THE BYZANTINE WORLD

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE CORPUS OF BYZANTINE HISTORIOGRAPHY

An interpretive essay

Anthony Kaldellis

The political, military and diplomatic history of the middle and late Byzantine empire (roughly AD 610–1453) is known to us largely through the more or less continuous series of extensive narratives composed by about thirty individual historians. While writing within a relatively limited range of generic forms, most of these men (and one woman) turned to history on their own initiative and each wrote in his own manner, reflecting individual biases, access to information and limitations. The comparatively high level of their accuracy and perspicacity has been praised even by scholars who used to disparage other aspects of Byzantine culture, while the total loss of the imperial archives makes their works our most important historical sources. Despite their differences, these works constitute a well-defined corpus. Though one could include political hagiography along with certain imperial orations and even sermons in the broader category of "Byzantine historical writing," this chapter will discuss the corpus of historiography proper, those texts whose generic coherence has stimulated and accommodated general surveys.[1] While the latter proceed from author to author, this study will look at the overall contours of the corpus, focusing on its coherence and conditions of its formation, its authors, their goals and intellectual resources. It will situate the writing of history at the nexus of literary and political activity in Byzantium and highlight its strengths and weaknesses.

Who were the Byzantine historians? The majority were imperial officials or court orators and hangers-on; one text was possibly authored or co-authored by a reigning emperor (*The Life of Basil I* by Constantine VII) and another by a former emperor (Kantakouzenos). Even if some of these historians were monks at the time that they wrote, still they wrote on the basis of their previous secular careers. Most of our histories are overwhelmingly secular in content and usually also in outlook. In the past, scholars highlighted the distinction between so-called "monkish chronicles" and "classicizing" or "secular histories," but that distinction is now seen as artificial and unhelpful.[2] Chronicles of a religious bent certainly did exist, however; the category should not be discarded, and it seems that some Byzantines were broadly aware of the distinction between histories and chronicles.[3] The works of George Synkellos and George the Monk focus on biblical and Christian history and do not

cater to those who want to know about Byzantine imperial history. But they were composed in the late eighth and mid-ninth centuries respectively, and had no heirs. Theophanes, on the other hand, who was a monk, continued the work of Synkellos down to 813, and focused on the iconoclastic controversy in which he was personally involved, otherwise offers an annalistic coverage of the history of Byzantium and its neighbors. It was only these authors, then, clustered toward the beginning of our period, who wrote histories that could be called "monkish" in outlook. But this still obscures their great differences: Synkellos was a serious scholar who laboriously coordinated chronological systems, while George the Monk compiled entertaining pious stories in a stream-of-consciousness style that had little regard for chronology.[4] Neither style was practiced again.

After the end of Iconoclasm, being a monk as such had no bearing on what and how one wrote, as we see in the cases of the court philosopher Psellos, the former civil official Zonaras and the former emperor Kantakouzenos. Their narratives reveal the preoccupations and intellectual interests of their secular careers, specifically (and respectively): to provide a subversive account of the court highlighting Psellos' own political and intellectual role; to follow Roman history from its beginning to the present; and to justify the deeds of Kantakouzenos himself as emperor. The same is true of historians who were churchmen: Theodosios the Deacon wrote a brief epic poem celebrating Nikephoros Phokas' conquest of Crete; Leo the Deacon an epic and purely secular narrative of the wars of Nikephoros II and John I Tzimiskes; and Eustathios, the Homerist and bishop of Thessalonika, a heavily classicizing account of the Norman sack of Thessalonika in 1185. There is nothing "ecclesiastical" about the outlook of these works; they were written based on the same secular – that is, classical Greek – education (on which see below).

Even from these bare summaries of their contents we can appreciate how idiosyncratic in subject matter and approach Byzantine historical works could be. There was no single template and no necessary link with one's career. The most theological historian, Gregoras, was a layman, while Psellos (technically a monk) and Attaleiates (who founded a monastery, albeit in order to protect his property from taxation) were nevertheless hostile to monks in the empire.[5]

Historiography in Byzantium was never dominated by official histories or royal annals despite the relatively stable monarchy and sequence of long dynasties. In fact, it is not entirely clear that we even have histories that were promulgated by the court and that were accepted by society at large, or even by the ruling and literate elites alone, as having some kind of normative authority over their view of history (even if they personally held different views).[6] "Royal annals" of the kind that recount the history of many ancient Near Eastern kingdoms, or that some medieval courts and religious centers compiled, seem to have been lacking altogether. We do have self-interested narrative histories that were produced at the court, but these, as we will see, had to compete with alternative versions and their success was not – or could not be – enforced through any state mechanism; moreover, they were idiosyncratic in outlook, long or ambitious literary works that could not (and did not) acquire an "official" status.[7]

It was apparently never the function of the Roman government to keep narrative accounts of its own history. This was done by individual authors on their own initiative. Their motives varied, as we might expect, and were mixed in every case.

One was to gain favor with the regime by producing a narrative that cast the current emperor or his ancestors favorably and blackened the memory of opponents of the dynasty (Genesios; Akropolites); another was to criticize past emperors, even if they had benefited the historian himself (Psellos; Attaleiates in a less sarcastic and personal mode); less often it was to criticize, however subtly, reigning emperors (Pachymeres). Some men became historians to justify their own actions in recent crises (Eustathios; Kantakouzenos) or to assert a claim on history after losing the throne (Anna; Kantakouzenos). For many it was to stake a claim to literary fame (Anna is open about this in her preface). Literary culture was a precious thing but not a profession.[8] In one case the motive was to recount world history in an easy format for aristocrats who needed primers (Manasses). In the most interesting cases, motives were intellectual, for example to explain what went wrong in a period of imperial decline (Attaleiates; Choniates) or to set forth a new intellectual agenda for the court and empire (Psellos).[9]

With few exceptions that were motivated mostly by religious controversy, the treatment of reigning emperors was almost always laudatory, though not necessarily sincere. It is unlikely that Psellos thought highly of Michael VII or Attaleiates of Nikephoros III. Had these authors subsequently expanded their narratives under future emperors, they would have eliminated the panegyrics with which their histories had previously ended and replaced them with more critical accounts, as Choniates seems to have done with the Angeloi dynasty.[10] The treatment of past emperors, however, could be both laudatory and sincere, for example Basil II by Psellos and John II by Choniates. It was generally prudent to bring the work to a close before the accession of the reigning emperor, as the historians of the early empire had done (except Prokopios). It is conceivable that Genesios and Theophanes Continuatus ended their narratives with Basil I so as not to discuss the reign of his son Leo VI, which was full of controversies that directly impinged upon the birth of their imperial patron, Constantine VII. Avoiding the reigning emperor was one way to safeguard integrity and independence, ideals that were affirmed even by historians closely linked to the court.[11] Whether these ideals were practiced must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. An effective way of praising the powerful was under the cover of integrity, which thereby became a rhetorical weapon in the arsenal of propaganda. ("Integrity" could be paraded by mixing a slight dose of mild blame in with a lot of praise.)

The praise of an emperor, however, did not necessarily make a history an "official" version. Anna's heroic narrative of her father Alexios was written long after his death when the princess herself was still fuming at losing the struggle for the succession; her brother John II, whom she criticizes, or his son Manuel I, whom she never mentions, would not have endorsed the *Alexiad*. Likewise, the former emperor Kantakouzenos wrote his history after he had abdicated, when rivals held power at the court. Bitter princesses and defeated emperors had no monopoly on the truth. Neither, apparently, did reigning emperors themselves, as there was no mechanism by which they could, in the contentious political-literary climate of Constantinople, make their version of events normative. The nearest we have to an official history, in the limited sense that it issued from the court, is the series of imperial biographies that were written or commissioned by Constantine VII.[12] Their goal was to present Basil I, the founder of the dynasty and Constantine's grandfather, as having saved

the state from his heretical, immoral and incompetent predecessors (in the case of Michael III, by murdering him). But alternative traditions were circulating about Basil that were not so flattering, for example in versions of the chronicle of pseudo-Symeon. Emperors had no control over how their propaganda would be received and could not override the polyphony of Byzantine political culture.[13] Michael III, it seems, had circulated a story about himself that was meant to make him appear pious, but it was ever so slightly twisted by pseudo-Symeon to make him seem unworthy of the throne.[14] One can only imagine the diversity of opinion among the political classes; there were no "masters of truth" about history in Byzantium. Moreover, the histories issued by the court of Constantine VII were subtle literary and narrative creations in their own right, fusing classical and biblical themes, tropes and images. They were not meant to be broadcast to the population and could be fully appreciated only by the same literary elite that was producing and consuming those alternative versions.[15] Perhaps these texts were more a part of the regime's well-documented ambitions in the scholarly and literary spheres than an (futile) effort to take control of history. Constantine and his ghost-writers were likely activated by the same motives as other Byzantine historians.

The corpus was, then, constituted through a series of personal initiatives. In this sense, we are fortunate that so many learned Byzantines turned their hands to history. Yet it seems that the weight and prestige of the tradition, which, as an inherited and already agglomerated sequence, began in classical antiquity and in the Old Testament, may have inspired some of them to do so. Whatever else they may have thought they were doing, Byzantine historians were often conscious of carrying on a venerable tradition. Nikephoros, writing in the 780s, seems to have decided to continue the history of Theophylaktos, the last historian of antiquity, whose narrative ended in 602. Theophanes continued the chronicle of his mentor George Synkellos down to 813, but in this case the relationship was a personal one. We have at least three continuations of Theophanes: Genesios and Theophanes Continuatus in the tenth century and also John Skylitzes in the late eleventh. Psellos had read Leo the Deacon and picks up where he left off (around 976); whether he intended his own history as a continuation of Leo or not, the two works were placed together in the manuscript with a scribal note linking them that indicated such a relationship. Bryennios (in the early twelfth century) wrote a brief narrative of the rise of Alexios I, then passed his materials to his wife, Anna, who wrote the account of Alexios' reign. Again, it is not clear whether Choniates, who picks up exactly where Anna leaves off (with the death of Alexios in 1118), intended to "continue" her narrative, given that his view of Alexios was entirely different than her own, but that, in effect, is how the corpus as a whole was gradually constituted for posterity.

But this presentation gives a somewhat misleading picture of the corpus' uniformity and continuity. In not one instance did a continuator use the same style and format and reflect the same political outlook as had his predecessor. Theophylaktos covers twenty years (582–602) in almost 300 pages of dense Attic prose whereas Nikephoros covers 169 years (602–769) in some seventy pages in a far simpler style. The imperial biographies of Theophanes Continuatus have nothing to do with Theophanes' annalistic approach; Psellos' chatty court memoirs are likewise different from Leo's epic militarism; and Choniates' bitter irony is worlds apart from Anna's adulatory eulogy. The corpus, then, was both unified and diverse, in different

respects. That we have four continuations of Theophanes, moreover, indicates that there was no contemporary perception of a single historiographical tradition to which one added an extension; there was insufficient "neutrality" for that in thinking about imperial history. Genesios and Theophanes Continuatus, for example, were written on the basis of a different view of the recent dynastic past than was pseudo-Symeon. Over a century later Skylitzes criticized many of his predecessors for partiality and rewrote the history of the period, albeit reign by reign rather than, like Theophanes, year by year. In addition, the tradition was sometimes invigorated by "fresh starts." Attaleiates was not continuing the work of any predecessor, not even formally, when he began his narrative in 1034; he chose that date because it suited the logic of imperial decline that he wanted to analyze. Gregoras backtracked to 1204 to begin his work, effectively bypassing Akropolites and Pachymeres who had already covered the years 1204–61 and 1261–1307 (and sometimes offering different versions of the same events).

This system – if it can be called that – of personal initiative and indirect collaboration across the generations had advantages. It presents the course of Byzantine history through a multiplicity of voices and perspectives that often overlapped, usefully for modern historians. A range of subgenres, styles and literary modes were deployed to represent a complex reality. The personal and sometimes autobiographical perspective endowed narratives with immediacy and liveliness.[16] But the system had weaknesses too. If no contemporary decided to write about a certain period, or if those whose works survived wrote later and did not necessarily use (or have available) sufficient contemporary sources, crucial reigns could be poorly represented. This happened to the long reign of Basil II (976–1025), frustrating modern scholars.[17] The ninth century after 813 is covered (for us) by histories written a century later, as is the last century of Byzantium: it was the Fall that inspired a flood of narratives that reached back a century. In addition, what I have been calling the corpus of historiography was never assembled as such in Byzantine times. That began to occur in early modern times, culminating in the early-to-mid-nineteenth-century *Corpus scriptorum historiae byzantinae* and the twentieth-century *Corpus fontium historiae byzantinae*.[18] As we saw, sequential narratives by different authors could be bundled together in a single manuscript while other manuscripts contained historical miscellanies including both ancient and Byzantine authors. So while nearly all of the latter were aware that they were writing within a prestigious tradition that stretched back on the one side to ancient Greece and on the other to the early Church, each had access to (or knowledge of) only a part of it because it was scattered. The bias was anyway in favor of the classics, for example Kantakouzenos knew Thucydides well but it is doubtful that he knew much about tenth-century historiography.

Despite its heterogeneity, however, and its spasmodic growth, the corpus ultimately does hold together and deserves to be studied as a unity, as a single extended conversation with many voices. This is for two main reasons: first, the continuity of the Roman state and society and, second, the educational system that produced almost all our historians. The "history" in question was that of the Roman empire; even the world chronicles culminated in Roman history after surveying the ancient Near East (in the cases of Zonaras and Manasses relatively quickly, with little attention paid to Greek history, which the Byzantines did not consider to be

"theirs").[19] Imperial history was sequential and linear; one had only to decide which segment of it to cover, and the segments, as we saw, could be joined together like links in a chain. Most of their parameters remained the same: the capital was Rome and then New Rome, there was always an emperor (possibly facing rivals), a Church (appearing normally only when it was torn by dissent), the instruments of government were roughly the same, the armies were at the frontiers, and the enemies were barbarians, and the historians kept the same ancient names for them (Scythians, Medes, etc.) regardless of who they really were. Conversely, throughout this period the Roman people (whom we call Byzantines) had at all times a single language and religion and a unified government, administration, economy and culture, which meant they could be taken for granted as a coherent collectivity.[20] Since, then, the goal of history was not to identify long-term social and cultural change; despite the diversity in the historiographical tradition, most of its component texts dealt mostly with events at the court or capital and with wars on the frontiers (wherever they happened to be in any period). Even narratives as different as those by Psellos and Attaleiates have this at least in common: both men considered themselves historians of the Roman state and people.[21] This level of coherence had been impossible to attain in ancient Greece, with its warring city-states and kingdoms and ill-defined cultural boundaries, or, for the same reasons, in the Latin West.[22] So the *Corpus scriptorum historiae byzantinae* is in this sense a valid category.

Second, almost all the extant historical texts reflect more or less the same educational curriculum, which instilled in Byzantine authors the ambition, and usually the ability, to write in ancient rather than in vernacular spoken Greek, either in a full-blown Attic idiom or a more accessible *koine* (closer, that is, to the language of the Church). Within this range there was a variety of registers and individual styles. The language of Theophanes Continuatus and Skylitzes is flat like a newspaper compared to the artful allusiveness of Psellos and the baroque complexity of Eustathios and Choniates. Yet the training behind it all remained relatively stable. It is well known (and often deplored) that educated Byzantines studied rhetoric above all, because it enabled them to deliver speeches at court, to draft documents, and also because the intricacy of its conventions served as a useful benchmark of refinement in a subtle and sophisticated elite society. And rhetorical training – including both the proper grammar and syntax of the high register as well as the technical skills and vocabulary associated with the different modes and tropes – was the crucible of most historiography. It was not merely that the narratives could include speeches, but that every sentence had to be turned in just the right way to have the desired effect within the overall economy of the text. It is here that we can tell the difference between the masters of subtlety and mood such as Psellos and Choniates, and the pompous verbosity of a Genesios; Anna, despite her boasts, seems to have mastered a single trope, something akin to a marching band rhythm (at 1.16.7 she refers to the pace of her narrative as "the horse of history," probably a stately trot). There are indications that our histories were recited and performed before audiences with the same rhetorical training, which substantially closes the gap between "rhetoric" and "history" (though this aspect remains unexplored).[23]

The language of history, moreover, which presupposed a formal training in rhetoric, was not neutral as to the shape and contents of the finished work.[24] An excursus on the intellectual resources that enabled these narratives would allow us a

glimpse into the historian's mental workshop. Secular historiography in Byzantium never emerged from the shadow of its classical antecedents. Not only were the classics models of style in their own right, they had largely set the tone for what constituted historical narration. A Byzantine writer aspiring to join the ongoing conversation was sure to emulate their style and format, though we must remember that a diverse set of texts constituted the classical canon to begin with and so variety could be accommodated: imperial biography was inspired by Plutarch; Attaleiates' analysis of Roman decline seems to hark back to Polybios' on Rome's rise; Psellos claimed that his own work mediated between the historians of ancient Rome (Cassius Dio? Dionysios of Halikarnassos?) and "our chronography"; Kantakouzenos seems to have preferred Thucydides (and even wrote about himself in the third person); and Chalkokondyles' ethnography was cast in a Herodotean mold. All this meant that the Byzantine historians were in constant dialogue with their Greek models, albeit not always the same ones. This close relationship was not for show, for they often laced their works with narrative imitations and verbal allusions which, in some cases, were subversive, requiring readers to be alert and discerning.[25] It also meant, however, for better or for worse, that "history" was conceived largely as politics and war.

While many histories include ecclesiastical affairs to various degrees (e.g. Psellos almost not at all; Gregoras extensively), they generally cast the Church as another site for political contestation. It is worth noting here Eusebios' faith that Christianity would spell the end of the bloody warfare recounted by the Greek historians and inspire an interest in the more peaceful struggles of the spirit. He was wrong, as even his continuator Socrates noted with dismay a century later. Not only did Byzantine historiography remain "Greek" in this sense, it was the Greek element that absorbed the Christian one. The Byzantines did not continue the tradition of ecclesiastical history (at least not before the fourteenth century). Theophanes' annals and the imperial-biographical approach of his continuators entailed the folding of church history into secular history; in fact, it mandated it, because in practice the patriarch worked for the emperor. It would not have been possible to write an *Ecclesiastical History* like that of Eusebios, at least not without fusing it with some version of Suetonius or Tacitus.

But political-and-military history was never a simple matter and could not itself be represented well apart from a complex combination of generic forms. This posed structural and narratological challenges that many Byzantine writers, driven to display their versatility and rhetorical prowess, eagerly accepted. We should, then, imagine Byzantine historical narrative not as a linear recounting of events but as an uneven textual landscape shaped by the dynamic interplay of a range of generic modes which rhetorical theory treated as distinct. These were studied separately in the abstract and strategically deployed according to need or fancy, but every work of history entailed a different set of combinations, which partly accounts for the diversity that we observe in our texts. These constitutive subgenres included political and battlefield speeches, a rather direct intrusion of performative rhetoric into the narrative which offered historians the opportunity to compose speeches that they would not normally have had occasion to deliver in their capacity as court orators;[26] invective and panegyric in the representation of emperors and officials whom political conditions or sound historical judgment required to be blamed or praised (these

were not necessarily separate set-pieces but rather the principles of their composition shaped the mood of the narrative); *ekphraseis* of monuments and gardens could provide delightful digressions from the narrative (e.g. Psellos on the churches of Romanos III and Constantine IX); legal scholarship could also be brought to bear (e.g. Attaleiates' panegyrical, albeit ironic, account of Nikephoros III); full-blown laments could be introduced for captured cities (e.g. Thessalonika in 1185; Constantinople in 1204 and 1453); the romance novel inspired amorous scenes in Psellos and Choniates, though the novel's concern with virtue was inverted by them into sinister plots and sexual improprieties. On the Christian side, Gregoras' history is at times a theological treatise. The tropes of hagiography could likewise be deployed to introduce a saintly figure in the narrative (e.g. the patriarch Ignatios in Genesios, a figure lifted directly from hagiography), or endow emperors with a saintly aura (e.g. *The Life of Basil I*).[27] Historiography, then, was a site where genres and rhetorical modes met and even collided. For example, Attaleiates' account of Nikephoros III weaves legal history, panegyric and exhortation against a background of subtle sarcasm, while Psellos maintains a dynamic tension between the propagandistic aspects of rhetoric (which he acknowledges) and the veracity required by sound history.[28]

I have omitted one major compositional mode of ancient historiography, namely ethnography, because it suffered an inexplicable decline in the middle Byzantine period (and one that has been little noticed and commented upon in the scholarship). Ethnography had flourished in late antiquity. Considering the works of Priskos, Prokopios, Agathias and Theophylaktos, we may conclude that it was even deemed an essential component of any historical work. And yet while we may know the layout, contents and inhabitants of Attila's tent, middle Byzantine historiography barely records the names of the leaders of the empire's enemies, and often not even that, and far less any information about their people's customs. The light of history shone brightly upon the empire itself but almost all beyond its frontiers remained in the dark. Slavs and Arabs sometimes appear as generic "enemies of Christ" and no more. It is not as though there were no "new people" in this period to match the great movements of late antiquity; moreover, we know that the Byzantine court and its functionaries and diplomats possessed a great deal of information about foreign peoples and states. Somehow, however, for reasons that remain obscure, that information did not end up in the histories. There are brief notices about the Pechenegs in Psellos and Attaleiates, perhaps a page long, and some perceptive information about Central Asia in Bryennios, but for fuller ethnographies we have to wait for the historians of the Fall, especially Chalkokondyles, who emulated Herodotos.

These, in brief, were the generic resources by which Byzantine historians crafted narratives. Many were formally discrete tropes that they learned during the course of their rhetorical education. Against modern objections that history should not be rhetorical, it should be pointed out that rhetorical education in Byzantium, as in the earlier Roman empire, was heavily historical to begin with. Students practiced composing declamations with a historical premise and wrote exercises (*progymnasmata*) that required them to speak through the mouth of a figure from mythology or ancient history. This taught them perspective (among other skills as well). Rhetorical composition defined the different styles ("grave," "pompous," etc.) that were most appropriate for different narrative moments. Rhetorical education was indirectly

a training for historiography;[29] conversely, the writing of history enabled these educated Byzantines to exercise and display more of their rhetorical skills than probably any other mode of discourse. This partly explains why so many of them did so when it was not required for any of their careers (unlike the delivery of panegyrical speeches). They wrote history as much for pleasure as for acclaim. It enabled them to judge the mighty and the past, to be philosophical, martial, pious, moralistic, hortatory, subversive and entertaining, all sometimes in the same text. They could be Homeric in genuine admiration (Anna on Alexios) or in ironic subversion (Eustathios and Choniates on the Komnenoi).[30]

* * *

Let us step back now and consider different ways of reading these texts. Much depends on whether we approach them as historians looking for information or as students of literature trying to understand their often subtle representation of the world, though the two perspectives invariably lead into one another (for all that they have not been developed equally in the scholarship).

A prosopography of those who appear in the histories would reveal that they are inhabited mostly by emperors and their wives, generals, leading officials of the state, courtiers and top ecclesiastics. This is a world of elite men, reflecting the gender and status of the historians themselves (one woman among them, and she a princess) and their intended readers. More average Byzantines do appear from time to time, either individually or, as in the case of the Constantinopolitan "mob," in groups, but they are often anonymous and appear either because their actions affect elite narratives or because their stories have the right Herodotean credentials. Byzantinists seeking information about daily life have mostly turned to hagiography. So too regarding geography. The spotlight falls on the capital and the frontiers (or wherever the armies were active), leaving out the majority of the empire's territory, where there was usually little exciting going on. So the histories can be said to focus on what was exceptional and in this way they are unrepresentative of life in the empire for the majority of its subjects (as local news reports are in the US). Constantinople was no ordinary city and the frontiers were often turbulent places, giving, if we were to rely on the histories alone, a rather misleading impression of Byzantium as a whole: not all provinces were frontiers. It is not until the late eleventh and twelfth centuries that the histories focus upon central Asia Minor, because that was when it began to be raided and settled by Turks; they do not cover western Asia Minor or Greece until the thirteenth century. Thessalonika would seem to be an exception to this rule, considering the military narratives in the *Miracles of Saint Demetrios* (in large measure a historical text), and the siege-and-capture accounts of Kaminiates (for 904), Eustathios (1185) and Anagnostes (1430). But not only was Thessalonika an exceptional city to begin with, more like Constantinople than, say, Naupaktos, and often on the empire's frontier (facing the Slavs or the Arab raiders of the Aegean), its presence in these texts conforms to the general conclusions stated above. We know little of life there when it was not being besieged.

There was, then, a Constantinopolitan bias, which comes as no surprise, given that most historians were active there. And given the kind of history that they set out to write it made sense for them to be there: Constantinople was the center of all information about Europe and the Near East. It was where decisions were made,

where officials deposited their reports and where key participants in events could be contacted (and if they could not be interviewed, their retainers, who had seen the same action, sometimes from a better perspective, might be). Constantinople was also where the audience that historians sought to impress resided. So there is nothing unusual about this slant in their information and outlook. There was an even more exclusive level of reporting. Many episodes of intrigue and murder in Theophanes Continuatus (for example) could be followed only by someone who had intimate familiarity with the palace layout.[31]

In the past it was insufficiently appreciated just how much we are at the mercy of each individual author for our "facts" about Byzantine history. Their annalistic or reign-by-reign organization along with their sequencing created the illusion of smooth continuity and even interchangeability, but we must resist this perception and the use of the texts as sources that it entails. For all that they were part of the same tradition in the ways discussed above, these historians were not equivalent in the way that they reported on events. Psellos gives few dates and is coy about the identity of the men he was writing about, few of whom he names, leaving us with a hazy narrative of personalities. He says almost nothing about military matters. Anna's purpose was to make her father seem like a hero and to that end she distorted or lied about the order of certain events; what seemed to be a solid source is now unraveling under critical scrutiny.[32] The rules change as we move from one text to another. And what are we to do when two serious and otherwise reliable historians writing about the same period (say, Pachymeres and Gregoras) give different versions of the same event and they are our only sources for that event? To cope with these problems, we must study each text closely on its own terms – to uncover what I just called its "rules" – with the same attention that has traditionally been paid to the ancient historians. Byzantinists have much to learn from classicists in this matter, for the one tradition evolved directly out of the other and never lost touch with it.

This brings us to the thorny issue of reading historical texts not merely as sources but as "literature," which is now widely recognized as necessary though exactly what it means is still vague.[33] Specifically, it is not clear in what sense Byzantine texts, even the romance novels, constitute what we might recognize as literature – and what *do* we mean by *literature*? Moreover, the broader problem of the intersection of historiography and literature has not been resolved today at the most theoretical levels of inquiry. It might be possible to bypass this semantic obstacle by substituting the term "rhetoric" for that of "literature," given, as we saw, that these texts were rhetorical at every level. Unfortunately, that term has been imbued with negative albeit largely unfair connotations, especially in regard to Byzantine texts. If it were possible to agree that the "rhetoric" of the Byzantine histories is what makes them (a) enjoyable to hear (in the original) and read; (b) persuasive in their representation of people, events and periods; and (c) intellectually insightful and stimulating with regard to their basic themes, then we could probably dispense with the term "literature" without, however, at the same time dispensing with the problem of fictionality that "literature" inevitably poses. This is because the discipline of rhetoric in Byzantium included a training in many of the devices of fictionality of which the historians also made good use. Like their ancient counterparts, they invented speeches for their characters and sometimes invented or transposed the characters themselves for dramatic effect,[34] and an episode that was factually untrue could still

point to a deeper truth that a historian wanted to develop as a theme during the course of his narrative; in fact, it could point to this truth with more clarity than a factual episode.[35]

It would be incredible to believe that historians writing in such different intellectual and social contexts, for such different audiences, would have shared the goals and standards of modern scholars. I am not implying that they would have wanted to do so had they been aware of them, or that they tried and failed, but that they understood the value and nature of history in different ways. The purpose of the *Life of Basil I* was to mythologize its hero by surrounding him with classical and biblical associations. This is easy to see on the surface, but how extensively and deeply does this imperative shape the details of the text? It has been proposed through a close literary reading that the figure of the rich widow Danielis who assisted Basil in his rise to power might after all be a fiction, which promotes those very associations.[36] Psellos casts the death of Romanos III in the palace baths as a failed baptism that hastened the emperor on his way down to Hades rather than raising him up from it.[37] Choniates' Andronikos Komnenos is cast in the mold of Homer's Odysseus, but he alternates between heroic and anti-heroic comparisons, part of the historian's broader project to represent the history of his time as one of reversal and constant paradox.[38] What are scholars to make of all this?

Clearly, these images and comparisons have little to do with representing historical truth in the way a modern historian would. There are other goals at work here, themes addressed to audiences who were looking for more than just the facts (or who knew the facts and did not need or want to be told them again). Granted, it matters little exactly how Romanos III died and what he thought he was doing when he entered the baths that day and how ironic it was how things turned out for him . . . on the other hand, quite a lot of Byzantine social history has been shouldered by Danielis. And Choniates' representation of Andronikos, by far the most important one we have, is central to any reconstruction of that crucial reign. All this does make the task of modern historians using these texts as sources more difficult, but that cannot be helped. There is exciting work to be done both in sifting through the histories' factual value and in appreciating what else they have to tell us, for, after all, the Byzantine historians were for the most part an intelligent, thoughtful, diverse and creative group of writers.

NOTES

1 Hunger 1978, I; Karpozilos 1997–2002. Treadgold 2007 promises sequels on the middle and late Byzantine historians.
2 E.g. Afinogenov 1992 comparing George the Monk and John Zonaras; Ljubarskij 1993 on the state of the field, citing previous scholarship; Holmes 2005: 172–85 on Skylitzes.
3 Karpozilos 1997–2002: II, 30–2.
4 Kazhdan 2006: II, 43–52.
5 Kaldellis 2007: 213, 254.
6 Cf. Shepard 2003.
7 Howard-Johnson 1994 has argued for an official history of the campaigns of Heraclius based on staff paperwork, but this was before our period and written in unique circumstances (see esp. 70). The conclusion that it was an unparalleled hybrid of prose and verse written by George of Pisidia depends on speculative reasoning.
8 Mazzucchi 1978: 271.

9 Odorico 2006 has also emphasized the practical, immediate goals that works of history were meant to accomplish.
10 Simpson 2006.
11 Simpson 2006: 203–4.
12 For Constantine VII and the question of authorship, see I. Ševčenko 1992.
13 See Angold in this volume.
14 Nilsson and Scott 2007: 327.
15 E.g. Anagnostakis 1989.
16 For the historian in the history, see Macrides 1996.
17 Holmes 2005 copes with this problem.
18 See Reinsch in this volume.
19 Cf. Jeffreys 1979.
20 Kaldellis 2007: 42–119 on the Roman national identity of Byzantium.
21 This is independent of the question of the mutual influence among Byzantine (Roman) and Near Eastern (Syriac and Arabic) historiographical traditions, on which see Holmes 2005.
22 Davidson 2007: 5: "This phenomenal cultural diversity of ancient Greece is one reason why Greek history is so complicated – and why books for general readers on the Hellenic world are so much rarer than books about Rome. Rome is at least a single political entity."
23 In general, Cavallo 2006: 47, 50; also Munitiz 2004. Eustathios' *Capture of Thessalonika* is cast in the form of a sermon.
24 For new readings of the rhetoric of Byzantine literature, see Jeffreys 2003.
25 Moravcsik 1966; Hunger 1969–70; Kaldellis 2004: 17–61.
26 Cf. Hoffmann 2007 on Leo the Deacon.
27 Alexander 1940.
28 Kaldellis 1999: 127–54.
29 Gibson 2004.
30 Sarris 1995–7.
31 Featherstone 2009. See also Featherstone in this volume.
32 Frankopan 2005.
33 Preliminary discussions in Ljubarskij 1998; Odorico *et al.* 2006; Kazhdan 2006: II; Macrides 2009.
34 E.g. Efthymiades 2008 on the figure of Thomas in Choniates.
35 Cf. Kaldellis 1999 and 2004.
36 Anagnostakis 1989.
37 Efthymiades 2005.
38 Kaldellis 2009.