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Rustam Shukurov, Byzantine Ideas of Persia, 650–1461 (Global Histories before Globalisation). London: Routledge 2023. xvii+270 pp. – ISBN 978-1-03-207067-4. Open access at https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003205197

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Rustam Shukurov's new book takes a multipronged approach to a topic with wide-ranging implications for Byzantine studies. Successive chapters consider the role of Persia and Persians (especially Persian kings and the Magi) in the sacred history of Byzantine Christianity (chs. 1–2), Persian saints commemorated in Byzantine cult and naming practices (ch. 3), Persian history and language as an object of historical inquiry and philology as practiced by Byzantine scholars like Photios (ch. 4), references to Persia and Persians as foils and exemplars for contemporaries in Byzantine rhetoric and language and proverbs (ch. 5), the trope of Persian wisdom in Byzantine "occult sciences" (ch. 6), and *actual* contacts with Persians in the form of Persians in the Byzantine empire, knowledge gained by Greek-speaking Byzantines from Persian texts and teachers, contemporary linguistic borrowings, and geographical knowledge (ch. 7). Finally, an epilogue cautions against exaggerating seventh- to ninth-century Byzantine cultural rupture and proposes that the modern Iranian image of ancient Persia is indebted to the way Byzantines imagined ancient Persia.

The author uses his assembled material to build an argument about Byzantine "cultural memory". This methodological lens is often quite fruitful, permitting him to move beyond the sort of positivism whose curiosity begins and ends with assessing the accuracy of any given report about Persia (or anything else) that one finds in the sources. Instead, following the lead of western medievalists, Byzantinists, and others (pp. 3–5), Shukurov seeks to uncover the "imaginary Persia" (pp. 2, 49, 52, 85) that lived in the minds of medieval speakers of Greek who lived within the territory of the Byzantine empire, and how this image changed over time. He argues that "Persian motifs in Byzantine culture" were rooted "in deeper layers of the Greco-Roman civilisation", rather than being manifestations of a "superficial" attraction to "Asian exoticism" (p. 7).

This approach leads in some genuinely interesting directions. For example, Shukurov points to how Byzantines adapted the Sasanian ideology

of Rome and Persia as the “two eyes” of the world in order to articulate their own political ideologies through ancient Persian history (pp. 98–103). Still, there is something unsatisfying about the book’s treatment of the ancient Persia of Byzantine memory as a phenomenon that can be more or less isolated from Byzantine encounters with real, living Persians. Though focused on cultural memory and Persia as an idea, SHUKUROV does also present evidence for Persia and Persians as part of Byzantine reality. This is above all in the rich final chapter, ch. 7, explicitly dedicated to “Iranian actualities”, where SHUKUROV concludes from his survey of examples that actual Byzantine contact with *real* Persia and Persians was considerable in the early medieval period (seventh to ninth century) because of “Persians fleeing Islamisation”, that such contact decreased in the middle Byzantine period (tenth and eleventh century), and increased again “from the twelfth century onward” (pp. 170–171). But such evidence also arises in earlier chapters, where its place in the argument about cultural memory is not always clear. Occasionally, contacts with contemporary Persia and Persians are mentioned as possible motivations for the cultivation of a “cultural memory” of Persia, but many such opportunities to explore the relationship between memory and the present, between idea and reality, are passed over in silence. From most of the book, a reader could easily come away with the impression that Byzantine scholars liked to remember Persia simply because it helped them hone and maintain their image of themselves quite independently of any stake in the Persian present. Thinking about Persia becomes another form of Byzantine navel-gazing.

I should stress that this image of an inward-looking Byzantine cultural elite is deeply entrenched in our discipline to this very day.[1] The extent to which SHUKUROV resists this stereotype speaks to his open-mindedness in reading the evidence. This is all the more so the case when one considers the scholarly contexts in which he has spent most of his professional life, late Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, where Byzantium was particularly fraught with political connotations of contemporary relevance.[2] In an eloquent au-

1. See MARIA MAVROUDI, Byzantine Translations from Arabic into Greek. Old and New Historiographical Trends in Confluence and in Conflict. Journal of Late Antique, Islamic, and Byzantine Studies 2 (2023) pp. 215–288, at 230. I thank MARIA MAVROUDI for emphasizing this point to me.

2. Hailing from Persian-speaking Tajikistan (p. xv), he was trained at Moscow State University, where he received his PhD in 1991 and afterwards joined the faculty, teaching there until very recently, when, as he narrates in the book’s acknowledgments, the “political atmosphere in Moscow” suffered “a sharp deterioration” in the wake of the Russian state’s invasion of Ukraine (24 February 2022), and he “left Moscow” for Dushanbe, then

tobiographical essay on the intellectual climate in which Soviet Byzantine and medieval studies took place, published just after the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union, the prominent Russian medievalist AARON GUREVICH (1924–2006) explained that he had decided not to become a Byzantinist because he found Byzantium depressingly familiar. A rejection of the Byzantine heritage, for GUREVICH, was a rejection of Stalinism, which he saw as a reversion to Russia's earlier Tsarist ways. In Byzantine sources, GUREVICH found it all too easy to recognize the authoritarianism, opaquely arbitrary punishment and leniency, demands for ideological purity, religious and ethnic bigotry (he was Jewish), and suppression of intellectual heterodoxy that he experienced in the academic life of mid-twentieth-century Russia.[3]

SHUKUROV thus takes us a step away from the flat image of an inward-looking, intellectually repressive, culturally conformist Byzantium; in order to see how we might further overcome this stereotype and build in its place a more accurate and interesting image of Byzantine culture, it may be helpful for us to compare the book under review to a monograph published twenty years ago on an analogous topic but produced within the different, neighboring discipline of Middle Eastern Studies: NADIA MARIA EL CHEIKH's *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs*.[4] SHUKUROV's book does not

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Vienna, then St Andrews (p. xv). These are not ideal conditions in which to produce a monograph; we are fortunate that it has come to light at all.

3. AARON GUREVICH, Why am I not a Byzantinist? Dumbarton Oaks Papers 46 (1992) pp. 89–96, esp. 94–95. I am grateful to MARIA MAVROUDI for pointing me to this essay for insights into Soviet intellectual life. For a brief account of GUREVICH's life and career see ELENA LEMENEVA, Gurevich, Aron Iakovlevich. In: ALBRECHT CLASSEN (ed.), Handbook of Medieval Studies. Berlin 2010, pp. 2333–2337. Already in 1971, IHOR ŠEVČENKO (1922–2009) suggested that being a member of the Soviet cultural elite could make the world inhabited by Byzantine writers seem very familiar (which he framed positively as giving Soviet scholars special insight into Byzantine culture): ŠEVČENKO, in JOHN MEYENDORFF – IHOR ŠEVČENKO – PAUL J. ALEXANDER, The Cambridge and Soviet Histories of the Byzantine Empire. Slavic Review 30/3 (1971) pp. 619–648, at 631. Further glimpses of the scholarly background to SHUKUROV's book may perhaps be detected in certain investigative habits and turns of phrase, such as a tendency to look for "popular" perspectives and texts that could be construed as "addressed to a wider public" than Byzantine elites (e.g., p. 59 liturgy, p. 103 heuristic opposition between "antiquarian interest" and "resonat[ing] with a broader public", p. 164 astrology). For this tendency in Soviet scholarship see ŠEVČENKO, in ibid., 626 ¶3, where he notes that the Soviet history of Byzantium under review "describes... liturgical poetry... as popular in spirit" and "hears folkloristic tones" in the *Ladder* by Saint John of Sinai.

4. NADIA MARIA EL CHEIKH, Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs. Cambridge, MA 2004. For a Byzantinist's perspective on this book see the review by MARIA MAVROUDI

cite hers, but there is much to be gained from reading them side by side. Both set themselves the task of investigating how one culture or people perceived another, in diachronic perspectives that roughly coincide (from around the seventh-century Islamic conquests to the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople). In both cases, one of the cultures in question is Byzantium. And yet EL CHEIKH's treatment of her subject is different in key ways. While attentive to the diachronic trajectories and transformations that Arab perceptions of Byzantium underwent, she is equally committed to placing perceptions of the Other – and trajectories of change in such perceptions – in their respective historical contexts.[5] EL CHEIKH articulates her methodological stance on the dynamic interplay between perception and reality across time as follows:

> The image of Byzantium in the Arabic-Islamic sources was not monolithic across the centuries. Images seem to have responded to changing internal, regional, and international political realities and may be narrated only by acknowledging and referring to the historical development of the Byzantine and Islamic states. In particular, we must take into account the persistent fluctuation of power between the two rivals if we are to understand the evolution of certain images, *topoi*, rhetorical figures, and other similar structures.[6]

After doing just that over the course of her book, EL CHEIKH reaffirms her approach:

> It has been a premise of this work that the image of Byzantium was conditioned by the fluctuations of Muslim-Byzantine relations, by the circumstances of the international conjuncture, and by the internal conditions of the Islamic world.[7]

SHUKUROV's approach, by contrast, is in the first place descriptive (p. 1):

> In this study, my aim is to develop a holistic description of the Byzantine perceptions of Persia from the seventh century down to the late Byzantine period in all their complexity and diversity.

This focus on the history of mentalities, of the sort practiced by GUREVICH in defiance of Soviet scholarly realism, helps explain SHUKUROV's choice to separate image and reality as two independent topics of investigation

in Byzantinische Zeitschrift 100/1 (2008) pp. 200–204.

5. EL CHEIKH, Byzantium Viewed, pp. 13–16 (sections on "A History of Alterity" and "The Temporal Evolution of Perception").

6. Ibid., p. 15.

7. Ibid., p. 223.

(pp. 1–2):[8]

> [T]his book aims to achieve two objectives. First, it seeks to reconstruct the image of ancient Persia in a religious and secular context. Second, it represents an effort to analyse and organise information about the contemporary Persian world, which the Byzantines accumulated from the seventh to fifteenth centuries.

SHUKUROV did not set out to integrate these topics as EL CHEIKH did, but future research on Byzantium and Persia should. Otherwise we risk implicitly accepting the contrary of EL CHEIKH's premise for the case of Byzantine notions about Persia, in which such notions are presumed to have little to do with contemporary Byzantine-Persian relations. To be clear, SHUKUROV certainly does not profess to accept this premise; and to judge from the dossier he has assembled, neither should we.

The particular content of EL CHEIKH's book also indicates further avenues to explore, since Persians and images of Persia figure prominently in it. Thus as we read about the place of Persian kings in Byzantine political ideology we might wish to consider how this could have been in dialogue with Muslim political ideologies, such as that of the Umayyad caliphs who "tried to inscribe themselves into a universal history of world empire", with one caliph styling himself "son of Kisrā" (i.e., Khosrow/Khusrav) and grandson of "Caesar"– that is, heir to the two great powers, (Sasanian) Iran and (New) Rome.[9] And what of the *shuʿūbiyya* movement, which asserted the legitimacy, within the Islamic polity, of cultures and peoples other than the Arabs, thus prompting exploration of non-Arab, pre-Islamic (especially Persian) history and literature?[10] Did this have anything to do with contemporary Byzantine uses of the Persian past? Until we ask, we cannot know.

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8. This favorable reception of *Annaliste* methodology was shared by another prominent Russian Jewish scholar of Gurevich's generation, the Byzantinist ALEXANDER KAZHDAN (1922–1997), on whom see GUREVICH, Why am I not a Byzantinist? p. 90 col. 2; ANGELIKI E. LAIOU – ALICE-MARY TALBOT, Alexander Petrovich Kazhdan, 1922–1997. Dumbarton Oaks Papers 51 (1997) pp. xii–xvii. I thank MARIA MAVROUDI for pointing out the role of GUREVICH and KAZHDAN among Soviet-trained scholars in promoting the *Annales* school of history-writing.

9. Ibid., 85. See also GARTH FOWDEN, Quṣayr ʿAmra. Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria. Berkeley 2004, ch. 7 ("The Six Kings").

10. EL CHEIKH, Byzantium Viewed, pp. 111–120.

Part of the difference in approaches is due to the respective historiographical contexts of Byzantine Studies and Middle Eastern Studies. Whereas El Cheikh could take it for granted that Arabs "encountered" Byzantium,[11] Byzantinists might first need to be convinced that Byzantines after the Islamic conquests had much exposure to their Persian contemporaries at all, as Shukurov observes. Accordingly, his book aims to fill in the gap by putting together three "perspectives on Persia" that Byzantinists have treated separately: (1) "a Christian-based interpretation", (2) "a perception shaped by Hellenic knowledge inherited from antiquity", and (3) "an image of Persia shaped by Byzantine contemporary experience" (p. 1). This is an important first step: if we neatly divide biblical exegesis from historiography, theology from philosophy, hagiography from imperial politics – how then can we hope to understand Byzantine thought-worlds? Shukurov has moved us decisively away from that compartmentalized modern mindset.

This leaves us with the next step to undertake: putting thought-worlds in conversation with lived experience. Indeed, the book's many examples are ideally suited to helping us along in this direction. Questions of cultural memory aside, the evidence Shukurov presents points to a rich diversity of language and culture within the Byzantine empire, and to substantive engagement by Hellenophone Byzantines with other languages and cultures, in particular Persian language and culture, both ancient and contemporary. The implications for Byzantinists are far-reaching. Faced with all of this evidence in one place, we will no longer be able to treat individual examples of contact with Persia and Persians or cultural engagement with images of Persia (from the "Phrygian caps" of Byzantine book illumination and icons to Byzantine accounts of Persian sages like Ostanes and Zoroaster) as marginal or exceptional. We will have to place any such instances in this wider context and consider how it accords with or revises the diachronic trends and developments that Shukurov tentatively sketches. If Greek-speaking Byzantines actively studied Persian history, language, and culture for their contemporary purposes; if they learned from Persian texts and teachers; if some "Byzantines" *were* Persian; then surely this is a serious blow to persistent assumptions that Byzantines were uniquely inward looking, uninterested in learning about or from other cultures, and committed to mindlessly copying, re-reading, and imitating their favorite Greek texts from classical antiquity simply because it made them feel good

11. Ibid., ch. 1 ("The Encounter with Byzantium").

about Hellenic (and their own) cultural superiority.[12] A careful consideration of SHUKUROV's examples adds to the conviction that it is time to overturn these assumptions – and actively explore Byzantine interest in the "outside" (non-Greek) world as a recurring feature of Byzantine culture, a Byzantine "cosmopolitanism" that went hand-in-hand with the cultivation of what Byzantine intellectuals perceived as their own literary and intellectual traditions.[13] Once we recall the many examples, perhaps better known to Byzantinists, of speakers of Georgian, Armenian, Syriac, Arabic, Latin, and Slavic languages playing an active role in Byzantine culture, politics, and society, we may wonder how we could ever have imagined otherwise.[14]

The book itself, focused as it is on cultural memory, does not consistently pursue this argument, offering instead only the occasional, gentle corrective to some detail of the old picture, and, despite its general orientation, often seeming to fall back implicitly on old tropes about Byzantine antiquarianism and lack of interest in the outside world. In the epilogue we do read that Byzantine ideas about Persia were grounded in reality ("had a solid factual basis") and were deeply "meaningful" within Byzantine culture (p. 188), but throughout most of the book we are told of one example of meaningful engagement after another that it is "remarkable", "strange", "bizarre", as if any evidence that Byzantium was a multilingual, multiethnic empire with cosmopolitan intellectuals and a culturally savvy ruling class, no matter how abundant, must be treated as exceptional and inexplicable.[15] One way to carry on the work of this book would be to scrutinize each example that SHUKUROV, with admirable candor, has marked off as anomalous or difficult to explain – and in each case to consider how else we might carry on his work. As a result of this open and honest approach

12. For a recent re-evaluation of the thesis that Byzantine "cultural chauvinism and nationalism…impeded a proper reception of non-Greek knowledge in Byzantium" (published too late for SHUKUROV to have consulted it before his book went to press) see MAVROUDI, Byzantine Translations from Arabic into Greek, pp. 238–245 (quote on p. 242).

13. Ibid., pp. 245–248.

14. For a similar point see already IHOR ŠEVČENKO, New Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire. Slavic Review 27/1 (1968) pp. 109–118, at 110–114, countering what he calls "the Hellenic hypothesis".

15. Instead we are to imagine what MAVROUDI (Byzantine Translations from Arabic into Greek, p. 247) has called "an empire without an imperial culture". For the modern scholarly habit of treating such examples of Byzantine interest in other cultures as exceptions see also SAMUEL NOBLE, Byzantine *Adab* and *Falsafah* in 11th Century Antioch. Journal of Arabic Literature 53/3–4 (2022) pp. 246–264, at 247; cited by MAVROUDI, Byzantine Translations from Arabic into Greek, 248 n. 134.

to scholarship, we have been gifted the results of his efforts and scholarly instinct: a wealth of suggestive evidence waiting to be explored further.

The book's interpretations of several well-known Byzantine scholars (well known to Byzantinists, at least) are likewise best read as provisional attempts to make sense of their engagement with and perceptions of Persia and Persian culture, ancient to contemporary. How could the case be otherwise for figures like the ninth-century scholar, bureaucrat, and Patriarch of Constantinople Photios, the eleventh-century consul of philosophers Michael Psellos, or the fourteenth-/fifteenth-century Platonist George Gemistos Plethon? A more satisfying examination would surely require something approaching book-length studies for each. The same goes for the thirteenth-/fourteenth-century student of astronomy/astrology George-Gregory Chioniades, who went to Tabriz to learn astronomy so as to improve his medical practice – and whose autograph scholia demonstrate his interest in Persian astrological terminology, the Greek tradition of medical astrology, human psychology, and Aristotelian logic, among other things.[16] SHUKUROV is to be applauded for including these intellectuals alongside the "religious" evidence presented in earlier chapters like Persian saints and biblical exegesis about the Magi, openly challenging (e.g., on p. 188) the old prescription and the still persistent habit of treating "secular" and "religious" intellectual activities as more or less unrelated, even when a single individual pursued "both". This is true even when the book's treatment of these figures is not entirely persuasive.

Take Photios, for instance. In discussing "the originality of Photios's reading of the story of the Magi", SHUKUROV perspicaciously notes that Photios's departure from "traditional... exegesis" of the laconic account in the Gospel of Matthew has the effect of "linking [the story] with the idea of a special metahistorical status of the Persian empire. Photios", he continues, "remarkably shifted the focus from the Persian kingship to the Persians as a nation who heeded God's commandments to assist and exalt both Old and New Israel." This might have been an opportunity to reflect on what this can tell us about Photios's politics and imperial ideology. Instead, at

16. See, with references, ALEXANDRE M. ROBERTS, Byzantine-Islamic Scientific Culture in the Astronomical Diagrams of Chioniades on John of Damascus. In: JEFFREY HAMBURGER – DAVID ROXBURGH – LINDA SAFRAN (eds), The Diagram as Paradigm. Cross-Cultural Approaches. Washington, DC 2022, pp. 113–148, esp. 119–121 (generally), 122–123 (Persian astrological terminology), 131–132 (Greek medical astrology), 133–135 (psychology), 135–139 (logic); and MAVROUDI, Byzantine Translations from Arabic into Greek, pp. 236–237.

this point the book simply concludes that Photios's intervention reflects "the special interpretive focus of a professional historian, attentive to factual details and prone to historical generalisations" (p. 25). Opportunities to explore Photios's substantive engagement with Persian language, culture, and history are often missed. The observation that the word Περσαῖ (with the accent on the final syllable), reported by Photios as the Persian "endonym", might reflect New Persian pronunciation is buried in a chapter endnote (79 n. 12, printed on p. 92); why not highlight Photios's apparent knowledge, direct or indirect, of contemporary Persian phonetics? Likewise, if Photios's "curious etymology" of the name Mani might refer to Middle Persian *mānag* (pp. 80–81), a plausible suggestion, then the historical consequences should be emphasized; instead, the book's conclusion from this example ("Photios was especially keen on Persian etymologies") risks making Photios sound preoccupied with etymology for its own sake, rather than potentially engaging, through etymology, with Persian culture out of his own contemporary political or cultural concerns, especially given where this etymology appears (in Photios's polemic against the Paulicians). SHUKUROV seems to see Photios's engagement with the history of Persia as a sort of "clever reading about past events" that were meaningful for his "cultural identity" (p. 81). This trivializing interpretation leads him to conclude that "Photios's interest in Persia and Persians may not [have] serve[d] any direct 'practical' value" (p. 81). Maybe not. Or maybe Photios was a shrewd political actor whose scholarship reflected more than cultural memory for memory's sake. The latter possibility, however, is never seriously entertained.

In the case of Psellos, SHUKUROV is admirably candid about his difficulty in making sense of the eleventh-century scholar's "attitude to Persian wisdom and generally to the Persians", which he describes as "quite problematic". The "problem" from SHUKUROV's perspective seems to be that despite embracing "occult" knowledge as an integral part of the Hellenic heritage, alongside "theology/philosophy" etc., Psellos nevertheless makes little mention of Persians and "rarely connects Hellenic wisdom with Persian sages" (p. 119). The unspoken assumptions seem to be that "the occult" was a static and monolithic body of material, instantly recognizable as such to Byzantines just as it is to us and in the same way as it is to us, consisting of the same suspect sciences, all equally suspect, and that an "occult" intellectual tradition neatly separable from other Byzantine intellectual traditions consistently tied this ancient wisdom to Persia. It is only from this perspective that it would be puzzling for Psellos to embrace "the

occult" but not the narrative of Persian wisdom. But what if we take Psellos not as a problem but rather as evidence of how and to what extent those things that *we* call "the occult" were, for the Byzantines, monolithic or inextricable from narratives about the origins of knowledge in ancient Persia? Then perhaps what he says about a "soothsayer who was Persian by blood" (as SHUKUROV puts it, p. 120) in his indictment of Patriarch Michael Keroularios begins to make better sense – and need not be read as hostility toward Persians in general. Psellos disparages the patriarch for taking on ignorant "astrologers and seers" simply on account of their "nation", since one was Illyrian, another Persian.[17] The comment is general, referring not only to one Persian or one Illyrian, and it is neutral on the question of Persia and Persians, only implying that Persians had a reputation for being good at soothsaying. The problem with the astrologers and other diviners hired by the patriarch was their ignorance of the arts that they claimed to practice. And it is only "curious" that Psellos fails to condemn them for practicing divination if we presuppose that divination and "alchemy" and all the "occult sciences" were or should have been universally condemned in Byzantine culture, at least in public; but clearly this was not the case.[18] Accordingly, I think it misses the point to say that "Psellos... directly associates Persian diviners with ignorance and fraud" (p. 120). In this passage he associates with fraud not Persians or diviners or Persian diviners in general but only the particular Persian (and Illyrian) diviners that the patriarch chose to hire.

More broadly, I see little reason to ascribe to Psellos "antipathy to everything Persian" based on the examples given (p. 120). Must a remark that "the kings of Persia delayed bonding with their newborn infants in case they died" and so "missed much parental joy" (as SHUKUROV paraphrases it, p. 120) be read as intended to disparage Persia (or at least Persian kings) rather than as a rhetorical foil to Psellos's own delight in the presence of newborns?[19] The passage in question is rather sympathetic towards Per-

17. Psellos, Orationes forenses et acta, ed. GEORGE T. DENNIS. Stuttgart 1994, oration 1, lines 2657–2661, p. 97: ἀστρολόγοι δή τινες ἐπὶ τούτοις καὶ μάντεις, τῶν οὐδὲν μὲν εἰδότων οὐδ' ὅ τι μαντείας εἶδος ἐπισταμένων, πιστευομένων δὲ ἄλλως οὐκ ἀπὸ τῆς τέχνης, ἀλλ' ἀπὸ τοῦ ἔθνους, ὅτι ὁ μὲν Ἰλλυριός, ὁ δὲ Πέρσης.

18. On this passage in the context of what Psellos has to say about the patriarch's readings in the hierotechnical (i.e., "alchemical") tradition see now ALEXANDRE M. ROBERTS, Thinking about Chemistry in Byzantium and the Islamic World. Journal of the History of Ideas 84/4 (2023) pp. 595–619, at 613.

19. Cf. the emotional intensity of Psellos's oration for his daughter Styliane, on which see PANAGIOTIS A. AGAPITOS, Public and Private Death in Psellos. Maria Skleraina

sian kings themselves, describing their fear “that death might snatch their delicate infants away”; through their studied aloofness they seek to avoid being “captivated through their eyes by the *pathos* of pleasure and then lament[ing] in full *pathos*, if their children should die”.[20] These are not cold, heartless tyrants; they are human beings like Psellos, susceptible to the same *pathos* that Psellos ascribes to himself and to which the reader is meant to relate. Later in the book, SHUKUROV proposes that “[i]n the tenth to eleventh centuries, the Persian ethnic presence in the empire diminished” (p. 171); could this hypothesized demographic change, rather than “antipathy”, help explain Psellos’s hypothesized lack of interest in the Persian legacy as compared to Photios or Chioniades or Plethon?

Similar questions continue to arise throughout the chapter on “the vicissitudes of wisdom” (ch. 6). Now, it is certainly welcome in a book about Byzantine ideas of Persia to have a chapter on how Byzantine scholars thought about “Persian wisdom”, philosophy, magic, and the occult sciences, especially since this aspect of the Persian legacy in Byzantium, and Byzantine thought more generally, is still so little understood. The trouble is that our usual shortcuts for referring to this material without reading it closely or contextualizing it fall short of allowing the kind of insights to which SHUKUROV rightly aspires. The book follows the lead of some recent historiography that denies that there was any such thing as Byzantine philosophy at all; accordingly, SHUKUROV refers not to “Byzantine philosophy” but to Byzantine “theologo-philosophical thought” (p. 119).[21] Particularly striking is when Plethon’s “theosophy” and Plato’s “philosophy” are mentioned in the same breath (p. 121); are theirs really two incommen-

and Styliane Psellaina. Byzantinische Zeitschrift 101/2 (2008) pp. 555–607, at 586–589; STRATIS PAPAIOANNOU, Michael Psellos. Rhetoric and Authorship in Byzantium. Cambridge 2013, pp. 220–221.

20. Trans. (along with the rest of the letter in which this occurs) by PAPAIOANNOU, Michael Psellos, 198 (cited by SHUKUROV).

21. To justify this usage, he recommends an essay on the inapplicability of the term “philosophy” to Byzantine thought (p. 119 n. 15, printed on p. 129), without mentioning an important critique of that same essay and the position it represents by MARIA MAVROUDI, The Modern Historiography of Byzantine and Islamic Philosophy. A Comparison. Al-Masāq 33/3 (2021) pp. 282–299 (an essay that may well have appeared too late to inform the book’s approach). See also KATERINA IERODIAKONOU (ed.), Byzantine Philosophy and Its Ancient Sources. Oxford 2002; MICHELE TRIZIO, Byzantine Philosophy as a Contemporary Historiographical Project. Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales 74/1 (2007) pp. 247–294; BÖRJE BYDÉN – KATERINA IERODIAKONOU (eds), The Many Faces of Byzantine Philosophy. Athens 2012.

surable *kinds* of thinking?[22] A similar modern attitude was once prevalent in the case of Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), today widely regarded as an important and influential philosopher.[23] It will be important for any future study to acknowledge that the view adopted by SHUKUROV is far from the consensus among Byzantinists or historians of philosophy and to assess the relative merits of this and opposing approaches based in part on the evidence cited by SHUKUROV himself. The result may well be that we will have to discard the chapter's concluding contrast between "the true philosopher Psellos" and "the true theosophist Plethon" (p. 128).

The stakes of all this for how we conceive of Byzantine culture overall are high. Reflecting in the epilogue upon the various Byzantine images of Persia he has reconstructed throughout the book, SHUKUROV paints a picture in which Byzantine images of Persia were "diverse" but "never re-thought as an integral whole" (p. 190) – as if we would expect a single, coherent image of Persia to be found in a thousand years of literature and liturgy. SHUKUROV cautions us "not [to] be unfair to the Byzantines for their inability or rather unwillingness to construct an uncontradictory concept of Persia. The fact is", he continues, "that the diverse Persian images exemplify well the coexistence of conflicting discursive strategies in the Byzantine mentality" (p. 190). This supposed defense of Byzantine intellectuals risks pathologizing them by suggesting that they were self-contradictory not only about Persia but about everything else too. "The Byzantine mentality seems to be less concerned with contradictions in its world-image", he continues (p. 190). Thus evidence that could be read to subvert an image of a static, stale Byzantium is instead read in a way that preserves the prejudice by implying that "the Byzantine mentality" *can* all be thought of as one static monolith and then concluding that this monolith is internally contradictory. For that matter, can we be so sure that the contradictions SHUKUROV perceives are not in fact artifacts of the modern frameworks we impose, in which the Persia of the Bible, of the liturgy, of ancient historiography, of the ancient sages, are all expected to fit together in one

22. For a parallel (and not unrelated) example from the Islamic world see the characterization of al-Suhrawardī as a "theosophist" as discussed now by FRANK GRIFFEL, review of Suhrawardī's Illuminationism. A Philosophical Study, by JARI KAUKUA. Arabic Sciences and Philosophy 34 (2024) pp. 139–152.

23. See DIMITRI GUTAS, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition. Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works, 2nd ed. Leiden 2014, pp. xxi–xxii = 1st ed. Leiden 1988, pp. 3–4, where Gutas critiques a passage in which SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR described Ibn Sīnā's book on "Eastern Philosophy" as presenting not philosophy or dialectic but "theosophy". See also MAVROUDI, Modern Historiography, 283 n. 5.

particular way? Perhaps if we were to query all those remarkable, curious anomalies, each within their respective historical contexts, we would find that each one is coherent, that even if Byzantine culture was no static coherent whole (why should it have been?), nevertheless the bearers of that rich and varied culture, the individuals who read and wrote and thought and spoke and acted when and where they did, *were* individually coherent, in unexpected ways that would teach us something about Byzantine views of Persia and much more.

Some of the most refreshing parts of SHUKUROV's book are his discussions of linguistic phenomena such as Greek loanwords from Persian. A handy appendix listing "remarkable" linguistic "borrowings" of New Persians words in the ever-evolving Greek language (pp. 172–176) is a highlight in this regard. When it comes to *interpreting* linguistic data to reach historical conclusions, however, SHUKUROV's analysis must again be read with some caution – always mingled with due appreciation for the labor and erudition that have brought this evidence to our attention at all. If a Persian Christian in middle Byzantine Constantinople chose to have his tomb inscribed in Persian using the Pahlavi rather than the Arabic script, must we jump to the conclusion that this was "due to [the Arabic script's] obvious Islamic connotations" (p. 140) instead of simply reflecting the customs of a particular community? As educated Persians came to serve Muslim rulers and to become Muslim themselves, they learned Arabic and the Quran and eventually came to use its script to write their own language.[24] Absent such a socio-cultural change within a community, why should the script they used have changed overnight? It is only we who have come to expect New Persian to use the Arabic script. But just as a variety of scripts could be used to write Arabic, this must have been the case in early New Persian as well. And in any case, the Christian communities in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt who used Arabic and the Arabic script for their own biblical, exegetical, hagiographical, liturgical, and other specifically Christian texts seem not to have thought that the Arabic script was too "Islamic" for a Christian.[25]

24. For an anecdote, not to be taken at face value, that dramatizes a step in this process by depicting a prominent Persian convert to Islam apparently reading the Quran for the first time see MICHAEL COOPERSON, An Early Arabic Conversion Story. The Case of al-Faḍl b. Sahl. In: ALIREZA KORANGY et al. (eds), Essays in Islamic Philology, History, and Philosophy. Berlin 2016, pp. 386–399.

25. See JACK TANNOUS, Arabic as Christian Language and Arabic as the Language of Christians. In: AYMAN S. IBRAHIM (ed.), Medieval Encounters. Arabic-Speaking Christians and Islam. Piscataway, NJ 2022, pp. 1–93.

We will need to investigate the cultural connotations of script and language, not presuppose what they were. Finally, SHUKUROV's evidence for late-Byzantine speakers of Greek learning Persian leads him to write that after ca. 1300 "native Greeks began to actively learn foreign languages" whereas before, "translations were exclusively provided by natural bilinguals" (p. 162). The first part of this conclusion is perfectly reasonable, but it might also lead us to ask what exactly the basis is for the second part (concerning the early and middle Byzantine period); the answer, it turns out, is the silence of a fragmentary historical record – hardly a foundation for firm pronouncements. It is we who have chosen to populate gaps in the record with a stereotype of smug Byzantines who could not be bothered to learn anything but Greek.[26] Even in the case of Photios, who adduces Persian etymologies that indicate New Persian pronunciation, we assume that he must have had help from native speakers of Persian. But why?[27]

SHUKUROV has so many fascinating examples to provide that the book often lacks space for sufficient discussion. This leaves a reader with many questions. Why did it matter whether nations or languages were first to multiply in the wake of the collapse of the Tower of Babel (p. 17)? If John Malalas thought of the Magi of the New Testament as "Persian spies" (p. 21), what can this tell us about his views of Persians and contemporary sixth-century concerns? If Byzantines more generally viewed the Magi not as kings but "as Persian astrologers and philosophers, or righteous men, or priests" (p. 22), what does this mean for how Byzantines viewed Persians? It is "curious" indeed that "in the fourteenth century, the Persian identity of the Magi became instrumental in Christian polemics against contemporary Muslim Persians" (p. 25). Could this be fruitfully juxtaposed with

26. For an explanation of why it is misleading in an analogous case to say that we know of no "native speaker of Greek" who learned Syriac see now MAVROUDI, Byzantine Translations from Arabic into Greek, pp. 243–244. For dramatic differences in patterns of survival of evidence from the early and middle as compared to the late Byzantine period see ibid., pp. 253–254.

27. SHUKUROV writes: "Photios's etymology leaves the impression that he, knowing no Persian, contacted a Persian native speaker to find out where this strange meaning of παράδεισος came from... Photios likely gained native-speaker expertise for his etymologies, in particular, from the local Byzantine Persians" (p. 149). These are perfectly plausible scenarios, but can we be certain that Photios (who at one point undertook an embassy to Baghdad, a city with a large Persian-speaking population in the ninth century) knew "no Persian", or that his informants and translators were not native speakers of Greek who had learned Persian as a foreign language or were bilingual by upbringing? For this very point in the case of Syriac more generally, again see MAVROUDI, Byzantine Translations from Arabic into Greek, p. 244.

"interest…[among] late Byzantine" readers in the *Oraculum Chosrois* that predicted the Persian-Roman wars of the seventh century and "subsequent [Roman] prosperity", which SHUKUROV relates to "the Ottoman conquest" (p. 118)? And might both examples be compared to Muslim polemics against contemporary Byzantines in times of tension and apocalyptic predictions of the conquest of Constantinople by Muslims, as analyzed by EL CHEIKH?[28] If the late antique author Theodore of Antioch is so "remarkable for referring to the primordial creator deity Zurvan" (p. 28), why not devote another few lines to discussing this remarkable fact? If, "[c]uriously enough, Chioniades's accentuation of Μουχαράμ (as well as of other Muslim months) is Persian, but not Arabic", then perhaps we should correlate this with other known evidence for this scholar's Persian accentuation of Arabo-Persian words[29] and subject it to an analysis that explicitly wields this evidence against commonly held presuppositions about Byzantines and their ignorance of neighboring cultures and languages – and compares it to Photios's accentuation of Persian words centuries earlier.

We have SHUKUROV to thank for opening all these and many more directions for future research, and if one reviewer wishes for more discussion, others will be grateful for concision. And for all its historiographical incrementalism, SHUKUROV's book still paves the way for us to stop wondering why Byzantines did not engage with other cultures or learn their languages and to ask instead why and how they *did*. Anyone who wishes to research how Byzantines thought about and interacted with Persians should read this book and follow up on the many examples it adduces. Anyone seeking a context for the Persians we encounter in Byzantine sources would do well to consult it. And anyone looking for Byzantine cosmopolitanism, multilingualism, and engagement with the world beyond the confines of Hellenism or Ῥωμανία will find in it a museum's worth of exhibits attesting to these very things.

Keywords

intellectual history; history of mentalities; cross-cultural interaction

28. EL CHEIKH, Byzantium Viewed, ch. 1.
29. E.g., ROBERTS, Byzantine-Islamic Scientific Culture, 121 col. 2.