SCANDINAVIAN JOURNAL OF BYZANTINE AND MODERN GREEK STUDIES

Efthymia Braounou
9 **On the issue of irony in Michael Psellos's encomium on Michael Keroularios**

Barbara Graziosi
25 **On Seeing The Poet: Arabic, Italian and Byzantine portraits of Homer**

Olof Heilo
49 **Empire of Clay and Iron: Divisions in the Byzantine state ideology and Christian apocalyptic expectations from the reigns of Heraclius to Leo III (610-718)**

Ioannis Kioridis
65 **The wife's prayer for her husband in the *Cantar de mio Cid* and the Escorial version of *Digenis Akritis***

Argiro Markaki
81 **The Politics of Marriage and Liebestod in Chortatsis' *Erophile***

Claudia Rapp
111 **Author, Audience, Text and Saint: Two Modes of Early Byzantine Hagiography**

131 **Book Reviews**

No 1 • 2015

Instructions for contributors to

SCANDINAVIAN JOURNAL OF BYZANTINE AND MODERN GREEK STUDIES

SJBMGS encourages scholarly contributions within Byzantine and Modern Greek philology and history.

Manuscripts of articles to be considered for publication should be sent to Marianna.Smaragdi@klass.lu.se or Marianna Smaragdi, Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University, Box 201, 22100 Lund, Sweden.

Your article will be refereed. If it is accepted for publication, you will be asked to supply a final version on e-mail. Authors will receive five copies of the journal volume.

The SJBMGS is a nonprofit venture to be distributed on an exchange basis to scholars and libraries.

Copyright: The authors and the editor.

Editorial Board:
Demetrios Agoritsas, PhD
Christoforos Charalambakis, professor, University of Athens
Eric Cullhed, senior lecturer, University of Uppsala
Olof Heilo, PhD, University of Vienna
David Holton, professor emeritus, University of Cambridge
Christian Høgel, professor wso, University of Southern Denmark
Ingela Nilsson, professor, University of Uppsala
Staffan Wahlgren, professor, NTNU, Trondheim

Editor-in-chief:
Vassilios Sabatakakis
vassilios.sabatakakis@klass.lu.se

The unusual use of Byzantium

Olof Heilo

Byzantine themes are rare in Swedish literature. In fact, in order to find such themes one has to make a thorough archaeological dig.

Non-Swedes might find this surprising, given not only the famous historical presence of Nordic warriors at the Byzantine court in "Miklagård", but also the much later enmity with Russia and the Orthodox Christian world. One could at least have expected some kind of Swedish "Byzantino-orientalism" to have developed during the centuries that passed since Novgorod turned down the Christianizing efforts of the 14th century Swedish king Magnus IV Eriksson with the words "go to Constantinople … for that is from where we received our Christianity."

But historical memories are shorter than they want to imply. The *Kulturkampf* that inspired 19th century nationalist Swedish authors pitted Protestant Christianity against Catholicism, and Swedes against Russians only in more general terms. As for the Viking era, it was mostly too distant, exotic and eccentric to create a lasting point of identification for the literate bourgeoisie. The 20th century, finally, saw the rapid modernization of Sweden under the banner of a Social democracy that had little use for any such points of cultural reference.

There are, however, a number of interesting examples from modern Swedish literature in which Byzantium is used both as a projection screen in the "Orientalist" sense, and in a more positive sense as a source of inspiration. *Bruken av Bysans* ("The Uses of Byzantium", 2011) by Helena Bodin offers a thorough insight.

Negative Swedish perceptions of Byzantium tend to have a thing in common, which is not particularly Swedish, but rather connects them to the usual Western anti-Byzantinism from the time of Gibbon and Mon-

tesquieu: they all suffer from some sort of obsession with Classical Antiquity. Displaying anti-Christian sentiments that became mainstream in the mid-20th century (characteristically late compared to the continent) these Classicists considered Byzantium as something that had gone awry in every sense: politically, culturally, religiously. As their Mediterranean inclinations indicate, they were hardly nationalist Swedes. But most of them seem to have written from the embedded perspective of a well-defined national state and attributing a high level of consistency to other cultural systems, which is hardly an advisable way of approaching the complex realities we call "Byzantine".

Swedish authors in Finland, bordering the Orthodox East, reveal strikingly different attitudes. These may be called "Orientalising" too, in the sense that they treat Byzantium and Orthodox Christianity as something mysterious and exotic. Karelia, the legendary borderland between Finland and Russia, turns into a Nordic Byzantium in a way that recalls the "Nesting" Orientalisms sometimes observed throughout Eastern Europe. But it is never resentful: rather, the encounter with the oriental Other seems to signify the discovery of a reality unknown or forgotten to the Western self. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Edith Södergran (1892-1923) was also a feminist pioneer – her poems are uncontaminated by the male prerogatives normally associated with Western attitudes towards the East, even if they sometimes reveal Dostoyevsky-like notions of a "childish purity" found in the Orthodox faith.

A completely unique disposition towards Byzantium is revealed by the Swedish poet Gunnar Ekelöf (1907-1968). His late *Diwan*-trilogy (1965-7) was initiated by a visit to the modern chapel of the Blachernai in Istanbul; before that, he had lived for longer and shorter periods in Greece, absorbing its living Byzantine heritage and ostentatiously avoiding the Classical past – something Swedish journalists, who came to interview him, found it extremely difficult to comprehend. To Ekelöf, "Byzantium" was a borderland in its truest "Acritic" sense: a place where the Ancient and Medieval worlds, where Pagan, Christian and Muslim realities, where beauty and violence met and conflated – in this sense he was well ahead of his time. Considering how difficult it can be still on an academic level to explain it, one can only imagine the

confusion it must have caused Swedes who had been taught in school that Orthodox Christians were “Greek Catholics”. Adding further to the general disorientation, Ekelöf initially described his *Diwan* as an “interpretation”, a statement he was later forced to modify.

English readers may find Bodin’s book bypassing one of very few Swedish depictions of Byzantium to have been translated into English: the story of Are in Frans G Bengtsson’s bestseller *Röde Orm* (1940-5; transl. M. Meyer as “The Long Ships”). Instead, Bengtsson is represented by a historical essay that mirrors his overall Gibbonesque attitude to Byzantium and connects it to another lover of Classical antiquity, the gifted essayist Alf Henrikson (1905-1995) whose entertaining but very erroneous *Byzantinsk historia* (1971) has unfortunately become something like a main Swedish standard work on the whole Byzantine era. The bottom line of all this, one should consider, is an overall Swedish indifference towards Byzantium, a reality so distant and different that it was useful neither as an ideal nor as a bogeyman.

Things are changing in Sweden, however: if Orthodox Easter celebrations in Stockholm were still in 1954 mistaken for a fire alarm, the Orthodox Church – which has been a recognized state religion in Finland since 1918 – is now present all over the country, not least with recent waves of immigrants from the Middle East. Sweden is slowly turning into a borderland, just like Byzantium once was: whether it will have any consequences for future Swedish literature remains to see.

ISSN 2002-0007