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Introduction to Books, Readers and Reading

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INTRODUCTION I

Byzantium: a Bookish World

Teresa Shawcross

Among the works composed by Photios – the captain of the guard, ambassador and chief imperial secretary who served two terms as patriarch under the emperors Michael III and Basil I – is one known as the *Myriobiblos* (the ‘Myriad Books’) or *Bibliotheca* (the ‘Library’).¹ A huge endeavour, it consisted of around 279 reviews of varying length that summarised the content of a text or group of texts, and provided remarks on the style as well as biographical details of the authors. Assuming knowledge of works that were considered canonical and therefore used as textbooks, Photios explicitly excluded these from discussion. Instead, his reviews represented forays further afield, pointing to the voracious breadth of his interests. Theological writings dominated, as one would expect of an ecclesiastic, but secular works of greater or lesser antiquity, including a number of considerable rarity, were not neglected: alongside reviews of philosophical disquisitions, histories, biographies, novels, and poems there are ones of scientific compendia such as lexica, medical treatises, herbals, and agricultural manuals. The quality of the collections to which Photios had access is evident from the fact that he often constitutes our fullest or indeed only source for an ancient text. In many instances, he consulted multiple versions, making an effort to seek out reliable, old manuscripts. Where he could secure access to only a fragmentary copy of a particular work, or had to abandon reading it before he had finished, he would leave space at the end of his draft review in the hope he could return to the task later. There were occasions, too, when he appears to have produced a preliminary evaluation based solely on others’ excerpts and summaries. In some cases at least, he explicitly acknowledged that he had not yet managed to find or read the text in question.²

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Greek are the work of the author of this chapter.

² R. Henry, ed., *Photius. Bibliothèque* (Paris, 1959–91); W. Treadgold, *The Nature of the Bibliotheca of Photios* (Washington, D. C., 1980); N. G. Wilson, *Scholars of Byzantium* (London, 1996), 89–111;

To be sure, Photios' is a striking work that offers an unrivalled insight into the books available to one individual as well as the approach he took when reading them. The familiarity and engagement with books to which it attests should be considered an extreme, but nonetheless representative, example of a broader tendency among those within the Byzantine Empire's sphere of influence. Institutional and personal libraries played a significant role in the accumulation of knowledge and information within society. Inventories produced during surveys of property together with other records (such as notes of shelfmarks) provide us with snapshots of the contents of particular manuscript collections at specific moments, while monograms and other marks of ownership allow us to reconstruct these collections' materiality.³ Outside Constantinople, some 960 and 330 books respectively have so far been associated with the monastic libraries of the Great Lavra on Mount Athos and of St John on Patmos, and some 150 with the private library of Constantine Laskaris in Messenia.⁴ When Nikephoros Moschopoulos, the titular metropolitan of Crete, moved to Mistra, he may have decided to take with him as many as a couple of hundred volumes, for he travelled with four horseloads of books.⁵ Eustathios Boilas, a retired military commander who had received a land grant in the remote and recently annexed province of Tayk, assembled 80 books, which he then housed in the monastery he founded on his estate, while Gregory Pakourianos donated 30 books to his monastic foundation near Plovdiv in Bulgaria.⁶

These numbers are likely to be the tip of the iceberg: anecdotal evidence indicates that the collections attached to the palace, patriarchate, institutions of higher learning and monasteries in the imperial capital were far larger, although today their holdings cannot be reconstructed with any

C. Mango, 'The Availability of Books in the Byzantine Empire, A.D. 750–850' in W. C. Loerke et al., eds., *Byzantine Books and Bookmen: A Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium* (Washington, D. C., 1975), 39–43.

³ N. G. Wilson, 'Books and Readers in Byzantium' in Loerke et al., eds., *Byzantine Books*, 4–8; N. G. Wilson, 'The Libraries of the Byzantine World', *GRBS*, 8 (1967), 66–8, and N. G. Wilson, 'Libraries' in E. M. Jeffreys, J. Haldon and R. Cormack, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies* (Oxford, 2008), 823; E. K. Litsas, 'Palaeographical Researches in the Lavra Library on Mount Athos', *Ελληνικά*, 50 (2000), 217–30; F. D'Aiuto, 'Note ai manoscritti del Menologio imperiale', *RSBN*, 32 (2002), 189–214; G. Cavallo, *Lire à Byzance*, P. Odorico and A. Segonds, trans. (Paris, 2006), 3, 86–7. Information on Byzantine libraries is collected together in K. P. Staikos, *The History of the Library in Western Civilisation* (New Castle, DE, 2007), vol. III.

⁴ Wilson, 'Libraries', 822–4.

⁵ I. Levi, 'Cinque lettere inedite di Manuele Moscopulo', *SIFC*, 10 (1902): 57–8.

⁶ P. Lemerle, *Cinq études sur le XI^e siècle byzantin* (Paris, 1977), 25; P. Gautier, 'Le typikon du sébaste Grégoire Pakourianos', *REB*, 42 (1984), 121–2.

degree of accuracy. Describing the library he had refounded at the Chora Monastery, Theodore Metochites claimed he had made it ‘a treasury’ of ‘countless books’ of various sorts, including not only books ‘of our Wisdom / most Divine, which are greatly useful’, but also books ‘of the Hellenic wisdom that is beyond the gates, / almost as numerous’.⁷ While the declaration that in 1453 there had been 120,000 tomes in Constantinople must be an exaggeration, it reflects the sense of one contemporary collector and dealer that very substantial libraries had been in existence prior to the city’s sack by the Ottomans.⁸ Some 60,000 manuscripts in Greek alone have survived down to our day, to which should be added those in Armenian, Arabic, Syriac, Georgian, Latin, and other languages current in the empire.⁹

Although particular books might be kept under lock and key, their perusal strictly forbidden, most were not merely collected and deposited, but also consumed. One visitor described a small space at the entrance to the imperial palace in such a way as to suggest that manuscripts were considered part of the ordinary contents of the complex. The space, which was a kind of *loggia*, roofed but open on the sides to the elements, was located on the ground floor and was easily accessible. It was furnished with stone tables and benches and had ‘many books and ancient writings and histories and, next to them, gaming boards – for the emperor’s dwelling is always well supplied’. The founding abbot of the Stoudios monastery, Theodore, similarly indicated in the rule for his community that reading was a normal occupation: ‘on days when we perform no physical labour the librarian bangs a gong once, the brothers gather at the place where books are kept and each takes one, reading it until late’.¹⁰ In addition to being available for consultation like this on site, volumes could also circulate, sometimes widely. They might be lost as a result of private theft, shipwreck, or even the plundering activities of a local mob or – as was the case with the library of the metropolitan of Athens, Michael Choniates – a foreign army. To discourage this, notices of ownership placed in books

⁷ I. Polemis, ed., *Theodori Metochitae carmina* (Turnhout, 2015), 44–6.1106–74; translation adapted from J. M. Featherstone, ‘Metochites’s Poems and the Chora’ in H. A. Klein et al., eds., *The Kariye Camii Reconsidered* (Istanbul, 2011), 221, 225–6.

⁸ A. Pertusi, ‘Le epistole storiche di Lauro Quirini sulla caduta di Costantinopoli’ in K. Krautter et al., eds., *Lauro Quirini umanista* (Florence, 1977), 182–3.

⁹ M. Richard and R. Olivier, eds., *Répertoire des bibliothèques et des catalogues de manuscrits grecs* (Turnhout, 1995); J. Waring, ‘Byzantine Book Culture’ in L. James, ed., *A Companion to Byzantium* (Chichester, 2010), 276.

¹⁰ M.-A. Pérez, ed., *Andanças é viajes de Pero Tafur* (Seville, 2009), 100; PG 99, 1713; Wilson, ‘Byzantine World’, 54, 63.

were frequently accompanied by curses against those contemplating theft or vandalism, while the depredations that still occurred were followed by attempts to seek redress and recover the property.¹¹ More often, however, collections were disseminated because people actively decided to share the material in their possession with others. The monastery of Patmos, for example, made a list of loans to institutions (fifteen items) as well as to individual monks and laypeople (nineteen items) located across a radius of several hundred miles.¹²

This introductory chapter explores the relationship those who lived within the Byzantine Empire – or came within its ambit – had with books and other objects inscribed with the written word. Tempering the evidence from prescriptive sources with that gleaned from surviving examples of practice, it seeks to identify some of the defining characteristics of textual production, collection, circulation, and, above all, consumption. In addition to reconstructing the ways in which individuals could engage with and experience the process of reading, it considers the institutional framework that rendered possible the formation of a readership in the first place. And it draws attention to the extent and composition of that readership. As we shall see, the acquisition of the skill of literacy remained the prerogative of a minority whose boundaries were defined by gender, class and location. This does not mean, however, that we should ignore the tremendous potency of literate culture in determining forms of solidarity that cut across social stratification. Interactions of a religious and political nature habitually emphasised the inclusionary role of texts, whose message was rendered accessible to the illiterate and transmitted to them through visual representation and oral performance.

How Should One Read?

Books, of course, could cause disappointment and frustration. The teacher John Tzetzes, who had a rather high opinion of his own interpretative capabilities, frequently disagreed with the views expressed in the scholia that accompanied the works he was studying, and in the margins scribbled

¹¹ F. Kolovou, ed., *Michaelis Choniatae epistulae* (Berlin, 2001), 156, 166, 168, 190, 196, 206; J.-F. Boissonade, ed., *Anecdota nova* (Paris, 1844), 3; M. Grünbart, 'Byzantium: a Bibliophile Society?', *Basilissa*, 1 (2004), 120.

¹² C. Astruc, 'Les listes des prêts figurants au verso de l'inventaire du trésor et de la bibliothèque de Patmos dressé en septembre 1200', *TM*, 12 (1994), 495–9; J. Waring, 'Literacies of Lists: Reading Byzantine Monastic Inventories' in C. Holmes and J. Waring, eds., *Literacy, Education and Manuscript Transmission in Byzantium and Beyond* (Leiden, 2002), 265–86.

insults against the ‘ignorant buffoons’ who had added ‘dross’ to what was valuable; at times, he even railed against the content of the works themselves.¹³ One late medieval reader of a late antique illustrated manuscript of a herbal struggled to make out the old-fashioned majuscule script employed in the labels of the plants and decided for ease of reference to write the names again at the tops of pages in his own hand. Another took a history to task for having promised a narrative written in simple prose yet gone on to use so convoluted a style it gave the reader vertigo and hindered comprehension.¹⁴ An even more acute cry of despair was penned by the mathematician John Chortasmenos next to a specific number problem in a copy of Diophantus’ *Arithmetica*: ‘Diophantus, may your soul rot in Hell because of the difficulty of the other theorems of yours, and in particular of the present theorem!’. We should feel some measure of sympathy, for the passage that elicited this exclamation was almost certainly the very one from which is derived the theorem, formulated by Pierre de Fermat in 1637 but not proven until 1994 by Andrew Wiles, that is considered to represent the most difficult mathematical problem of all, attracting the largest number of unsuccessful proofs.¹⁵

Mostly, however, books were seen as a source of gratification. If epistolographic exchanges allowed people in different locations to stay in contact with one another, books were the means by which an even more pronounced form of separation, caused by time, could be surmounted. They made it possible to commune not only with the living, but also with those long dead.¹⁶ Bishop Basil the Lesser related that in reading the homilies of Gregory of Nazianzos he felt it was as if he were in the presence of the man himself and could benefit from his personal companionship.¹⁷ The courtier Michael Psellos expressed his reaction to Gregory’s work in even less moderate language, describing himself as having undergone a process of seduction after which he was overcome by an ecstasy similar to the

¹³ M. J. Luzzato, *Tzetzes lettore di Tucidide: note autografe al codice Heidelberg Palatino Greco 252* (Bari, 1999), 18–20, 49–53; W. B. Stanford, ‘Tzetzes’ Farewell to Thucydides’, *Greece & Rome*, 11 (1941), 40–1; A. Kaldellis, *Byzantine Readings of Ancient History: Texts in Translation, with Introductions and Notes* (London, 2015), 65–79.

¹⁴ J.-L. van Dieten, ed., *Nicetae Choniatae Historia* (Berlin, 1975), I: xxxii.

¹⁵ Wilson, *Scholars*, 233; P. Tannery, ‘Les manuscrits de Diophante à l’Escorial’, *NAMSL*, 1 (1891), 393; J. Herrin, ‘Mathematical Mysteries in Byzantium: the Transmission of Fermat’s Last Theorem’, *Dialogos*, 6 (1999), 22–44, reprinted with some modifications in J. Herrin, *Margins and Metropolis: Authority across the Byzantine Empire* (Princeton, NJ, 2013), 312–34; but see J. Acerbi, ‘Why Chortasmenos Sent Diophantus to the Devil’, *BMGS*, 53 (2013), 379–89.

¹⁶ E. Boulgares and T. Mandakase, eds., *Ἰωσήφ μοναχοῦ τοῦ Βρυεννίου τὰ παραλειπόμενα* (Leipzig, 1784), 179; Cavallo, *Lire*, 53–4.

¹⁷ R. Cantarella, ‘Basilio minimo II. Scolii inediti con introduzione et note’, *BZ*, 26 (1926), 3–4.

transports produced during an act of love-making to which one has willingly surrendered oneself: 'I am taken over, in an inexpressible way, by the beauty and grace of his [Gregory's] eloquence . . . I feel vanquished by the rosaries of the burgeoning terms and abase myself to the sensations they create in me . . . I embrace and kiss the one who has ravished me in this way.'¹⁸ Again and again, individuals commenting on the effect the writings of a particular author had scribbled expressions of delight in the margins, such as: 'Oh! Libanius, what a pleasure to read you!'¹⁹

Reading was considered capable of having an effect resembling that of the coolness of water or the sweetness of honey on a parched or sick palate.²⁰ But for it to comfort and sustain in this way, the act needed to be carried out in an appropriate fashion. On the most basic level, readers were enjoined to concentrate fully on the text in front of them, denying themselves the diversion of glancing up or speaking to others while reading.²¹ A lazy person, it was explained, is easily distracted and turns his gaze 'away from the book and fixes it on the ceiling' or, flicking through 'to see how much is left for him to finish', counts the pages and – assessing the ampleness of the images and other decoration, and the size of the writing – even calculates the lines. A fellow of this sort, who is bored and given to yawning, believes in his heart of hearts that the best use for a volume is as a pillow on which he can lay his head as he nods off; consequently, the profit he draws from texts is less than that of someone who exercises proper self-discipline.²² But a more subtle though equally detrimental kind of behaviour was that of approaching texts with an eye to style over substance.²³ Those who do not know how to read in order to gain serious knowledge 'of places, nations, and actions' and thus attain familiarity with the 'treasures of learned writings of all types' are to be pitied as having been duped by the educational methods of charlatans who, though they pretend to impart learning, fail to do so and instead

¹⁸ A. Mayer, 'Psellos' Rede über den rhetorischen Charakter des Gregorios von Nazianz', *BZ*, 20 (1911), 49.

¹⁹ Wilson, *Scholars*, 232–3.

²⁰ F. J. G. La Porte-du Theil, 'Notices et extraits d'un volume de la Bibliothèque nationale, côté MCCIX parmi les manuscrits grecs, et contenant les opuscules et les lettres anecdotes de Théodore l'Hirtacénien', *Notices et extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque nationale et autres bibliothèques*, 6 (1800), 42; J. Darrouzès, ed., *Épistoliers byzantins du xe siècle* (Paris, 1960), 150; E. Kurtz and F. Drexel, eds., *Michaelis Pselli Scripta Minora* (Milan, 1941), vol. II, 135; L. M. Leone, ed., *Joannis Tzetzae Epistulae* (Leipzig, 1972), 34; Cavallo, *Lire*, 52–4.

²¹ G. Gorce, ed., *Vie de Sainte Mélanie* (Paris, 1962), 178, 180, 188; A. Giardina, 'Melania, la santa' in A. Frachetti, ed., *Roma al femminile* (Rome, 1994), 277–83; Cavallo, *Lire*, 12.

²² *PG* 79, 1160B; Cavallo, *Lire*, 103. ²³ Mayer, 'Psellos' Rede', 49.

peddle figures and tropes in such a way as to lose their students in 'a tortuous labyrinth' of rhetoric.²⁴

True readers, resisting the gratuitous immersion in linguistic pyrotechnics that accompanies 'reading for its own sake', should turn to books in order to sharpen and train the intellect, and attain the ability not only to think perceptively and profoundly but also to express their thoughts adequately and communicate them clearly and effectively to others.²⁵ To this end, they needed to undertake a combination of an intensive (*epimeles*) reading – what we would call close reading – of each text during which they paid careful attention to the glosses and other apparatus that accompanied it, with an extensive (*entribes*) reading of a range of texts through which they covered a large amount of ground in order to 'learn a lot'.²⁶ The pages of manuscripts allow us to trace how actual individuals approached this double task. Arethas, bishop of Caesarea, crammed the margins of his copy of Aristotle's *Organon* with jottings of various types, while Tzetzes added a copious series of notes in his copy of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* of Thucydides, addressing questions of orthography, grammar, syntax, as well as clarifying chronology and commenting on ancient culture and customs.²⁷ Some readers, of course, went beyond mere annotation, copying out excerpts or indeed whole works.²⁸ Manuscripts written in a rapid, idiosyncratic hand with abundant abbreviations, and combining a main text with a heavy apparatus of notes, represent the working copies of scholars who intended to use them as part of a programme of private study, or as preparation for teaching. Sometimes readers worked in groups and divided the labour between them. Seventeen different hands, for example, contributed to the copying and interpretation of a miscellany of astronomical, geographical, and mathematical texts.²⁹

²⁴ P. L. M. Leone, ed., *Ioannis Tzetzae Historiae* (Naples, 1968), 372.

²⁵ M. D. Spadaro, ed., *Kekaumenos. Raccomandazioni e consigli di un galantuomo* (Alessandria, 1998), 190, 198; C. M. Mazzucchi, 'Ambrosianus C 222 inf. (Graecus 886): Il codice e il suo autore', *Aevum*, 78 (2004), 416–17.

²⁶ Cavallo, *Lire*, 7, 18; B. Wassiliewsky and V. Jernstedt, eds., *Cecaumeni Strategicon et incerti scriptoris de officiis regis libellus* (St Petersburg, 1896), 158–9.

²⁷ P. Lemerle, *Le premier humanisme byzantin. Notes et remarques sur enseignement et culture à Byzance des origines au xe siècle* (Paris, 1971), 204–37; Luzzato, *Tzetzes*, 21–139.

²⁸ A. Markopoulos, 'La critique des textes au xe siècle. Le témoignage du Professeur anonyme', *JÖB*, 32 (1982), 31–7; G. Cortassa, 'Un filologo di Bisanzio e il suo committente: la lettera 88 dell'Anonimo di Londra', *Medioevo greco*, 1 (2001), 97–138.

²⁹ G. Cavallo, 'Sodalizi eruditi e pratiche di scrittura a Bisanzio' in J. Hamesse, ed., *Bilan et perspectives des études médiévales (1993–1998)* (Turnhout, 2004), 645–65; D. Bianconi, 'Eracle e Iolao: aspetti della collaborazione tra copisti nell'età dei Paleologi', *BZ*, 97 (2004), 521–56; D. Bianconi, 'Libri e mani. Sulla formazione di alcune miscellanee dell'età dei Paleologi', *Signo e testo*, 2 (2004), 311–63; P. Canart, 'Quelques exemples de division du travail chez les copistes byzantins' in P. Hoffmann,

More active intervention on the part of the readers resulted in editions aiming to restore or improve upon an original through the collation of multiple sources; or paraphrases or adaptations; or even wholly new works.³⁰

In the case of the philosopher George Gemistos Plethon, it is possible to trace the complete range of these activities, from his marginal notes in manuscripts, to his excerpts and summaries of material, to his editions and commentaries, and, finally, his own original compositions, some of which, such as the *Book of Laus*, were considerable in extent. A detailed picture can be reconstructed not only of Plethon's own working method, but also of the extent of its influence on students of his such as Laonikos Chalkokondyles.³¹ In most instances, however, the evidence is more indirect. Much of what is known about the reading habits of Byzantines comes from their output as authors who, in discussing, quoting or even tacitly including in their own writings elements from works that had in some way affected their cast of thought or style, reveal the existence of sometimes very elaborate intertextual relationships.³² While the abbess Kassia has – unlike her contemporary, Photios – left us no autobiographical notes of her readings, the allusions in her poems suggest knowledge of a wide range of texts.³³

ed., *Recherches de codicologie comparée. La composition du codex au moyen âge en orient et en occident* (Paris, 1998), 49–67; on the relationship between scholars who copied out texts for personal use and professional scribes, Wilson, 'Books and Readers', 9–11 and J. Irigoin, 'Centres de copie et bibliothèques' in Loerke et al., eds., *Byzantine Books*, 17–27; on scholarly collaboration, S. Steckel, N. Gaul and M. Grünbart, eds., *Networks of Learning: Perspectives on Scholars in Byzantine East and Latin West, c. 1000–1200* (Zurich, 2014).

- ³⁰ P. Maas, 'Sorti della letteratura antica a Bisanzio' in G. Pasquali, ed., *Storia della tradizione e critica del testo* (Florence, 1962), 490–1; Wilson, 'Books and Readers', 11–14.
- ³¹ A. Diller, 'The Autographs of Georgius Gemistus Plethon', *Scriptorium*, 10 (1956), 27–8; D. Dedes, 'Die Handschriften und das Werk des Georgios Gemistos (Plethon): Forschungen und Funde in Venedig', *Ἑλληνικά*, 33 (1981), 66–83; F. Pagani, 'Un nuovo testimone della recensio pletoniana al testo di Platone: il Marc. Gr. 188 (K)', *Res publica literarum*, 29 (2006), 5–125; F. Pagani, 'Damnata verba: censure di Pletone in alcuni codici platonici', *BZ*, 10 (2009), 167–202; for a general survey of Plethon's writings and their circumstances of composition, see C. M. Woodhouse, *Gemistos Plethon: The Last of the Hellenes* (Oxford, 1986). For Chalkokondyles, see A. Kaldellis, *A New Herodotus: Laonikos Chalkokondyles on the Ottoman Empire, the Fall of Byzantium, and the Emergence of the West* (Washington, D. C., 2014), 45–8, 259–62.
- ³² Cavallo, *Lire*, 3, 133. For example, for Iakovos the Monk's assembly of quotations and other compositional practices, see C. Laga, 'Entering the Library of Jacobus Monachus. The Exemplar of Jacobus' Quotations from the Commentary on the Song of Songs by Gregory of Nyssa' in K. Demoen and J. Vereecken, eds., *La spiritualité de l'univers byzantin dans le verbe et l'image* (Turnhout, 1997), 151–61, and E. M. Jeffreys, 'The Sevastokratorissa Eirene as a Literary Patroness: the Monk Iakovos', *JÖB*, 32 (1982), 63–71.
- ³³ E. V. Maltese, 'Lettura di Cassia' in F. de Martino, ed., *Rose di Pieria* (Bari, 1991), 339–61; E. V. Maltese, 'Una contemporanea di Fozio, Cassia: osservazioni sui versi profani' in M. Salvador, ed., *La poesia tardoantica e medievale* (Alessandria, 2001), 71–83.