

ALEXANDER RIEHLE (ed.), *A Companion to Byzantine Epistolography* (Brill's Companions to the Byzantine World 7). Leiden – Boston: Brill 2020. xii+531 pp. – ISBN: 978-90-04-41369-6 (€ 238,00)

- MARGARET MULLETT, University of Edinburgh  
(margaret.mullett@aol.co.uk)

*To the great Alexander, greeting*

*What a basket of delights you have sent me in your Companion: birds sing, honey pours, beauty flashes. It arrived without any dear mis-sive, without even a loquacious bearer, for those war-loving women who once addressed your namesake now leave parcels on the step and smartly step back. In return I offer a few words through the good offices of our friend whose beard is green. Keep safe in these difficult times.*

When in 1970 this reviewer embarked on a PhD on Byzantine letters she found herself alone. There were rich editions of letters, and KARLSSON's study, but none of the life-and-letters biographies of medieval Latin epistolographers she had enjoyed reading, no literary readings of individual letters or collections. A chance meeting in Athens with ANTONY LITTLEWOOD, who was moving on from progymnasmata to a long study of tenth-century letters for *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, confirmed her research plan. Twenty-five years later much had changed: Vienna graduate students were as likely to work on letters as on rhetoric or poetry and soon GRÜNBART's fundamental tools *Initia* and *Anredeformen* arrived. Then came in the 2000s the British Academy network on medieval friendship and friendship networks and the Handbook essays on epistolography by GRÜNBART, MULLETT, PAPAIOANNOU and YSEBAERT. By the 2010s every year of Fellows at Dumbarton Oaks included someone working on letters.

This volume will be another such landmark. It is the third literary Brill's Companion to the Byzantine World, joining no. 1 *Fictional Storytelling in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean* and no. 4 *A Companion to Byzantine Poetry*. It also joins the Cambridge University Press *Reading the Late*

*Byzantine Romance: a Handbook* and precedes *Satire in the Middle Byzantine Period*, apparently an Exploration not a Companion. It offers seventeen chapters with ten illustrations, twelve diagrams and five associated tables. It is very clean of all errors except the spelling of some proper names and the title of an archbishop.

In his lucid introduction (pp. 1–30), ALEXANDER RIEHLE addresses issues of definition, vocabulary, time and space, the historiography of work on epistolography, and the shape of the volume. His Byzantine letter is ‘a matrix of specific material, communicative and formal elements’ and all three elements get some consideration in the volume. He navigates his way out of constricting categorization, and plays with the idea of genre before turning to Byzantine understandings of the letter both verbal and metaphoric: the centrality of absence, the gift, one half of a conversation, the importance of friendship. He briefly touches on rhetorical theory and the canon of letterwriting models. He discusses date, and suggests that our genre shows how closely late antiquity and the later centuries belong together (though most of the volume deals with the eleventh to fourteenth centuries). He neatly characterises the geographical spread of letter-exchange as Mediterranean-wide, shrinking to Constantinople, opening up again to a wider realm in the final years of the empire. He restricts the book to consideration of epistolography in Greek. After a survey of work so far, highlighting friendship, communication, networks, performance and rituals as current concerns, he explains the structure of the book as contexts, case studies, forms and functions, and theory.

There is little to object to in this engaging opening: the pages on Byzantine theory do not use either Athanasios Chatzikes or the text attributed to Leo the Wise, recently discussed by THEODORA ANTONOPOULOU and then FOTEINI SPINGOU. Many will regret the decision to exclude other languages in an age when global Byzantium is of great interest. And the issue of genre (n. 22) is notoriously knotty, and RIEHLE’s reservations will not persuade everyone in view of the parallelism of letter, logos and poem in subject-matter or even a single delivery. But overall the introduction does exactly what is needed.

The first section, **CONTEXTS FOR BYZANTINE EPISTOLOGRA-PHY**, offers three other letter-writing traditions, connected to Byzantium in different ways: by origin, by translation, and by shared predecessors. THOMAS JOHANN BAUER’s chapter 1 on **Letterwriting in antiquity and early Christianity** (pp. 33–67) begins (again) with definitions, and

after that takes us from the very earliest Greek examples, through Latin and early Christian examples (with really helpful guides to the state of play on authenticity) to the familiar ground of the Cappadocians and their contemporaries: Ambrose, Augustine and Jerome, Synesios, Libanios and Julian. It is a model of compression, given that the field in antiquity is so diverse, and touches lightly on problems or issues: the contrast between ‘real’ or ‘literary’ or even ‘friendship’ letters is one such. JACK TANNOUS’s piece, chapter 2, **Syriac epistolography** (pp. 68–91), will be a surprise to many Byzantinists, and is again a masterpiece of control and organisation: the author is helpful on language, on vocabulary, and offers a late medieval theoretical text. He restricts himself to letters written in Syriac rather than translated from Greek and gives a chronological survey to the eighth century. He offers a puzzle: why did miaphysite and East Syrian letter-writers use Syriac but not Chalcedonians? And he is blunt about the state of play of epistolography in Syriac studies: the lack of editions, the lack of literary studies, the absence of bibliographic accounts. He suggests that the relationship with Greek changed over time, and leads us to wish he had been able to deal with the interrelationship of Greek and Syriac texts and collections, and hope that he will be able to make some inroads in future, having inspired other Syriac scholars to join him. His is a strong implicit argument for including languages other than Greek (or Latin) in late antiquity and beyond. If his is a field at the very beginning and BAUER’s surprisingly only very recent, the third chapter, by LENA WAHLGREN-SMITH, **Letter collections in the Latin West** (pp. 92–122), deals with a field which long predates serious study of the Byzantine letter, and is rich in collections (at least 200 writers in the ‘golden age’ of the eleventh and twelfth centuries), editions and life-and-letters biographies. She demonstrates the awareness of tradition in the most obscure of twelfth-century writers, skates quickly through Carolingian and Ottonian collections and spends most of her time in the golden age. She is selective, offering new readings, omitting some authors like Gilbert Foliot who were prominent in earlier discussions, introducing newcomers (Gui de Bazoches anyone?) and including (unusually and helpfully) Hildegard of Bingen, transgressing the form as demonstrated by her correspondents. But the familiar stars are there: Arnulf, Peter of Blois, Abelard-and-Heloise, Peter the Venerable, Bernard (and Nicholas) of Clairvaux, John of Salisbury. She characterises late medieval letters as more practical than literary, leading us to Paston and Stonor. Her analysis deals with collections as archive, but more interestingly with issues of autobiography and self-fashioning, with narrative and portraiture, issues which

have preoccupied Byzantinists of late. For the future she looks to the need for modern editions, for a more sophisticated approach to using letters as historical sources, to advances on style and influences aided by new technology (how Latinists must envy the TLG!) and finally, like RIEHLE, to a large synthesis. This might at this stage be more possible in her field than ours.

Contexts can be constricting or detached; they may explicate interconnections or offer intriguing comparisons and stark contrasts. These chapters provide the second and cry out for more studies which bring them together. In ten years time a comparable work (or second edition!) might also include Arabic epistolography, where there is current interest, for example MAURICE POMERANTZ's *Licit Magic* of 2018, both to explore connections and to establish comparisons. A new comparative network might include Chinese epistolography. The challenge with comparative work is to compare cultures at a comparable stage of investigation, when there are enough editions, studies, tools for research—and enough interest in the scholarly community.

After this taut and dense section, which avoids the temptation to draw comparisons with Byzantine epistolography, the reader will be anxious to discover what Byzantine letters are like. Wisely, the editor has moved next to the second section, **BYZANTINE LETTER-WRITERS IN CONTEXT** which offers two scintillating portraits, one of an eleventh-century, the other of a fourteenth-century collection. FLORIS BERNARD in chapter 4 **Michael Psellos** (pp. 125–145), brings his knowledge of Psellos's poems to bear on the collection newly exposed by PAPAIOANNOU's edition, already prefigured by 'Fragile literature' in *Face cachée* and the Oxford selective translation by JEFFREYS and LAUXTERMANN. BERNARD's crisp survey covers the ground: the scholarship is laid out, the strange manuscript tradition highlighted, and explained by the fact that Psellos, the arch-self-presenter, never made a collection of his own letters; the centrality of John Caesar Doukas is emphasised. The nature of transactions in the network is identified, with an intriguing suggestion that there was an awareness that patronage might not always have been within moral norms in Byzantium. But it is in the later sections when he comes into his own, depicting the social and cultural ideal of friendship, the playfulness, self-referentiality, irony of the letters couched in its discourse of mythological monsters and muses, the sheer futility of trying to reveal the 'real Psellos'. FLORIN LEONTE replies in chapter 5, **The letters of Demetrios Kydones** (pp. 146–

173), using his MA research at CEU and his work on the circle of Manuel II now published as *Imperial visions of late Byzantium*. He presents a picture of Kydones' style, his uses of letters, the process of the creation of the collection and the building of a self-image of 'an individual with a leading role in Byzantine politics' (not so far, we may imagine, from Psellos's desired self-image) and of someone who preferred concord over conflict. It is a serious and masterly study of the intersection of politics and literature in late Byzantium.

These two studies fascinate through their own merit, but also because they give a clear view of the potential and nature of the Byzantine letter and its collections. A whole volume of studies like this would have been wonderful, and remains a desideratum, but it is difficult to achieve until there are enough scholars to go round a representative number of collections—and even then research does not always happen contemporaneously, so studies over time would need to be collected and reprinted.

The third section, **FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF BYZANTINE EPISTOLOGRAPHY**, described by the editor as a kaleidoscope, contains ten chapters, not all of which do the same thing. The first two chapters are introductory, SOFIA KOTZABASSI in chapter 6, **Epistolography and rhetoric** (pp. 177–199), introducing the rhetorical expectations of letter-writing, summarizing Byzantine theory in handbooks and reception of letters, laying out the potential of letters as literature and touching on structure and devices. It ends oddly with the idea of talented authors going beyond the conventions of rhetoric to create superb literary works of art. (We'll see below another way of looking at this relationship). She manages to make rhetoric unthreatening and truly introductory for the reader; ALEXANDER BEIHAMMER in chapter 7, **Epistolography and diplomatics** (pp. 200–226), makes diplomatic as comprehensible as possible. We learn of the difference between letters and charters, the tiny number of surviving diplomatic letters and the larger body of material included in narrative, a crucial change from papyrus to paper, the use of Greek as a means of international communication until the time of Suleiman the Magnificent. This chapter is a very welcome inclusion.

The next group of papers, the core of the volume, in part 3, **FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF BYZANTINE EPISTOLOGRAPHY**, deals with themes and their problematics. FLORIN LEONTE in chapter 8, **Didacticism in Byzantine epistolography** (pp. 227–254), looks at the didactic aspects of 'the protean genre' of epistolography. He brings together the letters of

teachers and of scholars who never taught, dealing with spiritual and theological problems, technical treatments (astronomy, philology) and moral concerns. He is interested in the lack of common rhetorical formal features, yet the exploitation by many authors of the standard epistolary form for its combination of technical content and capacity to encapsulate the self. He notes as common features a straightforward intention to instruct a known addressee, a dignified and thoughtful style, in which the writer's voice is always audible, and a tendency to work up previous authoritative texts. He decides that epistolary form was not merely ornamental but added a great deal (mitigation of distance, ties to a common body of knowledge, a sense of common purpose and a flexibility in dialogue with other genres) to the subject matter. DIVNA MANOLOVA in chapter 9, **Epistolography and philosophy** (pp. 255–278), bridges didacticism (in chapter 8) and friendship (in chapter 10) with a sharp and persuasive consideration of philosophy which will have implications far beyond the study of letters. She uses Nikephoros Gregoras's letter-collection (which she knows extremely well) to argue that current essentialist definitions of philosophy fail to pick up Byzantine concepts of philosophy, and that Byzantine philosophical writings are not indebted to classical philosophical letters. She sees the opportunity both to further define Byzantine philosophies, and, where an epistolographer is philosophically competent, to deepen our sense of Byzantine friendship and allow us to make an attempt on Byzantine ethics. EMMANUEL BOURBOUHAKIS, in chapter 10, **Epistolary culture and friendship** (pp. 279–306), using mostly eleventh- and twelfth-century collections, pursues and illustrates earlier considerations of Byzantine epistolary friendship with excellent extended quotations (done best in this chapter) which will allow the reader to get a taste of the texts. He asks whether friendship could have been articulated in any other genre, suggests oddly that previous scholars played down the emotional content of letters, notes correctly the absence of spiritual love as understood in the west, and shows that letters afforded an opportunity for authors to perform friendship. FLORIS BERNARD in chapter 11, **Epistolary communication: rituals and codes** (pp. 307–332), picks up on earlier work on multimedia communication, the role of the bearer, gifts, the reception of letters, public intimacy and epistolary codes. He probes, adduces new evidence, weighs up, reevaluates, and arrives at new concepts of social codes in dynamic social realities. Cross-reference to chapter 14 might have been useful.

STRATIS PAPAIOANNOU in chapter 12, **The epistolographic self** (pp. 333–352), explores the rhetoricity of the Byzantine letter as an opening for

self-awareness and self-display, but sees it as being constrained by the practical needs of the letter, the tension between group and individual identity, and simple decorum. The potential for self-awareness in biblical, fictional and embedded letters is explored together with the positioning of letter-writers as authoritative figures. Specifically, the potential in confessional discourse for the revelation of a suffering, emotional self is revealed. The role of theory and the close link with *ethopoia* enabled talk of the self, and the nature of publication ensured that this was a public self. Examples which emphasise the emotionality of autobiographical discourse, citing various ‘spectacular examples’ including the frequent and emotionally intense descriptions of the opening of a letter lead to the conclusion that the letter functioned as a proxy for the self, indeed was the self.

Finally NIELS GAUL in chapter 13, **The letter in the *theatron*: epistolary voice, character, and soul (and their audience)** (pp. 353–373), surveys the evidence for the institution of the *theatron* over the Byzantine centuries, its terminology, its origins in late antiquity before turning to evidence for the performance of letters in such settings. Letters, he argues, lent themselves to this kind of performance, and were unlike any other kind of rhetorical text in that the author was, by definition and structurally, absent, and depended on an alien voice (of bearer, addressee or another) to bring the text to life. In GAUL’s sure hands the *theatron* develops from an activity in a theatrical building to an act of public performance before an audience in which there was no stage, no lights, merely a performer who stepped ‘into the middle’, rather like PETER BROOK’s minimalist definition of theatre as someone walking across a stage with someone else watching. And the performer (who next week will be audience) recreates the author’s voice, character and soul for the judgement of his literary peers. This and the previous paper will be instant classics, taking us into new territory even on apparently well-trodden paths.

Chapters 14 and 15 in this section are rather different from this kaleidoscopic portrait of the letter and could form a section of their own. They look specifically and elegantly at representations of the process and the appearance of Byzantine letter-exchange. CECILY HILSDALE’s brilliant paper, **Letters and letter exchange in Byzantine art** (pp. 374–402), explores three examples of letter-exchange in three illuminated manuscripts, first (as has long been noted) in the Madrid Skylitzes, then, more fully, in the Venice Alexander Romance and finally inventively in the narrative structure and pace of the *eiseterioi* addressed to a foreign princess in Vat.

Gr. 1851. She teases out the metonymic function of the representations of exchange, in which the letter stands in for the person of the sender; she observes the bureaucratic nature of letters in the second two examples and the performative quality of all. Through this closely observed analysis she adds both to our understanding of how letters work in Byzantium and also how visual narratives work. CAROLINA CUPANE in **Letters in narrative literature** (pp. 403–427), provides a very useful survey of included letters in history and romance with perceptive insights into the contribution of letters to other literary works. Letters, she argues, have a special capacity for expression which dramatises the account and creates the appearance of authenticity. She looks first at the tradition of classical antiquity then letters in Byzantine historiography, emphasising the homogeneity of the practice of the sixth-century classicising authors, and disparities among the twelfth-century and late historians, Anna giving texts verbatim, Kinnamos abridging and paraphrasing, Pachymeres uninterested, Gregoras penning ‘masterpieces’. She spends time on the Alexander romance which she acutely points out ‘minds the gap’ between the second sophistic novel and the revival in the twelfth century. In all versions letters are important. She then turns to the twelfth-century novels: two diplomatic letters in Prodromos, two private letters in Makrembolites, four love letters in Eugeneianos, in *Digenes Akrites* letters from mothers to sons. In the late romances she concentrates on *Libistros* where letters make up a quarter of the whole work, on love letters in the Byzantine *Achilleis* and the *Tale of Alexander and Semiramis* in *Kallimachos and Chrysorrhoe* two letters from eunuchs to the emperor and his reply. Any future advance on this chapter will include hagiography, where pickings may be slim but results can be very illuminating.

In all collections of essays some look backwards, some are very much of the moment and others are forward-looking, and we have seen some of each so far. The final section in the handbook, 4. **BYZANTINE EPISTOLOGRAPHY AND (POST-) MODERN THEORY** is very much concerned to look to the future and propose new methodologies. JOHANNES PREISER-KAPELLER in chapter 16, **Letters and network analysis** (pp. 431–465), introduces social network theory, wryly deploring the loose adoption of the term by historians who have no intention of mastering the theory. He notes that epistolography was the first body of material to be analysed with SNA with MULLETT’s *Theophylact* and GRÜNBART’s ‘T’is love’. In the meantime archaeologists and historians have developed their use of the techniques and the software for quantitative analysis has improved. Yet

the expectations of the late 1990s that other studies comparable to those performed on Theophylact, John Tzetzes and Theodore Prodromos have not come to pass. It may have something to do with the nature of the collections: only large collections with concrete details are likely to produce results beyond what can be seen without doing the analysis. This chapter makes a pitch for future scholars to attempt not just SNA of an ego network but quantitative analysis. It offers first a very clear description of the processes involved, and then, by way of illustration, a demonstration of what could be achieved by feeding the data from the Theophylact study into the software with a view to comparing qualitative and quantitative analyses. To a large degree the quantitative analysis confirmed the qualitative and made it visually comprehensible; there are intriguing suggested refinements. There is more than enough here to allow scholars to decide whether it is worth their while to acquire the software and learn the method.

If PREISER-KAPPELLER's chapter offered a tantalizing bonus to scholars of the future, RIEHLE's concluding chapter 17, **Letters and New Philology** (pp. 466–501), makes points far more fundamental to the study of Byzantine letters. It is a clear account of the history of philology and of the recent tendency to move away from classic editorial practice: recensio, emendatio, stemma and apparatus. What RIEHLE sees is that the processes of formation of Byzantine letter collections and their nature as fluid texts suit the classic method less well than synoptic presentation and *Einblendung* facilitated by digital editions. The reason that this is not just another intriguing way of analyzing and visualizing Byzantine processes is that it goes to the heart of the study of epistolography, which has always shown a tension between the analysis of the individual letter (with dictation, bearing, delivery and performance) and the later stage of incorporation into a manuscript collection of letters, whether as part of an instructional miscellany or an author's collection of his own letters/works or didactic, theological and ascetic collections. When we talk about the letter-collection of an author what we are usually talking about is all the letters in all the known manuscripts, arranged by the editor. About that kind of 'collection' much can be said, but nothing about arrangement or structure. And the thing is that we do have manuscripts formed and arranged by the author, and we have others put together by other Byzantine scholars. About those collections we can talk about arrangement and Riehle offers us through New Philology the possibility of seeing that Byzantine process in the edition of the text.

So this is an important Companion, a landmark. It is also a markedly young

collection: the authors are predominantly at associate level or below, and its editor is an Assistant Professor. (*A Companion to Byzantine Poetry* in contrast is written predominantly by emeriti and professors, though one of its three editors is an assistant). But its authors are the obvious and the best. Some papers are more like handbook articles, some more like essays, but they connect well together perhaps because much of the group is in constant conversation. When there are so many riches it seems churlish to point to absences, but it is a pity that epistolary poems/verse letters are not included (though they have a book to themselves in press), also monastic letters, and the tricky area between letter and treatise so well studied recently by both EIRINI-SOPHIA KIAPIDOU and DIVNA MANOLOVA. John Tzetzes is a surprising absence particularly in view of AGLAE PIZZONE's recent work. It is also a pity that very few authors refer to works of a comparative nature or in another literature: CONSTABLE, HASELDINE, YSEBAERT and ZIOLKOWSKI get several mentions but not GARRISON, DRONKE, JAEGER or even SOUTHERN.

One lack which is definitely not the editor's fault is that of a chapter on literary theory, and it is interesting that the editor thought this necessary when (p. 18) he suggests that 'there has been very little literary criticism proper'. This is a surprising statement, no less so in that it echoes HATLIE, and the more so in that it contradicts YSEBAERT: 'Especially Byzantinists appear to be inspired by the literary-critical point of view'. Byzantinists have studied letters for their topoi, citations, wordplay, irony, persona, emotions, fictionality, originality, self-presentation, narrative, genre, gender, performance, hybridity, humour, above all rhetoric. BAKHTIN, DERRIDA and FOUCAULT have entered the discourse. In this volume the papers by BERNARD, LEONTE, KOTZABASSI, MANOLOVA, BOURBOUHAKIS, PAPAIOANNOU, GAUL, and CUPANE are concerned, primarily or secondarily, with literary issues. All seventeen chapters are concerned with how a text works, which is the essence of literary study. Of course no episteme remains static: the close reading of the New Critics is a long way from the distant reading of MORETTI and the spatialists. Byzantinists should feel free to ask any questions, adopt any approach that illuminates their text. And we do.

There is however a question about what that text is. Byzantine epistolography involves four things: two texts, two processes. The individual letter, the process of letter exchange, the process of archiving, improving, selecting, and the letter-collection, fundamentally, as we have seen, a duality of

individual and collective, the microtext and the macrotext. This handbook is much stronger on the first than the second. It is not that we are unaware of this duality: CONSTABLE's *Letters and letter-collections* is regularly read by Byzantinists, as is YSEBAERT's 'Medieval letters and letter collections as historical sources', which increases CONSTABLE's four questions about the formation of a collection to eleven. PAPAIOANNOU's 'Fragile Literature' is a devastating exposé of the difficulties of understanding any collection, even one as rich as that of Psellos. And it is not that we are not doing it: the work of for example LEONTE, MANOLOVA, and RIEHLE is constantly informed by their understanding of the collection-processes of the letters of Demetrios Kydones, Manuel II, Nikephoros Gregoras, and Nikephoros Choumnos. New Philology offers us another way forward. As well as this what we need at the very least is clarity, even at the basic level of vocabulary. We regularly use in English 'correspondence' for that very rare animal, the exchange of letters (both sides of the conversation); 'epistolary' (as a noun) has also entered the vocabulary to distinguish a collection of model letters. What we also need is distinct terminology for collectives of letters, one the one hand 'all the known letters of an author' and on the other 'letters assembled, selected and edited, by author, recipient or other'. VERBAAL's distinction 'letter collection' and 'collection of letters' is clumsy and insufficiently memorable. RIEHLE suggests that collections by Byzantines are not usually called *sylloge* or *synagoge*, but simply *epistolai*, so we shall have to find this terminology ourselves as we advance into a new stage of the study of Byzantine epistolography. This involves taking 'letter-collection' (of both kinds) as seriously as we have taken 'letter' and 'letter-exchange'. It is an appealing prospect, and very new territory for us to traverse. But there are a lot of us now to do it. There is no question that a student approaching the study of Byzantine letters in 2020 with this book in hand could possibly feel alone: it is a true Companion.

#### Keywords

Byzantine epistolography