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Nicholas Mesarites. His life and works (in translation). Translated with notes and commentary by MICHAEL ANGOLD (Translated Texts for Byzantinists 4). Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2017. 374 pp. ISBN: 9781786940063 (Hardback £85.00 / Paperback £29.95)

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This is the first volume of the new Liverpool series for Byzantinists that is dedicated to the literary production of a single individual. MICHAEL ANGOLD includes and translates all the hitherto published texts that came down to us by the pen of Nicholas Mesarites,<sup>1</sup> who arguably deserves to be thought of as a significant source for our understanding of the medieval Roman (elite) society in a period marked by the cataclysmic event of the fall of Constantinople to the armies of the Fourth Crusade (1204). The “Introduction” (pp. 1–30) provides Mesarites’ biography, who came to be an ecclesiastic, active mainly during the reigns of Alexius III Angelus (1195–1203) and Theodore I Lascaris (1205–1222). Some of his works provide adequate information about his well-off family of bureaucratic origins, allowing for tracing its vicissitudes from the last part of the reign of Manuel I Comnenus (1143–1180) onwards. ANGOLD presents the family being benefited from close relations to the usurper Andronicus I Comnenus (1183–1185) and then again during the reign of Alexius III, enjoying also the favor of the patriarch John X Camaterus (1198–1206). Nevertheless Nicholas’ career took off after the 1204 disaster, when he was involved, as representative of the Orthodox clergy in Latin-occupied Constantinople, in the process of electing a new patriarch in the Nicaean exile. There he was elected bishop of Ephesus and progressively gained the trust of Theodore I Lascaris, firmly advocating the imperial prerogative in regulating Church affairs. Regarding Mesarites as a writer, ANGOLD stresses the fact that, no matter how charming his writings appear to the modern reader, in his own era he seems to have enjoyed little appreciation as a man of letters. He points out that he was a second rank writer who did not conform to the predominant aesthetics of his time: he wrote to please himself and not because he was commissioned by powerful patrons. Most of his works

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1. An edition of Mesarites’ “oration” (λόγος ἐκφραστικός) to emperor Alexius III Angelus is about to be published for the first time including translation by Beatrice Daskas in the *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, adding one more piece to the puzzle.

survive in a single manuscript, which he seems to have started compounding himself. Beside its relative importance for quarrying historical facts, the real value of Mesarites' literary production lies in the fact that, compared to the mainstream of contemporary intellectuals, it offers a different perspective on the world, which would be missing had it not survived. Furthermore, through Mesarites' pen one can gain glimpses of how "Byzantine" identity was being reconstructed after the loss of the imperial city. Apart from an English translation of the thematically various writings of Nicholas Mesarites, *ANGOLD* provides for each one an introduction which is at the same time a commentary. He includes bibliographical information about editions and earlier translations of the texts, whose succession is, for the most part, chronological. *ANGOLD* deals first with the "Narrative of the Coup of John the Fat" (pp. 31–74) against Alexius III Angelus (1200 or 1201), the most important text in Mesarites' corpus from the point of view of political history, albeit rather poor in facts. *ANGOLD* provides the context of the event, in whose frame Mesarites' "report" narrates lively his struggle as sacristan to protect the Passion relics kept in the Church of Pharos in the precinct of the Imperial Palace, which the pretender John (Axuch) Comnenus and his partisans occupied assisted by the Constantinopolitan mob. To facilitate the reader in matters of topography *ANGOLD* provides a sketch map and an explanatory text about the Bucoleon Palace, the lower part of the Imperial Palace, about which the narrative is a major source.

The second text dealt with is the much discussed "Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles" (pp. 75–133), the second greatest church in Constantinople whose complex was also the burial ground for many emperors. This text is one of the major sources for the building, which was demolished in the 15th century. *ANGOLD* comments on the rich scholarly debate on the text, regarding both its nature (ekphrasis/enkomion) and its trustworthiness as a source for reconstructing the building's architecture and decoration. Trying to place the work into its sociopolitical context, he also puts forward the view that Mesarites, in composing a celebratory piece on the occasion of the feast of the Holy Apostles (June 29), made use of it for backing the patriarch John X Camaterus and his views in the aftermath of the dogmatic controversy about the nature of the elements in the Holy Communion. The text can therefore be dated to 1200.

The "Epitaphios for his brother John" (pp. 134–192) follows. It is noted that this funeral lament of 1207 presents ample details about the Mesarites

family, though it is mostly a “moral and spiritual portrait” (p. 140). It included many hagiographical elements with John Mesarites being presented as a champion of Orthodoxy, whose example had to be followed in the face of the Latin authorities and clergy in Constantinople. Thus, argues the author, the text is also revealing about Mesarites’ self. In the next chapter, called the “Dossier of the Patriarchate” (pp. 193–234), ANGOLD tries to establish the chronology of the events described in three texts, which form a unity in the manuscript they survived, as they are all part of the story of how a new Orthodox patriarch came to be elected at Nicaea in 1208. He makes sense of the first of these texts, (1) the “Disputation of 30 August 1206”, as the immediate consequence of the death of the exiled patriarch John X Camaterus, which put the Orthodox under pressure to recognize the Latin patriarch of Constantinople, Thomas Morosini, a papal appointee. This eventually provoked an Orthodox reaction that led to (2) the “Request to Theodore I Lascaris”, which urges for an election of a new patriarch in exile, (3) the “Imperial Writ (graphe)”, i.e. the positive response of the emperor, and (4) the so-called “Reisebericht”, Mesarites’ report on two journeys to Nicaea in the above context. His “Fourth Lenten Sermon 1215” (pp. 235–296) describes a similar story as it is a report to his flock in Ephesus about the events he had participated in, which culminated in the election of the second patriarch in exile. In this chapter’s introduction ANGOLD revisits some of the problems of the reign of Theodore I Lascaris by discussing matters of chronology, political and ecclesiastical affairs.

Breaking chronological succession, the following chapter deals with the “Ethopoiia of a Mathematician” (pp. 297–305), i.e. a short character study, which presents an anonymous cleric, also a capable astrologer, expressing his disappointment about his failure to occupy the patriarchal see of Antioch after the fall of the imperial city. ANGOLD sees in this an aborted attempt on the side of the first emperor in exile to install a new titular patriarch of Antioch and draws connections to events in the homonymous Latin Principality. The Mesarites corpus concludes with his four “Letters” (pp. 306–319) that have survived in their entirety, amongst which one was addressed to Theodore Lascaris and two, recently published, most likely to the exiled patriarch John X Camaterus, which shed some light on the volatile situation prevailing in the aftermath of the 1204 disaster, as well as with three “Synodal Documents” (pp. 320–334) of the year 1216, which demonstrate Mesarites’ importance as a “servant of the crown”. A bibliography (pp. 335–348) and an index (pp. 349–362) complete the volume.

ANGOLD provides the first comprehensive study of Mesarites and his literary production, a contribution that helps us better situate the writer's output in the broader picture of the Greek-Orthodox world and its dynamics in the time of fragmentation for the medieval Roman polity. Nicetas Choniates' "grand narrative" may have shaped the posterity's perceptions about this time of turmoil, but as ANGOLD puts it, "only by reading Nicholas Mesarites will you know what it was like to be there" (p. 2). An interesting point that might merit further investigation.

**Keywords**

Constantinople; Fourth Crusade; John Komnenos "the Fat"; Nicholas Mesarites; Nicaea; Orthodox Church