates, chroniclers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This undertaking marked the beginning of Byzantine studies in France: from then on, the world of modern scientific scholarship began to take shape. The merit of Anne-Marie

Cheny's work lies in providing us with the keys to understanding this historiographical phenomenon, which had previously been poorly understood.

Conclusion

To the majority of people, the Byzantine Empire still retains an air of exoticism and obscurity. It is the empire whose history schoolchildren learn about in a brief chapter comparing it to the Carolingian Empire. It is associated with the adjective "Byzantine"—which describes something excessively complex, bureaucratic or intricate. And yet, if the Byzantine Empire is not classified among the lesser-known empires and occupies a significant place in history—albeit one that remains difficult to pinpoint (Antiquity? The Middle Ages? The Roman Empire?)—it is thanks to the work of these scholars, whose careers are brilliantly highlighted in Anne-Marie Cheny's book.

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