Literature. No Longer the Cinderella of Byzantine Studies

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Abstract   This paper offers an overview of recent developments in philology and literary studies, arguing that the field has become more modern and inclusive, thus gaining a central place in Byzantine Studies at large. Three concepts are used to structure the discussion and target different areas of interdisciplinarity: metaphrasis, reception and hybridity. Theory is identified as crucial and necessary to the advancement of Byzantine Studies, along with an awareness of reception processes and our own role as scholars. Such a development, it is argued, can revitalise the study of Byzantium within the broader Humanities.

Keywords   Philology. Literature. Theory. Metaphrasis. Reception. Hybridity. Tradition.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Among Orchids and Cinderellas. – 3 Metaphrasis as Discursive Practice. – 4 Reception as a Modality of Change. – 5 Hybridity as Inevitable Process. – 6 Theory. Inescapable or a Cloud-Cuckoo-Land? – 7 No longer the Cinderella of Byzantine Studies.

1   Introduction

It is safe to say that philology has always had a central place in Byzantine Studies, since texts are crucial even to scholars with little or no interest in literature. Even Cyril Mango, who criticised Byzantine literature in his 1975 lecture so harshly that it took decades for the field to get over it, underlined the importance of texts to all Byzantinists (Mango 1975; Mullett 2021, 725). Needless to say, the need for texts does not equal an interest in literature, and even philological studies can be undertaken with no great attention to the literary aspects of the texts under examination. My aim here is not to censure such an approach, but rather to show how Byzantine philology has developed in recent years, becoming more modern and more inclusive, and how literary studies of Byzantine texts – both as part of and independent of such a development of philology – have become not only more frequent, but also more interdisciplinary and methodologically advanced. I hope to show here how such a development has led to a more central place of literary studies as an integral part of Byzantine Studies at large. Such a development can in turn, I argue, help put Byzantium back into the Humanities.

2   Among Orchids and Cinderellas

There is a general tendency for many disciplines in the Humanities to feel marginalised and under constant threat; in German, such disciplines go under the name *Orchideenfächer* – unnecessary disciplines in need of protection, not capable of surviving on their own. In times of new public management, philology is certainly not the only such discipline, but its identity is very much marked by a sense of being endangered. However, philology is not only one of the oldest disciplines, but also one that has managed to catch up with recent developments in, for instance, cognitive sciences and digital humanities; it is, in fact, considerably less dusty than some of its defenders seem to acknowledge. Most importantly, philology provides access to texts: a crucial basis for the study of history and the way in which history was produced. But of course, there is much more to philology than just the texts.

   Philology traditionally consists of textual criticism, linguistics and literary history, but literary studies should not be seen as a too recent addition – early on in the tradition, what must be seen as literary aspects were a significant part of the philological endeavour. So was literary criticism, even if the modern branch of that field came to Byzantine philology rather late and primarily through the pioneering work of Margaret Mullett. In a groundbreaking article published in 1990, Mullett noted that "literature is still the Cinderella of Byzantine

Studies", by which she meant that it was given a marginal place at conferences, congresses and in journals (Mullett 1990, 261-2). Thirty years after, I think we can breathe a sigh of relief and note that the hard of work of Mullett herself and others have led to a definite change. Not only has the interest in Byzantine literature grown, resulting in numerous editions, translations and studies of all kinds of texts, but literary criticism has also slowly gained a more or less self-evident place in the study of Byzantine texts. Mullett's call for historians to start treating texts as literature has been heard, resulting in numerous studies of the literariness of historiography.[1] There is still no complete literary history of Byzantium, but the purposeful work of Panagiotis Agapitos is taking us there (Agapitos 2015a; 2020), and as I write this, *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Literature*, edited by Stratis Papaioannou, has just been published (Papaioannou 2021).

This is not to say that we have reached our goal and can rest on our laurels, but we have certainly come a long way. This goes also for the place of literature in the field of Byzantine Studies. When John Haldon (2016, 5) summarised the development of Byzantine Studies in the fortieth anniversary volume of *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, he noted some aspects that concerned literary studies in particular:

> In particular issues of intertextuality, of authorial intention, of reception, and of the relativizing of cultural interpretive possibilities (in respect of our own perspective) have become part and parcel of scholarly discourse, thus greatly enriching our discipline.[2]

More importantly, Haldon (2016, 5) noted the significance of such progress for the field at large:

> I believe this shift also facilitated a much greater degree of cross-disciplinary reading, comparative thinking, and in respect of historical context and setting, a generally more open approach to the medieval west and the Islamic world in terms of both material and method.

Since Haldon made this observation, a new generation of scholars have taken on the challenge of developing new approaches, and in the following I will turn to recent examples of work that take on new

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1 Most notably Odorico, Agapitos, Hinterberger 2006; Nilsson, Scott 2007; Macrides 2010. See also Nilsson 2014, 87-111, and more recently Kinloch, MacFarlane 2019. Note also the plenary session in ICBS Belgrad 2016 on "How the Byzantines Wrote History", moderated by Ruth Macrides and with contributions by Leonora Neville, Warren Treadgold and Anthony Kaldellis in Marjanović-Dušanić 2016, 257-306.

2 By "discipline", Haldon most probably refers to Byzantine Studies as a whole, not just history; cf. Myrto Veikou's paper in the present volume.

theory and cross various traditional boundaries within or in relation to philological and literary studies. I will use three concepts to structure my discussion and target different areas of interdisciplinarity: metaphrasis, reception and hybridity. These in many ways overlapping concepts are central not only to literary studies, but for the overall study of Byzantine culture, society and history.

3   Metaphrasis as Discursive Practice

A central issue of any discussion of Byzantine literature has always been imitation – also for the Byzantines themselves. At the core lies, ultimately, the Byzantine relation to the so-called classical tradition and with that comes questions of originality and change. Alexander Kazhdan's emphasis on innovation and change was a decisive turning-point in the study of Byzantine texts, allowing for new ways of understanding and analysing texts. Kazhdans' work helped students and early career scholars to move away from disparaging views of Byzantine culture as marked by repetition of empty commonplaces while scholars like Mullett assisted in the discovery of modern criticism. Against that background, the step from imitation to inter- and transtextuality was not very large (e.g. Nilsson 2010; Marciniak 2013). The challenge, however, is not to start employing new terms for basically the same processes, but to also change hermeneutical approach; it is not enough to use the term intertextuality but still only be interested in locating 'sources' – we need to understand what kind of theoretical underpinning the terminology brings to the table.

While traditional *Quellenforshung* – still a backbone of philology – focuses on the use of previous texts, intertextuality in its original sense as used by the poststructuralist feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva aims to understand texts in a much larger picture (e.g. Kristeva 1980). Accepting such a perspective, that all texts are connected to other texts and other human expressions, can help us move away from the idea of mere 'influence' and instead look at looser connections and, more importantly, the creative process that is involved in imitating or alluding to previous or contemporary works. Moreover, it can help us take a step in at least two important directions of cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural analysis. First, thinking of intertextuality as a sociocultural phenomenon – a network of relations that characterise not only literature but also architecture, art and urban space – allows for fruitful comparison between textual and material culture. A recent example of such collaboration is a volume on "spoliation as translation", in which philologists, art historians and archaeologists use the same or similar methods to approach recycling in various kinds of material (Jevtić, Nilsson 2021). Second, thinking of literary connections as not only textual, but al-

so of stories as orally and culturally transmittable artefacts, we can move on to comparative studies without constantly focusing on textual dependence. A recent article by Carolina Cupane (2019) points us in such a direction by noting the "narrative koine" of the Middle Ages – a shared bulk of motifs and characters that travelled across linguistic and cultural borders.[3]

The interest in textual relations rather than dependence has made the transtextual model of Gérard Genette suitable for the study of Byzantine texts: they are clearly "palimpsestuous" in their layering of linguistic and literary traditions. A recent study by Stavroula Constantinou, "Metaphrasis. Mapping Premodern Writing", points at the crucial connection between rewriting as an inevitable part of creative writing and, in the words of Milan Kundera, "the spirit of our times", and rewriting in Byzantium. Rewriting is thus seen as "a persistent characteristic of Western literature from antiquity to the present" and Byzantine metaphrasis can finally be seen as a discursive practise shared by most times and cultures, no longer as mere repetition of the obsolete (Constantinou 2021, 4). Constantinou's useful analysis shows how fruitful the perspectives of modern criticism can be for the study of premodern texts and is accordingly indicative of current trends in our field. Progymnasmata and schedography are no longer seen as tedious exercises and testimonies of the educational cycles, but as crucial parts of a tradition of literary recycling that goes back to (at least) Homer and spans to current rewritings of the Trojan story stuff by authors like Pat Barker and Natalie Haynes. Byzantinists should thus be aware of the use of Byzantium in the award-winning science fiction novels by Arkady Martine as well as the presence of Empress Theodora in the videogame *Civilization V. Gods and Kings*.[4]

The way in which we understand rewriting has also been affected by an increasing interest in the sociopolitical aspects of literature. While such angles were investigated decades ago by Mullett and others in their study of Byzantine performance culture and *theatra*, it took some time for the approach to become an integrated part of the field. Now, the study of Byzantine texts in the large majority of cases includes rather an entire chain of circumstances: the materiality of the text, the social situation of its author, the performance of the text and its audience, its circulation and later reception (e.g. Bourbouhakis 2017; Shawcross, Toth 2018; Papaioannou 2021). Here, too, the

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[3] For similar comparative approaches, see Priki 2019 and Söderblom Saarela 2019, the latter discussed in Nilsson 2021b, 30-1.

[4] Behind the pen name Arkady Martine is Byzantinist Anna Linden Weller with the two novels *A Memory Called Empire* (2018) and *A Desolation Called Peace* (2020). On videogames and Antiquity/Byzantium, see Vázquez-Miraz, Matos, Freire 2020; Fasolio, forthcoming.

significance of rewriting is crucial. While the use of the Greek heritage in Byzantium used to be seen primarily as a way of showing off one's learning, scholars are now interested in what that use actually means: why a certain citation was placed here, why a 'tragic' or 'epic' style was relevant for this particular story, or in what way it was relevant for a writer to adopt the voice of an ancient author for this performance. Not only were texts in the Byzantine culture palimpsestuous, so were narrative strategies and authorial voices (Nilsson 2021a). Rewriting has cultural, social and political meaning.

Rewriting, finally, does not end with the Byzantine practices; it includes also our own translation efforts and interpretation. In a recent book by Adam Goldwyn (2021), it is noted how translation choices entail ideologically tainted interpretations that seriously affect subsequent readings of the passages in question. In this particular case, Goldwyn argues that the emotional quality of the work – Eustathios' *Capture of Thessalonike* – is suppressed in favour of the translator's – John Melville-Jones – understanding of it as historiography:

> Indeed, in this light, Melville-Jones' decision as translator of the work to render *pathos* under the neutral framework of "experience" or similar rather than the more emotionally-freighted "suffering" is suggestive of a view of the work as historiography rather than testimony; the process of translation thus becomes not just a transfer of languages from Greek to English but also of genre and interpretation from affective witness testimony into objective (and thus dispassionate) historiography. (Goldwyn 2021, 62)

A fuller understanding of both rewriting processes, including our own part in that chain of transmission, along with the import of new approaches from affective and cognitive studies will certainly help us become better readers of both Byzantine sources and our predecessors in the field. In the future, Goldwyn's reading of Eustathios as witness literature will probably be interpreted in a cultural and/or political context of which we may not even yet be aware. Every translator and every philologist is part of a long chain of interpretation, whether they know it or not.[5]

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5 This awareness has not quite reached Byzantine Studies, but is finally being discussed in Classics; see e.g. the recent discussions on ideological and gendered translation practices by Emelie Wilson, the first woman translator of the *Odyssey* into modern English. See Wilson 2017, esp. 86; 2020.

4 Reception as a Modality of Change

First of all, let me admit that reception and metaphrasis overlap in many significant ways. Metaphrasis is a kind of reception, and reception most often contains metaphrasis. Here they are used as separate categories for structural purposes, but they are both marked by intertextuality in the Kristevan sense: all text belongs in a social context which means that it is inevitably connected and contextualised (Kristeva 1980; Nilsson 2021b, 22-3). And the last example of the previous section clearly involves reception: our translations and interpretations of Byzantine texts is part of the reception of Byzantium. One could perhaps say that the term 'reception' has partly replaced that of 'tradition' over the past few decades, placing the emphasis on active appropriation rather than on a kind of effortless but preservative transfer of a canon. The influence from other fields in the Humanities and Social Sciences is clear, making us more aware of the complexities of 'cultural transfer' and the problems of 'cultural appropriation'. This has helped Byzantinists to move away from the idea of (the classical) tradition as stable and understand that innovation exists within the frames of convention. Tradition is not a solid entity; it is an ongoing process and, more importantly, a modality of change.

This ties in with what I said above about rewriting having cultural, social and political meaning. The use of a 'tradition' is very helpful in order to convince people of something's value. A contemporary example with which we are all sadly familiar is the way in which nationalist and populist movements all over Europe now draw upon folklore imagery, so-called Christian values, or the idea of a unified 'Europe' that never really existed (Heilo, Nilsson 2017; Vukašinović 2021). Fiction and popular science can easily be used for promoting such ideas, selling themselves thanks to the awareness of a 'joint tradition'. Another example, partly related and still surprisingly prevalent in both scholarly and popular circles, is the notion of a pure ancient Greek culture, untouched by oriental or Barbarian influence. It is useful to remember Jan Assman's idea, developed in relation to collective memory and cultural identity, that change in society must be legitimised as non-change – otherwise people are unlikely to follow (Assman 1992). In practice, this means that tradition is often invented, as has been argued in the case of modern nation building and the creation of national identity.

Byzantine texts offer so many instances of such processes that it is difficult to choose one example, but the *Patria of Constantinople* is a case in point. It represents the invention of a patriographical tradition, based on earlier material but probably compiled at some point in the tenth century in order to create a unified tradition of the capital. In fact, Constantinople itself is a material example of such constant reinvention in terms of a glorious past or glorious parallels, as in the

launching of Constantinople as the New Rome. It is a palimpsestuous city, marked by spoliation, recycling, rewriting, but yet claimed by many as 'theirs' and a constant object of cultural, religious and political contest. Tradition, then, can look very different depending on whose version it presents, and scholarly literature is not entirely free from such contesting and preservative narratives. Such narratives – that is, scholarly narratives that reproduce not only the Byzantine sources, but also each other – have only recently been subject to investigation by Matthew Kinloch and Milan Vukašinović (Kinloch 2018; Vukašinović 2019). Both scholars approach the material from a narratological perspective, combining it with modern approaches to history and ideology respectively. The result is refreshingly provocative, reminding us that we too, as scholars, repeat and thus preserve the tradition we are set to examine (see also Kinloch, MacFarlane 2019). And as noted by Leonora Neville in her excellent book *Byzantine Gender*, the Byzantine empire is bound to change with us, because our representations change with our approaches and interpretations (Neville 2019, 87-92).

Even more traditional philology is increasingly marked by this trend. In a long series of articles investigating the history of the study of Byzantine literature, Agapitos (2015b; 2017a; 2019) has shown how the way in which our study objects have been selected and examined has been marked by numerous political and ideological choices, subsequently repeated and preserved by scholars. To expose such paradigms may be seen as disturbing and even insulting, but it is necessary in order to properly understand our field and our own place in it. Agapitos' quest may be seen as an internal affair for philologists, but considering the crucial function of texts in Byzantine Studies at large, it is rather a concern we should all share, not least historians. Just like the exposures made by Kinloch and Vukašinović, mentioned above, such engagements with our research history are crucial for moving on and keeping up with developments in the Humanities and Social Sciences at large.

Another undertaking in recent years – less provocative but very important for our movement forward – is the new approach to different kinds of Byzantine commentaries: from scholia and book epigrams to paraphrases and more traditional commentaries. The Database of Byzantine Book Epigrams (DBBE), based in Ghent, has been instrumental in the change in attitude, not only making the material available but also underlining its importance from the cultural and literary perspective. It is a good example of how new methods drawn from Digital Humanities (digital editions and online collections allowing for searches and big data investigations) can be fruitfully combined with traditional philological investigations (textual criticism and close readings). Another recent addition is the online publication of a new critical edition and English translation of the *Com-*

mentary on the Odyssey by Eustathios of Thessalonike, published by Brill, so unfortunately not open access (Cullhed, Olson 2020). Such endeavours are bound to lead to more study of the texts and, moreover, a greater awareness of Byzantine texts beyond our own circles.

In a forthcoming volume on Byzantine commentaries on ancient Greek texts, a new and more inclusive approach is clear. In their introduction, Baukje van den Berg and Divna Manolova describe commentary-writing as a creative engagement with ancient texts and as "a targeted enterprise of identity building" on the part of the commentators, indicating an awareness of one's place in a long tradition rather than an unreflected focus on a glorious past. As van den Berg and Manolova note (Van den Berg, Manolova, Marciniak, forthcoming), "Fashioning oneself as another link in the chain of commentators perhaps brought additional cultural capital we cannot fully recognize yet".[6] When commentaries are thus allowed to include very different kinds of texts, including elaborate rewritings like Theodore Prodromos' Lucianic satires, and then read as a means of shedding light on Byzantine attitudes towards their ancient heritage, we have left behind the idea of Byzantine commentaries as containers of ancient material for classical philologists to harvest and present devoid of context. Commentaries make up an important and fruitful part of the Byzantine endeavour of rewriting and recycling, and while they may still be seen as "somehow subordinated" in relation to the texts they comment on, recent work shows how primary they can be for our understanding of Byzantine culture (Bértola 2021, 11).

An important aspect of the increasing interest in and updated approach to Byzantine commentaries is that it allows us to go beyond both philological-literary concerns and the Greek-speaking part of the Byzantine empire. Commentaries deal not only with ancient Greek authors, but also with the Bible, philosophy, medicine and science, which allows for interconnectedness and dialogue with other languages and cultures (e.g. Bydén, Radovic 2018). Tradition as a chain of receptions thus expands and evolves, reaching beyond the traditional view of Byzantium as a combination of Greek, Roman and Christian. Traditional boundaries between genres are dissolved (a commentary can also be a paraphrase, a paraphrase a highly individual work of self-fashioning), as are those between learned and vernacular, religious and profane, and the modern reception of Byzantium becomes more relevant for our understanding of what is Byzantine in a larger perspective. The study of modern reception is much more than entertaining or curious details about films, novels or commercials drawing on Byzantine imagery; it is also the story of how

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6 Cf. recent studies of Byzantine authors' self-fashioning after ancient models, esp. Lovato 2021 with references.

our field came about and what contributions we can make in a world where unsolicited uses of Byzantium for populist, sexist and nationalistic purposes abound.[7]

5 Hybridity as Inevitable Process

Metaphrasis as a discursive practice and reception as a modality of change inevitably leads to an intense mixing of ideas, forms and expressions. I have often been reluctant to use the term 'hybrid' because it seemed to imply the combination of preexisting clear-cut categories and thus carried a certain notion of something gone wrong. After being introduced to other ways of looking at hybridity, drawn from Cultural Studies, I have changed my mind and think that we need this term in order to describe what characterises most Byzantine literature and culture. The main reason for this need is the overall academic urge for neat dichotomies, for instance between tradition and change, repetition and innovation, Christian and pagan, and for clear distinctions between periods and intellectual trends, for example between classical and postclassical, Second Sophistic and Late Antique, Late Antique and Byzantine. While a certain change can be seen in neighbouring fields, we are still largely dominated by such Linnean thinking and I believe it hinders our scholarly imagination.

Criticism and discussions of cultural dichotomies are by no means new. Homi Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity' is a way of working against bipolar distinctions:

> Hybridity to me is the third space that enables other positions to emerge. The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation. (Bhabha 1990, 211, cit. in Veikou 2016, 151)

It is exactly this new area of negotiation that should interest us, emerging in the new study of rewriting and reception noted above. And it is certainly not just a concern for the study of literature and art, but for culture and society at large. In cultural geography, similar reactions against clear-cut distinctions were voiced in the 1990s, most notably by Edward Soja (1996; see Veikou 2016, 152) in his notion with the complex name "thirding as othering". What Soja wanted to achieve was similar to Bhabha's "third space" mentioned above: he wanted to introduce the space that is placed in-between. His aim

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[7] On the latter, see Goldwyn 2018a. As I am writing this, at least two edited volumes on reception are in the making: Kulhánkova, Marciniak forthcoming; Bhalla, Kotoula forthcoming.

was accordingly to break out of established interpretation schemes and mainstream bipolar schemes.

Regardless of whether we work with geography or not, these are crucial considerations to us as scholars in general and historians in particular. Soja wished to respond to all binarisms, to any attempt to confine thought and action to only two alternatives. In such a model, the original binary choice is not entirely dismissed, but it is subjected to a creative process of restructuring, drawing the scholar selectively and strategically from two opposite categories to new alternatives. Most of us have not been trained to look for such alternatives; on the contrary, we have been trained to look for that one specific answer to a question, never (or rarely) for the in-between. Constantinople again offers good examples of how this works in practice. Geographically, the spatial structure of settlements from various periods cannot easily be divided into urban and rural. The periodisation of the city's history poses constant challenges: when did Constantinople stop being late antique and become Byzantine, and to what extent was it still Byzantine under early Ottoman rule? We can also move to cultural micro-levels and consider, in the case of Byzantine literature, the dichotomy between learned and vernacular texts, verse and prose, Christian and pagan. In all cases, the scholarly discussion would gain from considering various middle positions.

Scholars moving in such directions have already been noted above, with Agapitos as the most ardent opponent to traditional distinctions between learning and vernacular, Christian and pagan (Agapitos 2015a; 2017b; Nilsson 2021a, 116-17). In a similar vein, Nikos Zagklas has argued for less clear boundaries between the different settings of court poetry in twelfth-century Constantinople, bringing in the concept of "communicating vessels" (from hydraulic technology) in order to describe how three settings in particular overlapped and cannot be clearly distinguished from one another: the court, the rhetorical *theatra* and the classroom (Zagklas 2014, 73-87). Another modern concept for describing processes at work in twelfth-century literature has been brought in by Eric Cullhed, referring to certain kinds of texts that combine education with entertainment as "edutainment" (from the media world) (Cullhed 2016, 11*). Previous needs to define genres and settings as separate are now thwarted by such in-between positions, often influenced by "travelling concepts" from other fields (Bal 2002). Just like past societies profit from being looked at from such angles, avoiding binary interpretation, our own scholarly process profits from the bringing in of concepts and ideas from other fields – cross-disciplinary hybridity is as important to accept as are any crossings noted in the material we study. This ties in with the present interest in identity and the seemingly endless quest for who the Byzantines really were, how they identified themselves, and how they saw the Other (Durak, Jevtić 2019; Vukašinović 2020).

The growing awareness of and interest in the Byzantine engagement with non-Greek societies have led to new attempts to situate Byzantium within the entangled medieval world of the Mediterranean, both diachronically and geographically. Relations with the medieval west have been more or less part of the scholarly tradition from the start, and also the connections between Byzantium and the Arab world, or Byzantium and China (now with the PAIXUE project[8] at the University of Edinburgh), have received quite a bit of attention for a while, but the encounters and interactions between Greek-speaking Byzantines and Turkish-speaking groups have often been mentioned in passing rather than properly investigated.[9] A recent monograph by Buket Kitapçı Bayrı hopefully represents a turning-point, presenting readers with a comparative investigation of Byzantine and Turkish sources, focusing on formations of identity in liminal spaces (Kitapçı Bayrı 2020). The importance of Kitapçı Bayrı's work is not only that is presents Byzantinists with texts that are often not read or even known to us, but also that it offers a modern and useful approach to both identity and space – two concepts that are very much in vogue right now and which are central to most discussions of cross-cultural interaction.

The inevitable processes of hybridity that appear in societies marked by rewriting and reception have already been noted in the case of commentaries, but it could be said to imbue Byzantine production on the whole – again, not just in traditionally cultural expressions but also in areas like law, military and politics. Indeed, all of Byzantine society could fruitfully be seen in terms of Bhabha's "area of negotiation of meaning and representation", not only as a constantly changing continuation of ancient and late antique (Greek) traditions, but also as a multilingual empire in regular and intense contact with neighbouring societies, perhaps politically fragmented but still culturally entangled. This means that we have to work together – philologists with historians, archaeologists and art historians – in order to better understand not only what we study, but also who we are as scholars.

6 Theory. Inescapable or a Cloud-Cuckoo-Land?

Much in this essay has been focused on new theoretical and methodological perspectives, simply because such developments have marked philological and literary studies in the last ten years. New ways of

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8 http://paixue.shca.ed.ac.uk/.

9 Significant exceptions are provided in the work by Alexander Beihammer and Nevra Necipoğlu, offering fruitful directions for future studies in history.

working (databases, digital editions, webinars) have created new ways of approaching the material, and more material has been made available in new editions and translations. But a large part of the texts we study remain the same, especially when it comes to what happened in the central parts of the empire and the capital, or at crucial moments in the history of Byzantium. This is where the need for new ways of looking at the material comes in. If we cannot manage that, we will end up merely repeating what has already been said, perhaps with slight variation, or contradicting it, according to the binary model examined above. An additional advantage of bringing in modern theory is that it opens for interdisciplinary collaboration and cross-fertilisation – by interpreting the same material from different angles, we are forced to think differently, or at least to take other positions into consideration. As importantly, new approaches offer us a way to reach out to other fields and talk about our material in a way that they understand, which could make Byzantine Studies less insular.

But let us admit that philology still is a conservative field where modern theory is not always welcome, which could perhaps be said for parts of Byzantine Studies at large. In philology, the usefulness of theory is being questioned, and 'simply reading the texts' with the use of 'common sense' is still rather often put forward as a sensible way of approaching the literary production of past societies; they are simply our 'sources'. In a similar way, the historical 'evidence' is often seen as the only way to reach any knowledge, as in Peter Sarris' argument that social history "must be written on the basis of the primacy of practical reason and a pragmatic approach to the evidence" (2009, 94). The question is how we can approach anything without a specific set of ideas in mind; *theory*, which should be clear to any Greek-speaking or Greek-reading Byzantinist, is how we *see* things; *method* is how we *do* things. A theory is not the same thing as a hypothesis, so while much research in recent years has been hypothesis-driven, that does not mean that it is theorised or even theoretically aware. In order to be scholars – or even to write a BA thesis – we need to make up our mind not only about the material and the questions we want to ask, but also how we look at it and how we will carry out our investigation.

While Sarris sees theorisation of the field as an ascent "to a methodological Cloud-cuckoo-land that only leads one further away from life as if was actually lived by *homo byzantinus*" (2009, 94), many scholars would now argue that we cannot have immediate access to that life, or even that there is no such thing as a typical *homo byzantinus*. However, such disagreement does not have to be an unbridgeable gap, but rather a point of departure for fruitful discussions and negotiations. The new generation of scholars have often been trained in theory as an inherent part of scholarly work and see explicit theorising as normal and necessary – indeed, inescapable. To such schol-

ars, positivistic clinging to sources and evidence, too, is a theoretical stance, and terms like 'common sense' are just a cover for the historically constructed subject position that prioritises able-bodied, colonialist, white, heterosexual men.

While theory was for a long time (and still is) associated with 'jargon' and complicated terminology, recent years have seen the implementation of wider theoretical perspectives in Byzantine Studies, ranging from gender studies and intersectionality to ecocriticism and narratology, and beyond. Noticeable is also the increasing awareness of our own scholarly position in this new theorised study of what we call the Byzantine, related to the interest in identity and the Other noted above. Neville (2019, 7) puts is aptly in her book on Byzantine Gender, noting how not only Byzantium's historical characters (women *and* men) but also Byzantium itself has been gendered throughout history:

> Most working Byzantinists think the old derogatory images of Byzantium have long been recognized as wrong and are no longer relevant. Few of them think that their research has much of anything to do with gender, which is still occasionally confused with the history of women. Assumptions and prejudices of which we are unconscious are the ones most likely to deceive us. Given that most Byzantinists think gender has no bearing on their work, they are likely to be oblivious to the ways assumptions about Byzantine gender play out in their research. We have not begun to confront the reality that the Western denigration of Byzantium is a discourse about gender.

Neville reminds us that our viewpoint matters, and that it may affect us in ways of which we are not aware. Roland Betancourt (2020, 15) takes a similar stance in his recent book on sexuality, gender and race, explaining that

> This book is titled *Byzantine Intersectionality* not only because it studies the intersectionality of identity across the Byzantine world but also because the pejorative "byzantine" speaks to the inherent queerness of these stories and the empire from which that slur was taken. Intersectional identity is Byzantine – it is infinitely complicated, and it is often characterized as devious, deceitful, and corrupt.

The reception element that I discussed above is in this way turned into an important presence in scholarly studies of texts and images; it is indeed theorised as a crucial part of our scholarly investigation. The increasing awareness of our own part in the tradition is noticeable in other recent studies applying modern theory, most notably perhaps in those that apply ecocritical, queer, spatial and affective per-

spectives.[10] Important to note from a philological angle is the way in which all these scholars work with texts, but in ways that take material, visual, emotional and even sensory issues into account. They thus open up towards other fields and provide new ways for texts and textual studies to be relevant for the field as a whole.

7   No longer the Cinderella of Byzantine Studies

Moving from the philological and textual towards the cultural and social, I hope to have shown how literature – in the widest sense of the word – matters more than ever before for the study of the Byzantine world. Recent developments have made Byzantine literary studies more relevant for interdisciplinary dialogue with students and scholars in fields where theory and marginal perspectives are normalised. I believe that this has contributed also to new ways of reading texts in our neighbouring sub-disciplines: historians, art historians, and even archaeologists are now performing 'close readings' with new glasses, profiting from and in turn enriching philological studies. It is gratifying that an historian, not a philologist, wrote the first study of gendered grammar in Byzantine texts (Kinloch 2020). It is equally rewarding to see how Spatial Studies and cognitive narratology have greatly enriched the study of literature over the past few years.[11] I am not saying that disciplinary boundaries do not matter, but I do believe that some of the best scholarship is produced when they are crossed and partly dissolved.

For philologists and literary historians, this development is certainly to our advantage. When Ihor Ševčenko imagined the future of Byzantine Studies at the Nineteenth International Congress of Byzantine Studies in Copenhagen, he said: "Everything is circular. Art historians will go back to looking at style, literary historians will edit texts and we shall all stop talking about patronage" (cited in Mullett 2003, 47). He was right and wrong: art historians do look at style and philologists do edit texts, but we do much more than that and we do it with theoretical awareness (Mullett 2021, 728). More importantly, we do it together, across disciplinary boundaries and with different aims; an *ekphrasis* is no longer either a depiction of an image or a rhetorical exercise – it is also a spatial representation that opens up a storyworld on multiple levels (Veikou 2018; Nilsson 2021c). And yes, we do still talk about patronage but in entirely new and, to us,

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10   Arentzen 2019; Arentzen, Burrus, Peers 2021; Betancourt 2020; Goldwyn 2018b; 2021; Pizzone 2021; forthcoming; Veikou 2016; 2018; 2020.

11   In addition to work cited above, see also various contributions in Messis, Mullett, Nilsson 2018 and in Veikou, Nilsson, forthcoming; Kulhánková 2021.

more exciting ways. When Mullett (2021, 733) looks toward the future in the new *Handbook of Byzantine Literature*, it is an image that feels closer to what we actually see: "It can be truly literary, a history and not a rigid system or isolated pen-portraits, and it will involve a bigger and longer Byzantium".

Texts will remain central to the field, and when literary criticism is applied in a competent yet visionary manner it does not compete with the sources but rather help us to appreciate and interpret them. When I was writing my dissertation, I was told that I had been deceived by 'the hocus pocus of literary theory'. While some colleagues may still accuse me of that, it is no longer a general attitude in Byzantine philology. On the contrary, modern theory and travelling concepts have allowed us to open up and communicate with other fields, to be part of larger developments in Humanities and Social Sciences, even if we remain – to be honest – a little bit behind.

As noted by the editors of the volume *Reading in the Byzantine Empire and Beyond*, in the Byzantine world "the written word was always a living thing: generative and transactional, it shaped individuals and bound them together in communities" (Shawcross, Toth 2018, xx). In a similar way, every instance of philological research is part of its history, "to be a philologist means to appropriate a term and recover a practice" (Gurd 2010, 1). It is therefore important to remember that our task as scholars includes the contest of conceptual boundaries. Of course we should strive to present new data and solid interpretations, but a central concern should always be to question and reconsider not only the results and methods of others, but also our own. We, too, are just one link in that ongoing process that we call tradition.

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