

CLAUDIA RAPP, *Elitekultur und christliche Religiosität in Spätantike und Byzanz* (Karl-Christ-Preis für Alte Geschichte 6). Göttingen: Verlag Antike 2024. 84 pp. – ISBN 978-3-911065-06-1

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Every two years since 2013, a prize named after the Marburg professor KARL CHRIST (1923–2008) has been awarded for outstanding work in Ancient History or in a related field. CLAUDIA RAPP was the first Byzantinist to receive it (2023), and her acceptance speech has now been published in print. Addressed mainly to Classicists, it takes aim at false oppositions that distort our view of Byzantine culture: religious versus secular discourse, dogmatic theology versus popular belief.

RAPP's first example comes from Egypt, where two large textiles, both dated ca. AD 400, were once deposited in a single burial (p. 33). While the larger of these (inv. 3100a) is woven with Bacchic figures, the smaller one (inv. 3100b) depicts the life of the Virgin: biblical images thus rub shoulders with mythological ones. A similarly broad-minded attitude was endorsed by Church fathers such as Basil of Caesarea (330–379), who famously explained to his nephews how they might benefit from Hellenic (i.e. 'pagan') literature (CPG 2867) (pp. 36–37). A few centuries after him, another prelate, Leo of Synada (PmbZ 24416), went so far as to confess not having focused on religious texts but spending too much time on 'external' (i.e. non-religious) ones (ἡ λόγοις οὐκ ἐσχόλασα θείοις, ἡ τοῖς ἔξω πλέον ἐνδιέτριψα καὶ τοῦ μέτρου) (pp. 43–44).

RAPP outlines Byzantine book culture through a couple of statistical overviews (pp. 48–53). A bar diagram shows that libraries both institutional and private did contain ancient, pre-Christian titles along with Christian ones (of course, the latter predominated). A set of pie charts divides all Greek authors active in the ninth–tenth and in the mid-thirteenth to mid-fifteenth centuries into laymen, monks plus lower clergy, and prelates. Regardless of their vocational status, most of these wrote on *both* religious and secular subjects, so that, in sum, non-religious texts form about a quarter of the total literary output. Perhaps there was a slight trend toward secularisation, since lay writers account for 35 % of the earlier sample and 44 % of the later one.¹

1. On this point see also ANTHONY CUTLER, *The Social Status of Byzantine Scribes*,

This bird's eye view is supplemented with two small case studies of individual manuscripts (pp. 44–47, 61–63). The first (Diktyon 16409) is a primary witness to several works by the great eleventh-century polymath Michael Psellus. The same anonymous scribe who copied these at some point ca. 1100 added (on f. 286v, which is now the last page) a spell supposed to help women in labour (Ἐπίγραμμα ἐπὶ γυναικὶ ὠδινούσῃ μὲν, μὴ ἰσχυούσῃ δὲ τεκεῖν). A single book this reflects both high learning and folk religion.

A second, no less striking example is provided by a codex of the late fourteenth century (Diktyon 69879). While it, too, includes Psellian texts (ff. 148r–150r), its main content is a vernacular poem (ff. 16r–142r). That poem's protagonist is not a biblical figure or a saint, but the greatest monarch of Greek antiquity:

Ὁ Μακεδόνων βασιλεὺς Ἀλέξανδρος ἐκεῖνος,
ὁ γίγας ὁ περίφημος, ὁ συνετὸς ἐν λόγοις,
ἡ πάρδαλις ἡ πτερωτή, λέων ὁ βρυχητίας,
ὁ πρὸς πολέμους ἰσχυρὸς, ὁ δυνατὸς ἐν μάχαις...

Testimony of folk belief is not lacking, either – in the form of a spell against snake bites (f. 151r-v). Just as in Diktyon 16409 (above), texts that many a scholar would associate with different 'social milieus', different 'levels of culture', or different 'types of discourse' are found here between the same two covers, copied by a single scribe for the same readership.

CLAUDIA RAPP thus pleads for a more holistic and more democratic approach to the study of Byzantium. Back in the day, Byzantinists would first of all be trained in Classics and would correspondingly focus on 'Graeco-Roman continuity', 'the Classical tradition', and the afterlife of the Attic dialect as an artificial literary language (pp. 32–33, 38–39). Yet it was none other than the discipline's founder KARL KRUMBACHER (1856–1909) who warned that 'deeper understanding and assessment of the Byzantine age are befuddled most of all by the habit of viewing everything there only as continuation and sequel to Antiquity' (p. 37).

RAPP's lecture is preceded by a *laudatio*, where HARTMUT LEPPIN, a historian of the late Roman Empire, calls Byzantine Studies an 'exotic subject' (*Orchideenfach*) and mentions that, as of 2022, a total of forty-one students pursued a degree in them at a German university (pp. 15, 17). It

800–1500: A Statistical Analysis Based on Vogel–Gardthausen. *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 74 (1981) pp. 328–334.

may be worth putting this statement in perspective. At about the time Professor LEPPIN was born – which is to say, not too long ago, – there was a single chair of Byzantine Studies in the FRG and the GDR, the one at the University of Munich. It was held by HANS-GEORG BECK (1910–1999), whom RAPP reverently mentions in her lecture (p. 38). Present-day Germany is home to *seven* ordinary professors of *Byzantinistik*. Their names can be found on the Internet.

Keywords

Byzantine cultural history