

CHRISTIAN GASTGEBER, *Byzantinische Soziographik. Der griechische Schreiber und seine Handschrift (Prolegomena Byzantina 1)*. Baden-Baden: Ergon 2024. 315 pp. – ISBN 978-3-98740-092-6

• GEORGI PARPULOV, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München  
(georgi.parpulov@lmu.de)

CHRISTIAN GASTGEBER's new term *Soziographik* means, briefly put, 'palaeography with a human face'. Traditional *Schriftkunde*, preoccupied with attributions and periodisation, looks exclusively at the morphology and taxonomy of scribal hands. *Soziographik*, by contrast, sees the creation and circulation of written records as two complementary processes. Every manuscript is 'a social phenomenon that originates from a social demand and exerts its impact within a certain social environment' (p. 20); it opens for us a window onto the society that once produced and used it (p. 17).

A seasoned palaeographer, GASTGEBER is not one to throw out the baby with the bathwater: much of his book is an exercise in customary *Schriftkunde*. We learn about nuclei, upstrokes and downstrokes, compounds (*nessi*) and ligatures, module and *ductus*, cursive and *Auszeichnungsmajuskel*, diacritics, punctuation and word division. The main styles of Greek calligraphy are masterfully presented (a description of the *Hodegon* one on pp. 251–253 is particularly fine). The transition from papyrus to parchment, the introduction of minuscule script, the gradual adoption of paper are spotlighted as key moments in the history of the book (pp. 127–146). None of this is new, but any eager student looking for a beginner's guide to Greek manuscripts will find it of inestimable value.

The book's less conventional part examines the social world of Byzantine scribes (their patrons are given short shrift; cf. pp. 28, 123–125).<sup>1</sup> This is difficult terrain. Few Byzantine manuscripts carry colophons, and many that once did have probably lost them through damage. An individual scribe's output can most often be reconstructed only by spotting his hand. Even when scribes did write their names, they would report little

1. For example, I recently discovered that an itemised bill for an illuminated book refers to a Gospel copied in 1346 on the order of Grand Duke Isaacius Palaeologus Asan: GEORGI PARPULOV, *Membra disiecta Sinaitica Graeca. Fragmentology* 5 (2022) pp. 79–85 (80). GASTGEBER is aware of my discovery (p. 89) but does not ask himself what it can tell us about that nobleman's means and ambitions.

else about themselves: one Chariton, for example, signed over a dozen codices between 1319 and 1346, yet we do not even know if he was a monk or a layman. GASTGEBER wisely ignores Chariton and concentrates on his better-documented colleagues. Special attention is paid to those employed as clerks in the emperor's or the patriarch's chancery (pp. 52–54, 89, 220, 239–241). One can also group together scribes who termed themselves 'calligrapher',<sup>2</sup> who worked as notaries, or who were church lecturers (ἀναγνώσται) (pp. 181–197). The three classes sometimes overlap: 'Theopemptos bezeichnete sich im Kolophon (f. 201v) nicht nur als Anagnostes, sondern auch als Kalligraph' (p. 186). A special – and atypical – case are the Greek émigrés active in Western Europe during the Renaissance (pp. 260–270).

The author should have clearly stated the aim of these sociographical chapters. Why are vocational categories significant? Are there scribal 'sociolinguistics' comparable to the well-defined period styles (*bouletée*, *Perlschrift*, and so on) that palaeographers normally refer to? Can we distinguish, say, an eleventh-century notary's hand from that of an eleventh-century monk in the same way we distinguish a tenth-century hand from a twelfth-century one? Can we tell on the basis of its script if an unsigned codex was copied by a notary, by a monk, or by a lector? My guess is that we cannot – and GASTGEBER himself admits as much when writing that '[t]he notary [one Leontios in this case] ... takes great care to meet calligraphic standards and provide optimal legibility' (p. 197). Would not each and every trained copyist do the same?

The question can be put in reverse by looking at men who worked side by side, in an identical environment: 'when focusing on script models and [their] inter-generational transfer, a lot would be gained from a sociographical study of scribes collaborating' (p. 51; cf. p. 113). It turns out that teammates – e.g. the fourteenth-century fellow-monks Germanus and Gennadius – did not always write in a similar way. If difference between scribes is due to an 'irrational human factor' (p. 91), we need to examine not the social but the mental and manual aspects of scribal work. GASTGEBER does that – and discusses creativity, various degrees of professional talent, the desire to avoid monotony, the way scribes held the pen and leaves (pp. 69–73, 92–99). This is not *Soziographik*, for it all has to do with individuals isolated from one another.

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2. 'Calligrapher' may have been a professional term for someone specialised in copying books, as opposed to writing letters and documents – the work of a 'tachygrapher' (p. 206).

Education, on the other hand, is inherently social: the best sociographical part of GASTGEBER's book is the one about scribal training (pp. 48–56). We never see a Byzantine scribe *develop* his style<sup>3</sup> (the calligraphic hand of Joasaph, for instance, seems not to change in the least over his decades-long career) – we can only ask how he *learned* it once and for all.<sup>4</sup> Would scribes seek to reproduce the script in the (sometimes ancient) exemplars they had in front of them? Or did they look at their teachers working and try to imitate them in the process? Such questions may be studied empirically: one could juxtapose an *Abschrift* with its surviving *Vorlage*,<sup>5</sup> or compare a disciple's handwriting with that of his master.<sup>6</sup> Rather than do special research on these lines, GASTGEBER proposes some hypothetical models which could explain 'the wide dissemination of script forms' (p. 54): a scribe trained in a certain style, for example, might move to a different centre of manuscript production and transfer his know-how (p. 56).

One weak point of pioneering work is that new *Gedankenmodelle* of this sort cannot be tested all at once. As it is, the book alternates between technical analysis of single scribal products (e.g. 'man erkennt eine Vereinheitlichungstendenz, sodass Homogenität eingehalten wird; die Fettaugen machen das Schriftbild belebter, verstören es nicht mehr, auch Involvierungen werden kunstvoll kalligraphisiert' on p. 237) and sweeping overviews (e.g. '[d]ie Schrift hatte in der Zwischenzeit eine Entwicklung durchgelaufen, die sich von den Idealen der früheren Rundminuskel einfach weiterentwickelt hat' on p. 251). There is no middle ground between these two poles. In both cases GASTGEBER tends to slip into metaphors that make change in handwriting appear, all of a sudden, self-propelled: 'die Minuskel durchlief ... eine Zeit extrem aufgeblähter und vergrößerter Buchstaben, die eine besondere Eigendynamik entwickelten ... Die ruhige Rundminuskel kam ... in diesen Sog ...' (p. 253). It is as if letters become animate: 'Die Schrift verlangte auch wieder Schwung' (p. 254), 'die Fettaugen ... haben sich wohl aus dem Schwung ergeben, wurden aber vom Schreiber [Maximus Planudes] doch unter Kontrolle gehalten' (p. 227). This is not *Soziographik*, either.

Fruitful sociographical study would require less metaphors and more facts.

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3. 'Das Problem der Paläographie ist nur, dass wir einen Schreiber selten in seiner gesamten Entwicklung beobachten können' (p. 71) is an understatement.

4. Such training could not have taken place while scribes worked under dictation, as GASTGEBER believes some did (pp. 99–102)

5. E.g. the Psalter of Basil II with the Paris Psalter.

6. The aforesaid Germanus and Gennadius are perhaps a case in point.

We need to identify as many individual scribes as we can, either named or anonymous. We should try to establish for whom they worked and what their patrons expected. We must ask ourselves why they wrote in a particular manner and what stylistic options were available to them.

We also need to look at manuscripts more soberly and more carefully. GASTGEBER gives an instructive example by discussing the hitherto neglected scribbles which several untrained hands left in the margins of a ninth-century Psalter. Not being himself a *Schreibanfänger*, he did not read two of these scribbles correctly: the one in his Fig. 4 actually says ο πατηρ μου εγενισε εκ **κλιας μητρος μου** και εγω εγεν (the beginning of a popular riddle),<sup>7</sup> while the one in Fig. 6 reads ευλογη υ ψυχη μου τον κ(υριο)ν **κ(υρι)ε** ο θε(εο)ς μου, etc. (the beginning of Psalm 103).

In sum, this important and thought-provoking book might well open new paths for the study of Greek manuscripts. May it be read widely – and may the series *Prolegomena Byzantina*, of which it forms the inaugural volume, long continue in the same vein.

#### **Keywords**

history of the book; manuscript studies; Greek palaeography

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7. ČELICA MILOVANOVIĆ, *Византијске загонетке* (Балканске народне умотворине 6). Beograd 1986, p. 17 (no. 1).