

Taxiarchis Koliass, *The Perspectives of Byzantine Studies in the Face of the New Conditions of Scientific Work and Research*.

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***The Perspectives of Byzantine Studies in the Face of the New Conditions of  
Scientific Work and Research***

As the XXII<sup>nd</sup> International Congress of Byzantine Studies is drawing to its end, I would like to share with the participants some personal observations and thoughts, which might seem to be a commonplace, but, perhaps they are not without value, since they were recorded with the Congress in mind.

One hundred and fourteen years have passed since the day Karl Krumbacher was appointed to the first chair of Byzantine Studies in the University of Munich, at a time when Byzantine Studies were considered part of Literature, before they evolved into a distinct discipline.

Since then there have been twenty-two congresses, Byzantine Studies have developed in thirty eight countries and many universities throughout the world include in their curricula the study of the Byzantine culture, either as a whole or in its various facets (history, literature, art history and archaeology, music, theology, law).

The decades that followed the creation of the first university chair of Byzantine Studies saw the publication of sources –literary texts, documents, inscriptions, coins and seals–, the conduct of systematic excavations, the compilation of dictionaries, the composition of new reference textbooks. After the first journals, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* and *Vizantijskij Vremennik*, more periodicals came out, contributing in a substantial way to the development of our discipline. Apart from numerous monographs, conference acts and many festschrifts were also published. As far as the latter are concerned, there have been lately – and continue to appear – such a large number that one cannot keep with. In fact, this overproduction is due to the

conclusion of the career of a whole generation of Byzantinists, i.e. the students of H.-G.Beck, H. Hunger, P. Lemerle, D. Zakythenos, G. Ostrogorsky, I. Dujčev, A. Kazhdan, I. Ševčenko and others. During the period of this generation (ca. 1970-1995) that is now retiring from academic life (but not from research) we could say that Byzantine studies reached their peak, not just as far as research is concerned, but also in the expansion of university departments and research centers. This development is not necessarily only the fruit of the efforts of the aforementioned generation. It is rather the product of the conditions prevailing in society during the period 1965-1980 and of the momentum that was created by those conditions and was maintained well into the next decade.

This meteoric rise of Byzantine studies and the concurrent increase in the production of scientific publications has led us to a point where we can no longer follow every new item in the bibliography, but only one or two fields of immediate interest for our research (of course, even today there are exceptions to this rule, in the form of some of our colleagues who seem to be omniscient). Fifty years ago a savant was able to have a broad overview of many fields, perhaps due to his or her wide-ranging education as well, but definitely because the number of publications was much smaller. All one has to do is to compare the number of pages in the bibliographical section of *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* between older and more recent issues.

Pure research (Grundlagenforschung), the importance of which was stressed by H. Hunger at the XVI International Congress in Vienna, exactly 30 years ago, has, in my opinion, progressed in a rather satisfactory degree. Today it is essential that it continues to be pursued, since a lot remains to be done. However, most of the byzantine texts are already accessible, there are quite a few noteworthy textbooks and we dedicate ourselves to more specialized areas of research, as well as synthetic work on various subjects. Let me mention some of the most important collective works at our disposal such as the *Tabula Imperii Byzantini*, the *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit*, the *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit*, the *Archives de l'Athos*, the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* and the *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in Dumbarton Oaks*.

During the last decades the study of subjects pertaining to everyday life, material culture and mentalities has greatly increased.

The study of art is no longer limited (as it was the case, up to a certain degree, in the past) to the study of monuments; it is now part of a wider study of culture.

In countries that had once been part of Byzantine territory, like Greece, greater attention has been finally given during the last decades to the study of all archaeological monuments dating from Byzantine times –and not only churches, which used to monopolize interest in the past; Antiquity thus is no longer the sole focus of research.

As for exhibiting the finds in museums, a new perception has developed. Priority is given not to the exposition of the object itself, as it happened earlier, but to its function within a society; to its interaction with man. Large-scale exhibitions were organized in various countries, catching the public's interest and making Byzantium known to an ever-widening circle of people within a community.

Within the last one hundred years, i.e. during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so many things were accomplished that it is almost difficult to conceive (e.g. the edition of the Archives de l'Athos and of the Book of the Eparch).

As we all know, through our everyday life experience, our living and working environments have changed dramatically over the past 10-15 years. The change was radical. Society's priorities and interests have also changed. These changes are directly related to the evolution of technology by leaps and bounds. Technology now offers many new possibilities (potentials that were unimaginable in the past) which are very useful, since they facilitate things. Of course, as it is often the case, the use of technology becomes an end in itself. In other words, sometimes we have to search for a field in which to apply its potential. In the case of humanities, research projects are mostly funded in the fields where technology can be applied.

A field for which new technologies have proved extremely useful is that of digitalization, mainly of archival material. The preservation and enhanced accessibility of archives have been greatly facilitated.

For about a decade, digitalization was generously funded. This was a very important and useful policy, not only because it facilitated the conduct of scientific research and played a part in its development, but also because multinational producers of software and hardware were able to sell their products. In this way, the contents of many archives and libraries were made far more accessible, not to mention time and money that did not have to be spent anymore on ordering and shipping archival material, organizing research trips to libraries abroad, etc.

At the same time, large databases have been created. I must mention the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, because it revolutionized our field by bringing all written sources to the desk of each and every one of us. Other great works were also digitized (e.g. the *Lexikon des Mittelalters*) and many other large databases were created (e.g. the *Dumbarton Oaks Hagiography*).

All of us, but mainly the younger ones, use the Internet, and not just for exchanging e-mails. (On a more personal note: it is rather disconcerting to send a message and receive a reply in less than three minutes. One is forced to live feeling guilty all the time, simply because one is late to reply to an e-mail). We also use it to track down information pertaining to our research, more specifically to locate bibliographical references, which we are often able to read online (e.g. via Google Books etc.). I remember that until a few years ago I warned my students not to use the Internet when looking for bibliography. In the meantime, searching with the help of the Internet has become so advanced that I now ask for my students' help in order to save time. Of course, the titles located are written in English, unless one widens the parameters of the search to include other languages. However, the numbers are overwhelmingly in favor of English. In this way, our students work under the misconception that the results of scholarly research are published only in English and for this reason they don't have to learn any other languages, even though they wish to become scholars.

Using the Internet, therefore, has opened up the libraries. A downside (not a very serious one), is the fact that the pirated circulation of titles online is out of control. Furthermore, attendance in libraries has dropped, since it is no longer necessary to visit an archive or book repository. This phenomenon sometimes leads to the researcher being cut off from his or her colleagues. This, however, is a widespread symptom of our times.

On the other hand, the Internet allows colleagues to meet and collaborate over vast distances, even across continents. I cannot help but think of N. Nicholas and G. Baloglou, who jointly published the *Entertaining tale of quadrupeds* (*Διήγησις παιδιόφραστος των ζώων των τετραπόδων*) while the former was in Australia and the latter in North America.

I must mention that projects are announced aiming at developing mobility among researchers, but the question is what are the chances of someone successfully applying and receiving such a grant.

Within this constantly changing environment, the chances of securing research grants are rather slim. Job cuts are unfortunately a world-wide phenomenon. This is not solely related to the current international financial crisis, for its beginning, as far as humanities in universities are concerned, goes back at least a decade. Employment opportunities, if and when they appear, are limited in time and with no prospect for renewal. At the same time, in our fields there is also a time limit as to employment in research projects, for which it is not easy to secure funds.

The difficulties in securing funds for research are due to the fact that the projects announced as a rule relate to society's current interests. So, it is not easy for Byzantine proposals to compete with those from other disciplines.

When research proposals are evaluated, it is usually done using criteria that do not fit in with Byzantine studies at all. For instance, there are criteria which aim at cementing a spirit of friendship and coexistence between nations, promoting globalization etc., which may be acceptable from a moral point of view and as far as political intentions are concerned, but sometimes lead to a distortion of history. This is comparable to similar phenomena in the past, when support was given to research trying to prove that nation A had more historical rights than nation B. Only that now we have moved towards the opposite direction, again falling victim to extremist opinions. Research in the past was to a significant degree guided, and in the present the degree of guidance has not lessened.

Furthermore, the people who define research guidelines and are by definition members of the evaluation committees, are not interested in the distant past, but in more recent periods; consequently, our proposals usually do not fare well. Let me mention as an example a research proposal on the perceptions of war in the Byzantine world, which was not chosen on the ground that it did not impact well on the issues that concern modern societies. I do not mean to say that our project was better or that research revolving around Byzantium should be automatically preferred. What I am trying to say is that our proposals must be adjusted and "wrapped" accordingly, if they are to have a fighting chance.

So, it is not easy to find money for funding research concerning the Byzantine period, since, unfortunately, in common with the rest of the humanities, it does not produce tangible advantages for today's business-minded society.

There are, however, exceptions that allow Byzantinists to be optimistic, especially when it comes to restoring archaeological monuments, for they can be utilized in drawing crowds of tourists and therefore generate revenues.

As for universities, we find that there is a tendency to increase their importance as places of teaching at the expense of their research activities. This is accomplished by cutting down on their research grants. At the same time, one may distinguish some sort of indifference towards receiving a meaningful education through knowledge; instead, it has become more important to acquire an ephemeral practical knowledge, or skills, as the trendy catchword goes.

These are the times of the development of distance learning and, through e-class, of the possibilities in the quest for new venues of teaching, affordable and thus with the potential to grow. Five years ago, at the London congress, we organized a round table where we presented the Internet's potential for teaching.

In recent years we witnessed the appearance of electronic Byzantine journals: *Byzantina Symmeikta*, which is an on-line open access journal, *Millennium*, which is available to paying subscribers and the recently-launched *Parekbolai*. At the same time, many traditional printed journals, such as the *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik*, the *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, the *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, and the *Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας* are also available in e-format.

In my opinion, new results in the field of Byzantine studies are not in as urgent a need of publication as those of medicine, molecular biology etc. No one is going to die if they get published eight or tenth months later! However, apart from the understandable interest of the authors themselves to see their papers published as soon as possible, it is rather this new environment, this new way of thinking and acting, that pushes us to adopt these novelties, not to mention the expectation of the publishers of e-journals that we will receive better grades when the journal and our academic institution will be evaluated.

Also e-books made their appearance in our field. We are witnessing the discussions on this subject that take place on international fora. It is particularly to us who delve into the past, especially those of us who study the history of the book itself, from the wax tablet to papyrus to parchment to paper, that the printed book seems like an object of worship; it is very difficult to think that we have to abandon its everyday use. But there is no alternative; when everyone is moving in that direction we have no

choice but to follow. Publishing houses began already producing Byzantine e-books and public institutions will no longer be able to approve printing expenses, especially when the directive comes from the highest echelons of power.

The use of electronic information, particularly those found on the World Wide Web, leads to a certain extent away from the perception of the past as History and reinforces our interest in the ephemeral, in the information that is here today and gone tomorrow. In a similar way, we see a growing interest in a form of development that may not be grounded in knowledge and past experience, which simply moves forward with unclear objectives into an unknown future. This is the way things are evolving, but couldn't some of us stay out of the game?

The Internet has also helped English to finally become the profession's *lingua franca*.

A current issue is that of the citation index, gradually forced upon us under the influence of Science Departments and because of our age's manic pursuit of leveling evaluations (which may be useful, but should not be the same for every field of knowledge, disregarding the particularities of each discipline). According to this method, many times we ignore what is essential and tend to use ill-fitting and inappropriate criteria as decisive factors when selecting scholars, passing judgment on research proposals or dealing with the evaluation (in other words the survival) of an entire research facility.

Furthermore, the evaluation of scholarly journals is well on its way; according to the category (A, B, C) under which they have been placed, a paper published by one of them may be judged as more or less significant. Of course, assigning journals to categories has often been the prerogative of people who have nothing to do with our field, who are not in a position to know the true value of a specific journal. The *Journal of Peloponnesian Studies* is a case in point: although it publishes scholarly papers on the region's local history (including the Byzantine period), its place in such a list may not be commensurate to its value. And of course the main criteria for a journal to be placed high on such a list is (or at least used to be) its use of the English language, whether it was published annually with no interruptions, the presence of a scholarly committee, even on paper. Thus three years ago only *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* was considered worthy of being placed on the A list; not *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, not *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik*, not *Vizantijskij Vremennik*, not *Revue des Études Byzantines* (perhaps because they published papers in languages

other than English). So, there is a clear and present danger of national or local journals being downgraded or disappearing altogether, because scholars will want to publish their work in journals that are high up on the list. This process is painfully reminiscent of the downgrading of entire national economies by privately-owned financial services companies.

This situation must be dealt with on an international level and for all fields of humanitarian studies, be they Byzantine, Roman or Scandinavian. The existing old-fashioned (clearly scholarly) standards must be preserved and at the same time adapted or new ones created, taking into consideration forthcoming developments. With the way things are developing in the realm of technology, it is not out of the question that the ability to automatically translate studies into English, so that a balance may be struck, will soon be widely available (of course, the quality of the English translation in such cases is a whole different story).

A growing issue that is characteristic of the fast and furious times we live in is the deluge not so much of publications, but of information relative to Byzantine studies that may be found on the Internet. There are so many websites, so many references to Byzantium, some good, some bad, that it is almost physically impossible for a person to browse through all of them, assess them, categorize them, save or dump them. Furthermore, worthwhile or not, it is not certain that they will be there the next day, still posted, or disappear into thin cyber air. Two years ago Michael Jeffreys and I had a talk on the subject, at the City of Athens Conference on Byzantine Studies. The occasion was a paper by Guentcho Banev that dealt with similar issues. That discussion became the primer for a research project conducted by the Institute of Byzantine Studies of the National Hellenic Research Foundation, in collaboration with the National Hellenic Documentation Center, aiming at creating a dynamic tool for the management of Byzantine Studies data on the Web. It will produce a practical and structured application facilitating easy access to the on-line scientific material produced worldwide on Byzantine history and culture. The project was presented the day before yesterday by colleagues Guentcho Banev and Gerasimos Merianos.

One point that needs to be addressed is that of the status of the Byzantinist himself, particularly the young scholar, since the older ones have already run their course with various degrees of success and there is nothing we can do about that now. What are the prospects of a Byzantinist as member of today's society? Five years ago, at the London conference, the late Ihor Ševčenko spoke of an outgoing generation (his

own) and he seemed to be satisfied by their accomplishments. Of course, he was speaking on behalf of scholars fortunate enough to have had an academic career. At the same time, however, he expressed his concern regarding the future of his younger colleagues.

As I mentioned before, today things don't look so good. As a result of modern society's utilitarian interests on a global scale, the teaching of classical languages, Greek and Latin, is all but abandoned. The end result is that young philologists find it next to impossible to secure a position.

There are of course the historians and archaeologists of Greece (philologists as well, in that particular country, because of the ability to teach Modern Greek), Bulgaria, Serbia and other countries who count the Byzantine era among their national histories, that have some prospects of a career in their countries' educational system. Since in the aforementioned countries, as well as Turkey, there is an abundance of Byzantine monuments, archaeologists in those countries have a better (albeit slim) chance of finding employment.

So, because of the lack of career prospects for young Byzantinists, there is a growing uneasiness about the small number of able young men and women who might choose to study Byzantium. Therefore, those of us who are able, either because of age or of position, have an obligation to pursue research grants, even though the conditions for research may not be ideal, even if only to secure employment for younger colleagues and to ensure a flow of competent youths into our discipline.

To be sure, one of our main concerns is to preserve Byzantine Studies as an international discipline, flourishing not only in countries that have a direct link to Byzantine culture, but, if possible, in all prestigious research centers around the world, just like Classical or Medieval Studies.

Another tendency of our times that has been brought about by prevailing conditions is the gradual neglect of traditional – I am tempted to say serious – research in favor of the production of material aiming at a wider public. The perception that a scholar must be useful to society, must contribute to its education and cultivation, gains ground daily. This perception, however, is based not on long-term planning that will bear fruit, but on the expectation of immediate and tangible – perhaps even superficial – results. Therefore, research is funded and conducted only when it produces specific benefits.

What really sells today is STS: Science, Technology and Society. So we must play by their rules (if possible, without setting aside our higher goal, the restoration of humanitarian studies). In other words, we must continue to increase our involvement in activities revolving around the applications of technological achievements.

Possibly, there is nothing left to do but try to survive and grow through this kind of work. By developing long distance learning, contributing to the production of educational films, preparing teaching material for use in the various levels of education, producing material, if possible, for everyday use and entertainment. By utilizing the growing tendency of modern technology to guide museum visitors or create virtual museums or environments (e.g. medieval cities) to be visited by all those who are interested. Through providing funds for such types of activities (for which both the technology and the end result are important), we must explore the possibility – when the material is being prepared – to conduct pure research and secure employment for young Byzantinists. Through similar activities there is a chance – albeit a limited one – to secure employment (short-term, unfortunately) for those studying manuscripts, papyri, history and (perhaps more easily) art and archaeology.

If such endeavors are to succeed, it is imperative that we project Byzantium's relevance to world history, to make it an interesting and attractive subject for the general public. Let us consider for a moment the success of the Glory of Byzantium exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Byzantium 330-1453 exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, the Pracht und Alltag exhibition in Bonn and many others that contributed to the dissemination of knowledge about Byzantium and to its recognition as an empire of cardinal importance.

In this spirit, little more than a month ago the Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies (the British National Committee of the AIEB) circulated among the representatives of the various National Committees a Proposal for a Development Commission within AIEB. In it the SPBS stresses the necessity for the Byzantine academic community to reach out to the general public worldwide and proposes the formation of an international commission within AIEB to that effect. The day before yesterday the General Assembly of the AIEB has already appointed such a committee. I believe congratulations for our British colleagues are in order.

We must therefore seek aspects of Byzantium and Byzantine culture that make them look interesting.

It is also wise to examine the fields into which Byzantine studies are going to develop in the near future. Or perhaps it is advisable to choose research fields into which, adapted to current conditions, will allow our discipline to survive, even flourish. Fields that are of general interest today, because they are relevant to the anxieties that trouble modern society. It goes without saying that you do not need me to pinpoint them. Nevertheless, I will mention a few examples, coming mainly from my own interests: The multinational character of Byzantine society; Byzantium's characteristics as a multinational great power, a centrally-governed empire, a partly controlled economy that had seen its fair share of crises; prices of consumer goods and services; military and diplomatic interventions; migrations of populations; popular movements and social upheaval; trade relations; Byzantium's relations with the predecessors of modern great powers and present-day countries in general; but also matters of ideology, theology, aesthetics and everyday life. Some of these suggestions have been made before or are repeated today by others. Let us remember Alexander Kazhdan and his work on the interest in Byzantium displayed by another authoritarian state, the Soviet Union, or Edward Luttwak's recent work on *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, in which the American analyst often compares Byzantium's strategy to modern international politics. Byzantium was one of the longest-surviving empires in history. Could the rise of China make it relevant once again in the near future?

Returning to the present, we are led to ponder whether we will continue to hold these large congresses in the future, when many other specialized conferences are organized within each five-year hiatus and the communication between colleagues has been greatly facilitated thanks to the Internet. Despite all that, I still believe in the usefulness of such grand-scale meetings, because they allow colleagues to come together, meet personally with people known to each other only as names in a bibliography, realize that they are part of a great community taking in countries and whole continents. Indeed, these last few days here in Sofia we had the opportunity to notice even better the presence of the Slavic-speaking world and its participation in the Byzantine tradition. I foresee that in the future we will probably have the acts of these congresses published in electronic form and even be able to follow the sessions internationally, through webcast. In the end, however, it all boils down to this: even if only to boost the morale of the Byzantinists themselves or to impress others, these large-scale events are still necessary.

