

GUILLAUME BIDAUT, *Le partage des eaux. Sociétés, territoires et environnements du Strymon (XIIIe–XVIe siècles)* (Dossiers byzantins 20). Paris: Centre d'études byzantines, néo-helléniques et sud-est européennes, EHESS-CéSor 2022. 288 S. – ISBN 10-94824-06-1 (sic) (€ 60.00)

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The investigation of historical developments with special focus on spatial aspects of historical cultures has gained importance during the last four decades, remaining under the spotlights, for two reasons. Firstly, spatial approaches have proved to be a great means for alternative interpretations of human agencies. Secondly, they offer good opportunities for discussing crucial issues of contemporary social life, such as ecologic life styles, natural resources management, private and public space planning. Late medieval Mediterranean cultures (such as Byzantium and the Ottoman empire) provide excellent opportunities for such discussions: they exemplify cultures closely related to nature as well as highly sensitive in producing their own appropriated spaces specifically designed to be of human-friendly scale. GUILLAUME BIDAUT's postgraduate research at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes des Sciences Sociales in Paris, just published in the series of *Dossiers Byzantins*, is an excellent contribution in this direction. The study is organised in one introductory chapter, six main chapters and one concluding chapter. It is accompanied by: (a) 3 Annexes (nr 1, 2, 4) depicting data drawn from historical documents organized in 11 tables; (b) a third Annex (nr 3) containing 5 figures with geographical and palynological data; (c) a 9-pp-long meticulous bibliographical table; (d) tables of contents and abbreviations; (e) two photographs of the Strymon river course; (f) 4 maps and 11 GIS-maps of the Strymon region, depicting historical and geographical data.

This well-documented study offers Byzantinists and medievalists a profound deconstruction of natural-human entanglements within a fluvial environment (Strymon in Northern Greece) during the late Middle Ages (13th–16th centuries). Its main advantage, which turns it into a valuable asset not only for academic library collections in historical geography but also for a broad readership, is the consideration of Strymon as a historical landscape created through the constant and ever-changing interaction between nature and humans. This aim is achieved through the author's central and

far-reaching focus on relations: among natural elements, among humans, between nature and humans. Furthermore, the author is interested in delineating the result of these relations on human societies and cultures: he attempts to shape out possible collective identities of late-medieval residents in this particular fluvial environment.

GB's historical narrative is based on a variety of data assembled and evaluated by means of combined methodology through a 'holistic' interdisciplinary approach. First of all, he conducts a detailed and profound, textual and historical analysis of a large body of medieval texts (monastic, ecclesiastical and secular administrative and legal documents, historiographical, geographical, and epistolary, written in Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian, and Turkish). Secondly, he considers geographical, geological and climatic data towards a reconstruction of successive paleoenvironments in the area under consideration. Thirdly, he integrates all evidence on nature and humans in a historical narrative, by using a theoretical approach which combines ecology and environmental history. Last but not least, GB interprets his research results from a cultural geographical perspective. The conception and the structure of the work, as well as the author's methodological choices and the reasons for them, are explained in the twenty-five-pages-long introduction. In the latter, GB also closely defines his concepts and material, the geographical region and the historical context under discussion, as well as the history of art in this particular area of studies.

The first chapter, with the title "The Palaeoenvironments of Strymon", presents the fluvial landscape of Strymon as a complex system of interaction among water movement, climate, topography, and population. A combined analysis of geographic, geomorphological, climatic and hydrological data produces a description of successive paleoenvironments in the area. These paleoenvironments are scrutinized through geographic distinctions – among Deltaic Area; "Strymon Lake"; Serres Plain; Kerkin Section – followed by a brief presentation of modern seasonal variations. The picture of historical landscapes in these palaeoenvironments is completed by means of a discussion of settlement dynamics and risks, during the 13th–16th centuries, based on the analysis of historical sources.

The second chapter, with a title roughly translated as "Unities, Identities, Limits of Strymon and its Valley", investigates the question of spatial identity in respect to that particular fluvial environment. Was Strymon a river or a territory during the Late Byzantine and the Ottoman periods? Did populations in the river's area identify themselves with reference to it? GB

analyses textual sources trying to read behind their lines so as to discover meanings of the river's name in people's writings about it. This analysis results in the author's final conclusion that "it is more correct to talk about several 'Strymons' instead of a single one" (p. 86). If the river as a physical object has relative stability, its perception by humans from the 13th to the 16th century varied considerably. The author explains how the unity of the river was persistent yet the identifying power of its names depended on several factors, during that period, the name corresponding to "diverse realities" (p. 87).

The third chapter, with a title roughly translated as "Navigating the Archipelago – The river as frontier and circulation axis", seeks to explain the variable role of Strymon River in its associated communication networks. Attention is brought to the historical evidence on the role of water routes, bridges, passages, and navigation practices in the Strymon region, drawn from legal documents. Through a discussion of natural parameters, political organization, infrastructures, and places as nodes of mobility, the Strymon landscape is correlated with that of an archipelago (as space that divides and unites people simultaneously). In a cultural reading of this fluvial system as communication network, villages are perceived as "islands" which can function either as isolated resilient units or as parts of an integral whole (the fluvial network in which they interact)–or both–depending on the agency of their residents.

The fourth chapter, with a title roughly translated as "Conquering the Abundance – The river as a medium to manage and as a resource to valorise" shifts focus exactly upon the latter: human agency. GB develops the conception of Strymon river as an ecosystem whose biorhythms are integrated in human economic systems. The textual evidence about 13th–16th-centuries' economic practices in a fluvial landscape (agriculture, herbiculture, irrigation, watermills operation, fishing, pisciculture) are discussed in respect to their social, political and cultural significance as well as to the ways in which they transform the landscape in their turn.

The fifth chapter, with a title roughly translated as "The river and the mountain –stockbreeders, shepherds and herds in Strymon Valley", relocates the reader away from the channels of the running-water and into the setting which produces it: the surrounding mountains. The interaction between lowlands and highlands is scrutinized through an investigation of economic practices (short- and long-distance transhumance, trade of resources derived from pastoral farming) and through the ways in which these practices

are transformed by cultural change (due to population change) from the Late Byzantine to the Ottoman period.

The sixth chapter, with a title roughly translated as “Where the waters mix – The Strymon delta, place of power and exchange between land and sea”, is the final part of historical analysis, integrating the fluvial system into the much bigger picture of the Northern Aegean. The space which serves as open gate that links the Strymon area with the sea is its lower deltaic area; GB does not hesitate to define the delta as “the maritime interface of the Strymon valley” (p. 193). A concept from ecology (the ecotone) is used for the interpretation of the river delta, as a category for describing the zone of transition between two (or more) ecosystems. Through an evaluation of historical sources, the delta is signified as a space which is economically semi-autonomous and culturally “always novel” (p. 215) through its serving as the fluvial system’s gate to the sea.

The lengthy (21–pp) concluding chapter offers the author’s final interpretation. It provides a synthetic historical narrative about the Strymon region in the 13th–16th centuries, while also “situating” and contextualizing the study within the theoretical framework of historical geography. On one hand, the author is clearly informed about the branch of “French tradition” in Human Geography (as shaped by Fernand Braudel’s “*histoire de longue durée*”) and the English tradition of Economic Geography. On the other hand, he does not hesitate to enrich and renew his tool-kit and vocabulary with the help of the competitive of the “American stream” of Cultural Geography, guided by necessities imposed by his object and subject of study. His combination of methodologies is a solid proposal for Byzantine historians and beneficial for the Byzantine Historical Geography and Spatial studies, in particular. Hopefully, the author will benefit from even broader interdisciplinary perspectives and more recent trends in both Physical and Cultural Geography, in his future projects.

Apart from its undoubtful contribution to Late Byzantine and Ottoman historiographical literature and its fresh theoretical perspective, this monograph offers something more. It leaves the specialist and the non-specialist reader with a vivid picture of a fluvial environment during the late Middle Ages and – even more so – with an impression of having comprehended and being familiar with the Strymon region and its inhabitants in those times. It so-introduces GB to the academic community as a skilled historian, competent for sensitive and in-depth interpretations of medieval texts, and as a geographer with noteworthy talent for interdisciplinary work and inte-

grative comprehension of historical contexts. The quality of this study is particularly impressive for a thesis submitted at the Masters level. With its clear targeting, solid methodology, firm structure, and eloquent articulation, the *Partage des eaux* makes a promise for this junior scholar's significant future contribution to the Byzantine and medieval Spatial studies.

Keywords

historical geography; Late Byzantine history; Strymon valley