

FRANCESCO MONTICINI, *Caduta e recupero: la crisi di età paleologa tra umanesimo e mistica* (Dossiers byzantins 19). Paris: Centre d'études byzantines, néo-helléniques et sud-est européennes 2021. 328 pp. – ISBN 1-09-482405-4

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In the last decades, the increase in the study of late Byzantine historical and intellectual phenomena gave way to a better understanding of their artistic features, attitudes, and theoretical contents. Given this interest, it is not surprising that many texts, events, and personalities from this period continue to be at the forefront of research into the field of intellectual history. The ambition of FRANCESCO MONTICINI's monograph stemming from the author's doctoral studies, is to combine two levels of research corresponding to two approaches that are complementary albeit distinct. One level is historical-intellectual, while the other pertains to the textual analysis and close reading of a commentary on Synesius' *Treatise on Dreams* dating from the fourteenth century. Divided into four distinct sections with two appendices containing the text of the commentary, the study employs philological tools of textual criticism as well as historical-prosopographical analysis. The first half of the book treats the broad historical and intellectual background of the text. In the second half, the focus moves to the translation, analysis, and contextualization of an erudite commentary preserved anonymously in codices that contain the Neoplatonic *Treatise On Dreams* of Synesius of Cyrene.

MONTICINI proceeds from the assumption that the groups of literati in the fourteenth century underwent an identity crisis in the Palaiologan period which, as he details, had largely to do with the cultivation of ancient Hellenic knowledge. The author argues that one of the main elements in this identity crisis was the understanding and interpretation of the *Treatise on Dreams* by Synesius, an author born in Cyrene around the year 370, several years after the death of Emperor Julian.

In the following, MONTICINI draws the contours of Synesius' intellectual profile. A Neoplatonic philosopher and Christian bishop, Synesius lived during a critical period spanning the end of Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Although he left a substantial corpus of texts and became known

in the subsequent centuries, he remains a controversial figure with a rather ambiguous profile. His first years of education were typical for a youth from a land-owning family. Synesius moved to Athens between 399 and 402 and then Constantinople at the court of Emperor Arcadius. After his return to Alexandria in 410, he became Bishop of Ptolemais a position he held until his death. His oeuvre includes several texts: a commentary on Pseudo-Democritus; a treatise on kingship; an allegorical essay on historical events; various rhetorical speeches and hymns; as well as letters.

The interpretations of Synesius' personality and biography vary, as we do not know with certainty if his family was Christian or not. Synesius' career and writings present an apparent contradiction: he was a bishop who sought to reconcile his Christianity with the Hellenic esoteric knowledge and mysteries as indicated by his acquaintance with the Chaldaean Oracles. In his treatise "Dion" he draws on both Christian authors as well as on esoteric authors like Hermes Trismegistos. However, this must come as a surprise, for Synesius was part of a culture that combined Christianity and Neoplatonic beliefs. Already, the pagan philosophers regarded esoteric knowledge as significant. For instance, the school of Hypatia, the famous Alexandrian Neoplatonic philosopher, did not teach exclusively geometry and astronomy but it also had a tradition of transmitting esoteric knowledge. Synesius himself was in close contact with the pagan circles in Alexandria, for we know that in 405 he sent a letter to Hypatia together with his writings.

In the following, MONTICINI treats in detail the underlying tenets and contents of Synesius' *Treatise on Dreams*. The text reflects Synesius' interest in astronomy and was heavily indebted to Platonic and Chaldaean philosophy. According to him, Platonism and Pythagoreanism intersected in the notion of a universe disposed in concentric spheres with matter found in the depth. Further concepts modulated Synesius' theory: the "imaginative spirit," *phantasia* which may be associated with self-consciousness, the mirroring of the interior and the exterior, or the distinction between clear and obscure dreams, i.e. dreams that do not need interpretation whereas others are mysterious. Another issue that preoccupied Synesius was the direct relation between dreams and reality: his treatise suggests the redaction of night diaries and shows the author's skills in switching from simple to complex arguments. Synesius was also preoccupied to adapt language to dream images since he regarded dream interpretation as an exercise in rhetoric meant to increase wisdom. Overall, the treatise, which was translated into Latin in 1488 by Marsilio Ficino, knew some popularity as indi-

cated by its rich manuscript tradition that includes eighty two manuscripts, some of them dating from the late Byzantine period. Moreover, often, the text of the treatise is accompanied by elaborate commentaries like the ones by Nikephoros Gregoras in the 1320s.

The second section of the book documents major historical and biographical facts from the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries. The reason for this historical excursus is to place the commentaries in a better context. As starting point of his discussion, MONTICINI chooses the events surrounding the Council of Lyon in 1274 and continues his account up to the years of Civil War in mid-fourteenth century. The chapter considers the short-term political reactions, the role of the Church, as well as the long-term strategies of the early Palaiologan emperors, Michael VIII, Andronikos II, Andronikos III, John VI Kantakouzenos and partially John V Palaiologos. The author emphasizes the significance of Michael VIII's rapprochement to the papacy whose help he sought in order to secure financial help to avoid another attack against Constantinople. However, this move caused a negative reaction in Constantinople which reverberated in Byzantium at various levels, many decades after his death.

His successor, Andronikos II inherited a complex political-military situation and MONTICINI summarizes the military situation during his reign: the involvement in the first Venetian-Genoese war (1294-1299), his support to the Genoese, and subsequent retaliations from the Venetians; the relations with the Ottomans and Serbia, etc. Significantly, Andronikos denied the validity of the Council of Lyons and sought to reestablish the unity of the church where different factions co-existed. Like Andronikos II, Andronikos III, had to cope with the Ottoman threat but, on the sea, he switched his allegiance from the Genoese to the Venetians.

MONTICINI then turns to the details of Byzantium's religious affairs in the early Palaiologan period and argues that, during Andronikos III's reign, the Church and the patriarchs acquired an increased role in society. This coincided with the rise of Hesychasm as a mainstream theological doctrine. Originating in the writings of previous Byzantine theologians and in widespread practices present in monastic milieu, Hesychasm advised for complete focus of the practican and preached contemplation based on specific spiritual-physical techniques. Gregory Palamas argued that God inhabits the human heart after baptism and the prayer was a method to focus for clearing up one's mind of unuseful thoughts. Yet, as MONTICINI shows, Hesychasm was far from a unanimously accepted doctrine particu-

larly in the intellectual circles in Constantinople. Hesychasts like Gregory of Sinai and Gregory Palamas were challenged in the writings of other theologians like Barlaam of Calabria or Prochoros Kydones. This opposition continued through the first decades of the mid-fourteenth century, despite the public debates that established Hesychasm as a valid Orthodox theology.

In parallel with the religious controversy, a different tendency developed in the Byzantine circles of literati: namely the revival of literary studies based on the transmission of ancient knowledge. Starting in the thirteenth century and until the Fall of Constantinople, MONTICINI argues, Byzantine intellectuals developed an “archeological” attitude towards ancient texts, an attitude reflected especially in collecting manuscripts. This late Byzantine conception of antiquity was based on the tenets introduced by the Second Sophistic where authors like Plato could be related to Iamblichus and Demosthenes held similar importance as Synesius.

The first Palaiologan period shows an increased respect for the past primarily through the lexica of authors like Thomas Magistros, Manuel Moschopoulos, Maximos Planoudes, or the rediscovery of old branches of knowledge that had been forgotten or little developed in Byzantium, e.g. astronomy or geography. MONTICINI indicates that this is a phase of concomitant continuity and innovation with respect to the past. With regard to this period we find a tendency of extracting information paralleled by a desire to reappropriate past and to reevaluate the idea of Hellenism.

Having outlined the main traits of the political and historical background in which the commentary on the Treatise on Dreams surfaced, MONTICINI zooms into the main protagonists of the intellectual landscape of the Palaiologan period. Beginning with George Akropolites, *megas logothetes* and private tutor appointed by Michael VIII Palaiologos to deal with the transmission of culture, we notice a renewed interest in the classics. Akropolites’ main subjects of teaching were Aristotle’s texts, Euclides’ geometry, arithmetic, and rhetoric.

Other notable scholars and teachers whom MONTICINI discusses are: Manuel Holobolos, George of Cyprus, Nikephoros Choumnos, Manuel Gabalas, Manuel Planoudes, Demetrios Triklinios, Theodore Metochites, and Joseph the Philosopher. They maintained a high interest not only in classical literature, but also in astronomy, editing of ancient texts, and translations from Greek into Latin. They were part of a schooling system that in addition to early forms of education offered the possibility of instruction in the com-

pany of an experienced teacher and scholar. It was in this environment that the practice of *synanagnosis* (reading together) developed. It involved the perusing texts from various authors and the periodic interruptions with commentaries from the teacher. However, MONTICINI concludes, that although the practice was widespread, we are not entirely certain if the commentaries are the product of a single author or of notes made by students from the teacher's teachings.

Within this milieu, MONTICINI singles out Nikephoros Gregoras, the author of a substantial commentary on Synesius' *Treatise on Dreams*. His biography resembles those of other scholars in his time: he arrived in Constantinople at an early age in 1315, and at the court he intersected with Theodore Metochites, Thomas Magistros, Nikephoros Choumnos, or Joseph the Philosopher. He studied astronomy and debated the Palamites with the instruments provided by both Christian thought as well as Aristotle.

Gregoras addressed the issue of human knowledge in opposition to the Hesychasts' negative approach to human science. He advocated Platonism, which his teacher, Metochites, had already partially adapted to skepticism. The skepticism of both Metochites and of Gregoras consisted of a negative dogmatism, which rejected any possibility of determining the true and the false with regard to phenomena and not in an absolute, open suspension of judgment. Gregoras vehemently opposed the Palamite doctrine which promised man to mystically comprehend the divinity (albeit with the proper distinction between God's energies and essence). This pessimistic view of human knowledge did not, however, lead to Gregoras' rejection of human sciences. On the contrary: even though the knowledge is limited, he argued, one may nevertheless understand a reflection of it in the perceptible world, such as via the study of mathematical sciences and the interrelationships of cosmic objects.

By and large, Gregoras' commentary on Synesius embeds all these ideas. Whether or not it was dedicated to Theodore Metochites, as MONTICINI inclines to believe, this commentary remains characteristic of its period. It included both short grammatical glosses and more comprehensive marginal notes in which the author discussed the philosophical elements of Synesius' work. A number of quotations are included, as well as several schematic drawings that are meant to highlight key sections. Connected to Gregoras' commentary, MONTICINI looks at a similar commentary on Synesius written by a member of Eudaimonioannes family. A hitherto unknown author, he seems to have possessed enough skills to comment on the philosophical

subtleties of Synesius' text and was also knowledgeable of astronomy. The problems involved in the study of this commentary are varied: Could it be that Eudaimonioannes was Gregoras' pupil or was he connected in some way to Metochites? MONTICINI notes that the two commentators seem to ignore each other since there are no cross-references or quotations from one or another. There are also other differences. Whereas Gregoras' commentary is less focused on the grammar or the text and more oriented towards the philosophy and theories proposed by Synesius. Gregoras' composition seems to be a work ready for circulation while in Eudaimonioannes' case we read more a work in progress and a draft.

This commentary attributed to Eudaimonioannes implies that astronomy was a topic popular among Palaiologan scholars. MONTICINI thus suggests that both Gregoras and Eudaimonioannes shared a similar cultural frame of references. He argues that Eudaimonioannes' commentary preceded that of Gregoras since it would have not made much sense to write a new commentary after Gregoras' accomplished work. Another hypothesis is that Eudaimonioannes, who was certainly active when Gregoras circulated his commentary, may have been first commissioned by Theodore Metochites but the task was later attributed to Gregoras. In the same way, it is plausible that Gregoras himself attributed the task to one of his students but then took it himself from scratch.

The commentary which MONTICINI offers in both original and translated form shows an author highly sensitive to the theoretical principles of the text as well as to its sources. It seems that the author carried out the research on Synesius at the same time with a research of Gregory of Nyssa's *On the Creation of Man* which is copied at the beginning of the manuscript. The author shows good knowledge about the contents of Synesius' whole text as he proceeds in small steps. Interestingly, the commentary ends when the author is speaking about identifying the spirit with the soul. It is difficult to say for which reason, the commentator stopped at that point but MONTICINI hypothesizes that most likely the cause for the author's interruption of the commentary was external.

If in the first part of the book, the focus was on the Palaiologan age and in the second part on the commentary of the *Treatise on Dreams*, in the third part the author attempts to connect the "piece of the puzzle", the commentary on Synesius' *Treatise* to the broader puzzle. Two are the guiding questions here: Why was Synesius commented in fourteenth century Byzantium, almost a millennium after his death? And why of all Synesius'

texts, Palaiologan authors chose this composition?

Since Byzantium knew a number of “renaissances,” the answers to these questions draw on the meaning and definition of classicism in the early Palaiologan period which was linked to the rebirth of the Empire after the reconquest of Constantinople by Michael VIII. A criterion for defining different versions of classicism, MONTICINI argues, is the distance which the imitator perceives from the classical author of choice. He shows that the classicism of the Palaiologan period had an “archaeological” nature and was distinct from the classicism of the Middle Byzantine period. This idea finds support in several sources. For instance, the choice of Synesius was explained by Gregoras himself who stated that he highly appreciated that Synesius was initiated in the mysteries of Delphi, just like Plato and Pythagoras, who were both believed to have deep knowledge about the oriental mysteries. Eventually, Synesius as the philosopher who combined philosophy and esoteric knowledge, became the optimal illustration of the “Hellene” in the eyes of the Palaiologans.

Furthermore, an author like Synesius served suitable arguments against the supporters of the anti-humanist current, particularly the Hesychasts. The debate between these two intellectual currents covered topics like God and the human being, or the body and the intellect, topics which Synesius treated in detail.

As MONTICINI fittingly illustrates, the conflict between discourses, “Hellenic” and “anti-Hellenic,” surfaced in a letter sent by Manuel Gabalas to Nikephoros Gregoras where Gabalas questions the role of *logoi* or prophane culture. Gabalas saw a conflict between the *logoi* he practised in his youth and his office as metropolitan where he had to show prudence and a Christian perspective. Concomitantly, other authors like Metochites discovered the nostalgia of the past and the impossibility of saying new things. The importance of *logoi* becomes more clear: the acquisition of knowledge was regarded by Palaiologan authors as a legitimizing marker of their intellectual identity.

Supplemented by two substantial appendices containing a description of the manuscripts and the text of Eudaimonioannes’ commentary, MONTICINI’s monograph is a robust piece of scholarship on the early Palaiologan intellectual history. While more is to be said about all the intellectual circles in Constantinople or Thessalonike including the gatherings in the framework of *theatra*, the book merges historical and philological information in a convincing way. At the same time, it opens the way for fur-

ther research into other instances of scholarly cooperation and competition based on debating ancient authors, instances which shaped the intellectual landscape of late Byzantium.

Keywords

commentaries; dreams; dream interpretation; Late Antiquity; Late Byzantium; Eudaimonioannes; Neoplatonism; Nikephoros Gregoras; Palaeologan period; Theodore Metochites; philosophy; Synesios

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