

ELENI KEFALA, *The Conquered. Byzantium and America on the Cusp of Modernity* (Extravagantes 1). Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection 2020. XIII, 158 pp. – ISBN 978-0-88402-476-7 (\$ 25.00)

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Processes of historical transformation and upheaval look back on a long tradition of research: Given different national characteristics and narratives, it is hardly surprising that this field has, due to its continuity, produced diverse focal points and questions. But despite the unbroken social and scholarly relevance of conquests as “one of the most constant and frequent phenomena in history, not only in Europe but also on other continents”,¹ the perspective of the people who were directly affected by being conquered and experienced loss, slavery, or death has not yet been systematically studied. Instead, scholarship has been primarily interested in the conquerors rather than in the people who were actually conquered.²

This perspective is now taken by ELENI KEFALA: As prominently stated in the title of her book, she focuses on the sources written by “The Conquered” in “Byzantium and America on the Cusp of Modernity”, namely after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453 and the conquest of Tenochtitlan in 1521 during the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. For this purpose, three poems serve as crown witnesses: the *Anaklema tes Konstantinopoles* (“The Lament for Constantinople”), mourning the loss of the city to the Ottomans, and the two Nahuatl songs *Huexotzinca yotl* (“Huexotzinca Piece”) and *Tlaxcalteca yotl* (“Tlaxcala Piece”) which lament the Aztec defeat to the Spanish conquistadors. These texts were written down

1. Cf. HANS-JOACHIM KÖNIG – BARDO FASSBENDER, Art. Eroberung, in: *Enzyklopädie der Neuzeit* 3 (2006), coll. 495–504, at col. 495, who describe the relevance of conquests as “eine der konstantesten und häufigsten Erscheinungen der Geschichte, nicht nur in Europa, sondern auch auf anderen Kontinenten.” The English translation is my own.

2. The perspective of the conquered has also been focused by recently held conferences, for instance, the symposium “On Being Conquered in Byzantium” which was organised by Adam Goldwyn in April 2021, cf. the programme <https://www.doaks.org/research/byzantine/scholarly-activities/on-being-conquered-in-byzantium>, and ANDREAS BIHRER – RIKE SZILL (eds), *Eroberte in der Vormoderne* (forthcoming), cf. for the conference report written by SARAH-CHRISTIN SCHRÖDER <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-8895>.

anonymously shortly after the conquests of each city, dealing with the coming to terms with both the loss of each empire and the previous ways of living of their inhabitants. In analysing representations of the views of the defeated, *KEFALA* not only takes up a highly topical and relevant issue. By linking late Byzantine with pre-Columbian history, her work also proves to be particularly relevant to current discussions on the Global Middle Ages, as it deals with two regions which in the sixteenth century had recently become the margins of medieval Christianity through conquest and expansion.³

Unfortunately, *KEFALA* hardly brings up any of these points in order to substantiate her research design. Instead, she seems almost strangely cautious about whether her chosen case examples are at all comparable. But while addressing this matter already in the preface to the book (pp. ix–xiii), it is the study’s origin, which resulted from a nine-month fellowship at Dumbarton Oaks in 2016 and 2017, rather than the source material itself that is presented as the reason for the choice of topic. As is known, the Research Library and Collection of Dumbarton Oaks, in fact, extends to the fields of Byzantine studies and the pre-Columbian cultures of the Americas.⁴ However, “The Conquered” neither seems to be a commissioned work nor do the circumstances of its origin add much to the questions raised by *KEFALA*: Both the Byzantine and Aztec case study do coincide with the transition from the later Middle Ages to the Early Modern period, and in the wake of the Printing Revolution, the Ottoman as well as the Nahua encounters attracted widespread attention in Europe causing a caesura in the European self-image with far-reaching consequences.⁵

The fact that “The Conquered” is, indeed, not merely a book on “what

3. Cf. CATHERINE J. HOLMES – NAOMI STANDEN, Introduction. Towards a Global Middle Ages. In: CATHERINE J. HOLMES – NAOMI STANDEN (eds), *The Global Middle Ages (Past and Present. Supplement. NS 13)*. Oxford 2018, pp. 1–44, and PETER FRANKOPAN, Why We Need to Think About the Global Middle Ages. In: *Journal of Medieval Worlds* 1.1 (2019), pp. 5–10.

4. For the sake of completeness, the Dumbarton Oaks research focus on Garden and Landscape studies is also mentioned.

5. This affects, for instance, constructions of space such as the establishment of America as an invention of Europe which, in the course of the Media Revolution, contributed significantly to a new European self-understanding, cf. FERDINAND OPLL, Am Schnittpunkt vielfältiger künstlerischer wie kartographischer Traditionen. Die Meldemansche Rundansicht. In: FERDINAND OPLL – MARTIN SCHEUTZ (eds), *Die Osmanen vor Wien. Die Meldeman-Rundansicht von 1529/30. Sensation, Propaganda und Stadtbild (Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung 74)*. Vienna 2020, pp. 109–146, at pp. 119–120.

for many remains an improbable marriage” (p. x) is, furthermore, already proven in the first chapter “Serendipities” (pp. 1–9). Herein are listed prophecies, eschatological predictions, symbols and motifs, as well as apparitions in the sky and at sacred places – all of which predicted the end of the Byzantine and Aztec empires decades, if not centuries, before the actual events took place. Though providing sufficient evidence for a transatlantic comparison based on actual source material this is not evaluated (later either). Thus, KEFALA’s objective is, while justified, unnecessarily reduced to external research conditions. Repeatedly stressing that the book literally “force[s] the Eastern Roman Empire and indigenous America into an unlikely relationship” (p. 14) not only weakens the research issue since these examples could have much more readily served as an argument *for* both the chosen sources and regions. It also raises the question as to why the initial and apparent problem regarding the comparability of the case studies is so prominently stated in the beginning at all. Consequently, KEFALA’s cautiousness almost pushes the reader to either question her very valid agenda right from the start or to shift the focus from the study’s results to a very fundamental question which calls into question the entire outline of the book. Calling the opening chapter “Serendipities” is undoubtedly appealing. However, its full potential is not achieved.

Moreover, KEFALA’s approach is innovative because, with the concept of cultural trauma, she draws on a field that has experienced a strong upswing in the past decades – also outside psychology. Until recently, research on pre-modern societies has hardly taken any interest in it, although many sources show a strong preoccupation with the interconnections of the experience of violence, loss, and the creation of memory.⁶ But it is by no means self-evident to apply the concept of cultural trauma to pre-modern societies: Describing historical events as ‘traumatic’ means operating with a term that is considered thoroughly problematic due to its origins in medical-psychological contexts and its usage in colloquial and everyday language. How can sources be interrogated for physical, psychologi-

6. Cf., for instance, WENDY J. TURNER – CHRISTINA LEE, *Conceptualizing Trauma for the Middle Ages*. In: WENDY J. TURNER – CHRISTINA LEE (eds), *Trauma in Medieval Society (Explorations in Medieval Culture 7)*. Leiden 2018, pp. 3–12. Even though this volume was not published until 2018, it could still have been included within the publishing process. For articles published before 2018 cf. MEGAN CASSIDY-WELCH, *Before Trauma. The Crusades, Medieval Memory and Violence*. In: *Continuum* 31.5 (2017), pp. 619–627, and KATHLEEN BIDDICK, *Trauma*. In: ELIZABETH EMERY – RICHARD J. UTZ (eds), *Medievalism. Key Critical Terms (Medievalism 5)*. Woodbridge 2014, pp. 247–253, who, at p. 252, explicitly mentions Kritoboulos of Imbros.

cal and emotional aspects – and, thus, for phenomena of historical realities that which in the obvious absence of contemporary witnesses can neither be verified nor falsified? How can a concept be operationalised which is constantly re-defined even within psychiatric-psychological research?⁷

On this methodological problem, KEFALA elaborates briefly in her second and third chapter: In the second chapter “Byzantium, America, and the ‘Modern’” (pp. 11–14), the main concern is to substantiate the comparison between the Byzantine and pre-Columbian case studies. In order to “historicize[] the comparative approach” (p. 14), a distinction between ‘exogenous and indigenous inferiorisation’ is introduced in order to sketch some effects of both conquests in modernity. However, it is not the comparison as such that needs to be historicised but rather the approach itself. This could and should have been discussed in the third chapter “Tradition and Theory” (pp. 15–26). Herein, KEFALA refers to the studies on trauma by JEFFREY ALEXANDER, NEIL SMELSER and RON EYERMAN (pp. 24f.) but does not put the modern terms applied into a historical perspective.⁸ A reference to the studies of CATHY CARUTH is sorely lacking which is surprising since her monograph is considered “the most influential, perhaps the foundational text of deconstructive trauma studies”⁹ in literary studies. The concepts of cultural trauma put forward by the authors mentioned above have not been without critical response themselves: Alexander neither differentiates between psychological and social consequences of trauma nor between cultural memory and trauma as social constructs. Smelser is, in contrast, more precise about trauma as a psychological concept but otherwise similarly ambivalent as Alexander, whereas Eyerman is

7. Cf. TREMBINSKI, Trauma as a Category of Analysis. In: TURNER – LEE (eds), *Trauma in Medieval Society*, pp. 13–33, at p. 14, who illustrates the construction of trauma as a modern medical concept in referring to the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DMS-5).

8. Cf. TURNER – LEE, *Conceptualizing Trauma*, and TREMBINSKI, *Trauma as a Category*.

9. WULF KANSTEINER – HARALD WEILNBÖCK, *Against the Concept of Cultural Trauma or How I Learned to Love the Suffering of Others Without the Help of Psychotherapy*. In: ASTRID ERLI – ANSGAR NÜNNING (eds), *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin 2008, pp. 229–240, at p. 230. Cf. JEFFREY ALEXANDER, *Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma*. In: JEFFREY ALEXANDER et al. (eds), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley 2004, pp. 1–10, who, at p. 6, also points to the studies by CATHY CARUTH as “[p]erhaps the most influential scholar in shaping th[e] approach [from the humanities based studies of trauma]”. Cf. CATHY CARUTH, *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore – London 1996.

only more precise because his contribution deals with memory and not with trauma.¹⁰ This is also the case with KEFALA's analysis: her book seems to be less about trauma but rather about forms of collective memory.¹¹

KEFALA describes collective traumas as “the end product of the trauma claim of culture creators” (p. 40) in her sources. Yet, what exactly is meant by a “trauma claim” remains ambiguous: It can be read, on the one hand, as an ‘assertion’ by cultural creators that may be unjustified (but this not addressed in the book), or, on the other hand, as a ‘claim’ that the same cultural creators make about a trauma (but that is difficult to substantiate). The fact that KEFALA interprets her sources as “workings of creators who use symbolic resources and historical particulars to articulate, in a familiar language, the trauma of the conquered” (p. 117) is interesting. In this context, it might have been helpful to integrate the concept of narrative trauma as a historical-narratological phenomenon that “can be defined as literary tales of lasting, overwhelming and uncontrollable emotional damage caused by war and violence”¹² as that would have also accommodated the author's background in the field of literary studies. This invites a reading in terms of notions of cultural – or narrative (?) – trauma from a contemporary perspective, rather than in terms of practices of collective memory, which is what KEFALA seems to focus on.

The fourth and most comprehensive chapter “Imparting Trauma” (pp. 27–116) is divided into the two sections “The Fall of Constantinople” (pp. 27–70) and “The Fall of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco” (pp. 71–116). At the beginning of each subchapter, KEFALA provides a synopsis and annotated translation of the three main-sources (pp. 30–37 and pp. 74–81), which is useful since there has not been a complete English translation of the

10. Cf. for a detailed critique HANS JOAS, *Cultural Trauma? On the Most Recent Turn* in Jeffrey Alexander's *Cultural Sociology*. In: *European Journal of Social Theory* 8.3 (2005), pp. 365–374.

11. That is, for instance, why the concept of postmemory by MARIANNE HIRSCH (pp. 52–53) fits so well in KEFALA's argument: Originating from the context of Holocaust studies, MARIANNE HIRSCH, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust (Gender and Culture)*. New York 2012, p. 5, describes her concept of postmemory as “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before.” However, KEFALA neither defines the ‘generation after’ in her period of investigation nor how this is to be transferred to pre-modern sources.

12. SONJA KERTH, *Narratives of Trauma in Medieval German Literature*. In: WENDY J. TURNER – CHRISTINA LEE (eds), *Trauma in Medieval Society (Explorations in Medieval Culture 7)*. Leiden 2018, pp. 274–297, at p. 278.

Anaklema so far.¹³ The Nahuatl texts represent modified – and in the case of the *Tlaxcaltecatoytl* – partial translations which ΚΕΦΑΛΑ cross-checked against other translations (p. 81 fn. 80). The analysis consists in offering information about their transmission, interpreting some narrative elements such as metaphors and figures, and discussing borrowings from other genres as well as the role of divine intervention in the texts by integrating a considerable number of direct quotations taken from existing research into her argument. Beyond the three main-sources, ΚΕΦΑΛΑ also includes a wide range of other sources and, thus, creates a broader scope on her material which is commendable. But given the overall size of the book, this is and could only be done cursorily. Therefore, the texts presented as primary sources ultimately represent only but one among many. Noteworthy suggestions on cross-references between the sources and their authors – for instance, between the *Anaklema* and the historiographies of Doukas and of Kritoboulos of Imbros (pp. 57–61)¹⁴ and the *Huexotzincayotl*, the *Florentine Codex* and the *Annals of Tlatelolco* (pp. 108) – sound promising but do not receive the space necessary to further develop these important theses. Also, due to the density of comparative material, some interesting text-immanent findings can hardly be considered: These include, for instance, a more detailed comparison of the two versions of the *Tlaxcaltecatoytl* which are mentioned only in the footnotes (p. 109 fn. 236). A stronger integration and evaluation of the 21 (coloured) illustrations would have also been desirable, as they could have further strengthened ΚΕΦΑΛΑ’s argument.

Despite the several commonalities that ΚΕΦΑΛΑ indicates in the first four chapters, the analysis then makes a big leap in content and shifts to an examination of different memory practices in the pre-modern and modern period. It is only in the fifth and last chapter “Texts and their Afterlife” (pp. 117–136) in which the different history of reception of the three main-sources is addressed: The *Anaklema* became an important source of reference in the Greek War of Independence, but the two Nahuatl songs were

13. Cf. for a French translation VINCENT DÉROCHE, Les thrènes anonymes sur la chute de Constantinople. In: VINCENT DÉROCHE – NICOLAS VATIN (eds), Constantinople 1453: des Byzantins aux Ottomans. Textes et documents (Collection Famagouste). Toulouse 2016, pp. 941–944.

14. Similarly, it has been suggested that Laonikos Chalkokondyles might have used Kritoboulos’ history, cf. DIETHER RODERICH REINSCH (ed.), Critobuli Imbriotae Historiae (Corpus fontium historiae Byzantinae 22). Berlin – New York 1983, pp. 84*–85*. It was also suggested “that the opposite might have been the case”, cf. ANTHONY KALDELIS, The Date of Laonikos Chalkokondyles’ Histories. In: Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies 52 (2012), pp. 111–136, at p. 134.

not rediscovered until the second half of the nineteenth century. KEFALA argues that “the Colonial Nahua society [...] was not especially inclined to such trauma claims” (p. 128) since laments like *Huexotzincayotl* and *Tlaxcaltecatoyotl* have been considered as exceptions to the rule. Thus, the fall of Constantinople in 1453 was incorporated in the cultural memory of modern Greece but “the historical contours of colonial and postindependence Mexico did not allow for the same to happen.” (p. 132) According to KEFALA, the post-Byzantine image of the Ottoman conquest had remained negatively affected until this day, whereas the post-Nahua perception of the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521 had been reinterpreted positively. Even though this may seem plausible overall, it is questionable whether such a dichotomous distinction will be tenable or whether a more nuanced description is needed in order to assess the experiences of conquests in the fifteenth and sixteenth century adequately. Undoubtedly, KEFALA’s argument is worth considering. But with regard to current debates on the historicisation of the concept of trauma for the pre-modern period, one might expect a stronger theoretical embedding in existing research debates: For if the “trauma claim” of the Byzantines and the Nahuas is upheld in the forms of collective, yet octroyed memory practices, only to be committed to different histories of reception, the question of the tertium comparationis, which was emphasised so prominently by KEFALA, does indeed arise – though not in the beginning but in the end. What is needed is a historicised analytical tool in order to describe processes of cultural innovation in situations of immediate dislocation. Such articulations, however, do not evolve in a vacuum but are always affected by different political players and (power) interests. Due to the large number of sources cited and due to the fact that the book is very relevant for the field of global studies and not least due to the purchase price, this book will likely find readers and stimulate further discussion – also with a prospect of an increasing interest and investigation of trauma in the pre-modern era.¹⁵

Keywords

trauma studies; conquest; conquered; Late Byzantine Empire; Fall of Constantinople; Aztec Empire; Fall of Tenochtitlan

15. I kindly thank Mara Dwornik and Johanna Gerwin for proofreading the English text.