

EIRENE-SOPHIA KIAPIDOU, *Byzantine Historiographical Prefaces (4th–15th Centuries): A Study on the Praxis and Culture of Writing History in Byzantium* (Byzantioç: Studies in Byzantine History and Civilization 23). Turnhout: Brepols 2025. 268 pp. – ISBN 978-2-503-61251-5

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EIRENE-SOPHIA KIAPIDOU mentions that my paper at the 2016 International Congress of Byzantine Studies on ‘The Unwritten Rules for Writing Byzantine History’ inspired her idea that the prefaces to Byzantine histories could include elements of ‘a written Byzantine “theory” of history-writing’ (p. 11). Such theoretical elements include the distinction between histories and chronicles, the originality of historians who followed their sources closely, and the importance historians assigned to factual accuracy. While not all Byzantine historians wrote prefaces and not all their prefaces survive, by her count forty-four historians wrote surviving prefaces. She rightly considers as prefaces ‘internal proems’ that introduce new parts of a history, since these also include general observations by the authors.

After summarizing the state of current research on Byzantine historiography and on prefaces in general, in her introduction KIAPIDOU discusses the prefaces of ancient Greek historians, some of whom (particularly Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, and Diodorus Siculus) influenced Byzantine historians. She also mentions ancient Latin historians, though the only Latin history that seems to have influenced the Byzantines was that of Ammianus Marcellinus, which she excludes because his general preface is lost (p. 55 n. 117). Yet ‘internal proems’ to his Books XV and XXVI are preserved, along with (probably) a Greek summary of part of his initial preface.¹

Chapter 1, ‘The Prefatory Communication Situation in Byzantine Historiography,’ discusses the main features of the prefaces and illustrates these

1. On the influence of Ammianus on Byzantine historiography, see W. TREADGOLD, *The Byzantine Summaries of the Lost Books of Ammianus Marcellinus*. *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 73 (2023) pp. 251–298 (with pp. 264–267 on Ammianus’ initial preface). On p. 61 n. 1, confusing the fourth-century Ammianus Marcellinus with the sixth-century Marcellinus Comes, KIAPIDOU has misread my *Early Byzantine Historians*. Basingstoke 2007, p. 234 to mean that a continuation of Marcellinus Comes’ chronicle was a continuation of Ammianus’ history. Marcellinus Comes’ chronicle has a short preface that she overlooks.

with discussions of some of the prefaces. She observes that a few historians omitted prefaces and that the prefaces are of very different lengths, ranging from the 25 words of Joseph Genesius to the over 3000 words of Nicephorus Xanthopoulos. She further notes that as a rule the historians wrote their prefaces after finishing the first editions of their histories (without noting that this would explain why George Syncellus' unfinished history lacks a preface). She then discusses types of preface that she characterizes as metrical, epistolary, and rhetorical.

Her discussions of individual prefaces are usually sound. She disagrees with me that the two prefaces of Michael Attaliates' history belonged to two different editions of his history, citing the two prefaces of the apparently single edition of Sozomen's church history (p. 105); but the existence of Attaliates' two editions seems evident from the different offices attributed to him in the headings of his two prefaces and from the panegyric treatment he gives Nicephorus III, which fits the dedicatory preface to Nicephorus but not the other preface that promises an objectivity found only in the treatment of earlier emperors.² KtAPIDOU plausibly argues that a similar dedicatory preface to Andronicus II by Nicephorus Xanthopoulos was 'an intensely rhetorical composition which was inserted into the manuscript of the ecclesiastical history' but was not originally written for it (p. 111). She concludes that even though the prefaces are largely formulaic they are nonetheless significant: 'Literary commonplaces are the means by which, voluntarily or involuntarily, each civilization and each age expresses itself and its values...' (p. 122).

Chapter 2, 'The Content of the Preserved Prefaces of Byzantine Historiography,' discusses the prefaces not already discussed in Chapter 1, with cross-references to her previous discussions. She divides the prefaces into 'elaborated prefaces' that are 'longer and more carefully worked' (p. 124) and 'conventionally functional' prefaces. This division and the mixture of discussions and references unfortunately tend to obscure the chronological development of the prefaces and their references to their predecessors. Here too, however, her discussions of the individual prefaces are generally accurate and well done.³ On Procopius' prefaces to his *Secret History* and *Buildings*, she makes the perceptive observation that 'neither mentions the

2. W. TREADGOLD, *Middle Byzantine Historians*. Basingstoke 2013, pp. 317–324.

3. Presumably her statement in her table on p. 195 that Nicephorus Gregoras wrote 'to please the emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos' is just an accidental repetition from the previous entry on Nicephorus Xanthopoulos, since Andronicus II died in 1332 and she realizes that Gregoras wrote the proem as late as 1347 (p. 184).

very essence of history, which is truth and present in the *On the Wars*, as it ought to be in the proem to any work of historiography. Prokopios thus seems rather to be pretending to write history, perhaps to lend authority to the rhetorical accounts that follow...' (p. 135). Yet a similar argument could be used to show that Attaliates' 'objective' preface cannot apply to his treatment of Nicephorus III.

Discussing Nicetas Choniates' preface, she tackles 'the famous paradox' of 'why Choniates insists so forcibly on a principle (simplicity and clarity of language) which he does not apply' in his elaborate style, concluding that he and his contemporaries wanted 'to link themselves and their texts with classical Greek antiquity as a counterweight to the detested Latin Crusaders' (p. 176). Yet Nicetas, who wrote this proem before the Fourth Crusade took Constantinople in 1204, was not particularly anti-Western and blamed the empire's downfall mainly on its own emperors and officials. When Nicetas writes (in KIAPIDOU's translation), 'This history, having truth as its sole objective, shuns rhetorical artifice and poetic storytelling' (p. 175), his point appears to be that he will avoid rhetoric and artifice as incompatible with truth, though without renouncing the complicated Atticizing Greek usual for learned Byzantine authors.

KIAPIDOU writes that Theodore Scutariotes' declaring in his preface 'that he does not say anything new but merely summarizes' is 'a revolutionary statement' (p. 182). Although his disclaiming authorship for this reason is unique, otherwise his words resemble Theophanes' claim in his preface that 'I did not set down anything of my own composition but have made a selection from the ancient historians and prose-writers' (p. 144), John Scylitzes' statement that he compiled 'an accurate synopsis' of his sources (p. 155), and similar statements by John Zonaras and others that they simply epitomized the texts they had found.

While I disagree with KIAPIDOU's treatment of the short preface of John Malalas, she recognizes that his 'identity, his sources and the extent of his reliance upon them, the subsequent use of the chronicle by later authors, and more recently the text's literary genre' are all controversial (p. 199). Suffice it to say that I believe Malalas' text, including his preface, is a badly distorted version of the universal history of Eustathius of Epiphania that was copied much more accurately by John of Antioch.⁴ In fact, KIAPIDOU

4. See TREADGOLD, *Early Byzantine Historians*, pp. 311–329 (with p. 312 and n. 6 on the preface).

DOU's tentative argument that this preface shows the indirect influence of Eusebius' *Chronicle* may well be correct (pp. 199–204).

Chapter 3, 'Theoretical Aspects of Byzantine Historiography: The Evidence of the Prefaces,' is concise and to the point. KIAPIDOU observes: 'Most texts rely on a rewriting of earlier sources' (p. 220), but this 'rewriting in no way detracts from the writer's authorship of the resulting text' (p. 221). Many prefaces define 'the essence and the value of historiography, with truth and moral-didactic benefit as its two basic constituents' that 'are sometimes held up for comparison with other literary genres: first and foremost with rhetoric (which flatters or censures, in either case at the expense of truth) and poetry/literature (which speaks of myth and is therefore of no profit)...' (p. 223). Note that these principles, which almost all Byzantine historians seem to have held, are incompatible with postmodern scholars' idea that history should be judged by the same criteria as fiction.

KIAPIDOU concludes that 'the surviving proems of the historical texts attest to a distinction in historiography between history and chronicle' but 'they also confirm... that the Byzantines used the terms *ιστορία* and *χρονογραφία* loosely to qualify their own and other works, and describe in a similar manner the writing process for both kinds of text' (p. 229). I would conclude that the Byzantines drew no consistent distinction between histories and chronicles, so that for most purposes the attempts made by modern scholars to distinguish the two are futile.

My recent reading of the histories of Nicephorus Gregoras and John VI Cantacuzenus (more than 3000 pages of difficult Greek) in order to write the third and final volume of my study of the Byzantine historians helps me to sympathize with students of Byzantine historiography who want to generalize about it without reading all of it. One of the reasons KIAPIDOU's survey succeeds is that she makes good use of the four-volume survey in Greek of APOSTOLOS KARPOZELOS, who really does seem to have read nearly all of Byzantine historiography.⁵ Most of her conclusions apply to most or all of it, and show that by and large Byzantine historiographical prefaces, for all their formulaic character, are reliable guides to Byzantine historiographical practice.

Keywords

Byzantine historiography

5. A. KARPOZELOS, *Βυζαντινοί ιστορικοί και χρονογράφοι*. 4 vols. Athens 1997–2015.