

ANDREAS RHOBY, *La letteratura bizantina. Un profilo storico* (Studi Superiori). Roma: Carocci 2022. 192 pp. – ISBN 978-88-290-1235-0

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ANDREAS RHOBY's is the first ever book-length survey of Byzantine literature to be published in Italian. Translated and revised from an earlier German version, his text surpasses previous Italian ones by SALVATORE IMPELLIZZERI, KARL KRUMBACHER, GUGLIELMO CAVALLO, and ATHANASIOS KAMBYLIS. RHOBY is comprehensive but not exhaustive, balancing breadth with selectivity. He focuses on key themes, representative authors, and significant works without attempting to cover every single aspect of Byzantine literary production. Accessible and user-friendly, his book is ideal for university students and newcomers to Byzantine studies, while its relative neglect of lesser-known authors and works might be a drawback for those with a deeper interest in Byzantium. A bibliography of some forty pages provides detailed references and will give any reader the opportunity to explore topics in greater depth. There is also a very helpful index of authors and works cited ('Indice degli autori antichi e bizantini e delle opera').

The book's 'Introduzione' lays the groundwork for a complete survey of Byzantine literature, focusing on its definition and significance. It emphasises that Byzantine texts are valuable as a literary (re)creation *per se*, not just a source of historical data. RHOBY defines a wide chronological scope: from the founding of Constantinople in AD 330 to the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453. His primary focus is on works written in Greek, but he also acknowledges that Byzantine literature included texts in Latin, Syriac, Armenian, and Slavonic, highlighting the linguistic diversity and multicultural aspects of the Eastern Roman Empire. RHOBY's broad concept of literature justifies the inclusion of texts from all genres, technical writings not excepted. This aligns with the Byzantine view of '*logoi* (or *grammata*)' as 'any written work, anything related to culture and learning' (p. 14).

Chapter 1 ('I primi secoli: l'inizio della letteratura bizantina') traces developments from the 4th to the 6th century. Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, Synesius, and Nonnus are presented as key authors who connected Classical culture with Christianity. RHOBY introduces two primary genres, hagiography and hymnography, with a focus on Romanos the Melode.

It also covers epigrammatic poets such as Paul the Silentiary and Agathias, and gives significant attention to Procopius of Caesarea, an essential historical source for the Justinianic era, and to John Malalas, a pioneer of chronography. The chapter concludes with brief sections on patristic literature and historiography. Regrettably, it omits the ‘School of Nonnus’ and the so called ‘wandering poets’; discussing them could have added more insight into the transition from Late Antique to Byzantine poetry.

Chapter 2 (‘Epoca di transizione: da Eraclio alla fine dell’iconoclasmo’) focuses on the time from the 7th to the first half of the 9th century. This period was marked by significant challenges, including changed climate, the Arab conquest of the empire’s eastern provinces, and invasions by the Bulgars and Lombards. The chapter is divided into two parts, examining writers before and during iconoclasm. It discusses George of Pisidia, who celebrated Emperor Heraclius’ victories with poetic works, and also mentions Theophylact Simocatta, the anonymous *Chronicon paschale*, and Andrew of Crete, who introduced the ‘canon’ genre of hymnography. The second part looks at writers who opposed iconoclasm, such as Patriarch Germanus I, John of Damascus, and Theodore the Studite, along with the historians Theophanes and Nicephorus. RHOBY concludes with a brief mention of the poetess Cassia and the polymath Leo the Philosopher. The omission of the Studium Monastery’s role in manuscript production is a notable gap, given its importance in preserving Byzantine texts. Despite this, the chapter provides valuable insights into the diversity of Byzantine literature during this transitional period.

Chapter 3 (‘Il periodo d’oro sotto gli imperatori della dinastia macedone’) examines what is considered a ‘golden age’ due to the revival of literary production following the ‘dark’ 7th and 8th centuries. It begins with Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople, who is recognised for his theological, exegetical, and encyclopaedic works. The chapter then discusses the literary contributions of two monarchs: Leo VI, known for his military treatises and poetry, and Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, whose focus on ‘encyclopaedism’ supported the preservation of older Greek literature. RHOBY then moves on to poetry, spotlights John Geometres and Simeon the New Theologian, and wraps up with a discussion of Simeon Metaphrastes.

Chapter 4 (‘Il XI secolo: crisi politica, rinascenza culturale’) surveys a time of political turmoil and cultural efflorescence. It does mention the battle of Manzikert in 1071 and attendant losses of territory to the Turks and Normans, but highlights the vibrant literary scene with prime-quality

writings from authors such as Michael Psellus, celebrated for his versatility. RHOBY focuses on Psellus' historical works and letters, then covers the poets John Mauropous and Christopher of Mytilene, the historical work of Michael Attaleiates, and a book of advice written by one Cecaumenus. He concludes with Theophylact of Ohrid, who represents a transition to the Comnenian era.

Chapter 5 ('L'età dei Comneni: la rinascenza letteraria nel lungo XII secolo (1081–1204)') begins with Anna Comnena, one of the few Byzantine female authors and daughter of Emperor Alexius I. Her *Alexiad* is described as an 'epic poem in prose' (p. 84), which, while celebrating her father's achievements and conquests, also reveals political frustrations and rivalry with her brother John. The latter, according to RHOBY, might explain why Anna omitted any reference to her father's only known work, *Muses*, which was dedicated to her brother (p. 86). The chapter then shifts to other authors serving the imperial court, Euthymius Zigabenus and Simeon Seth, before moving to the reign of John II Comnenus and focusing on Theodore Prodromus, Manganeius Prodromus, John Tzetzes, and Constantine Manasses. RHOBY clarifies that these writers, sometimes labelled 'mendicant poets', were in fact intellectuals serving the court and producing works for the imperial house (p. 88). The chapter also explores 12th-century literature in vernacular Greek, mentioning *Digenis Akritas*, an epic romance often considered as precursor to modern Greek literature. An examination of John Zonaras' historical work, which, RHOBY notes, is often overlooked, leads to discussing other chronographers such as John Cinnamus and Nicetas Choniates, who documented events between Manuel I Comnenus's reign and the Fourth Crusade in 1204. The chapter concludes with Neophytus of Cyprus, illustrating Byzantine literary production outside of Constantinople.

Chapter 6 ('La prima metà del XIII secolo: la letteratura bizantina in esilio') is the book's shortest one, reflecting the limited literary production after the fall of Constantinople in 1204, when the Byzantine Empire's administrative apparatus had relocated to the city of Nicaea in Bithynia. Despite its brevity, the chapter emphasises the unique contributions of the cultural elite residing in that provisional capital, highlighting the roles of local figures such as George Acropolites and Nicephorus Blemmydes in maintaining Byzantine literary traditions during a challenging time.

Chapter 7 ('Dalla restaurazione bizantina fino alla caduta: la letteratura nell'età dei Paleologi') covers the resurgence of literary activities from the

Byzantine recapture of Constantinople in 1261 under Michael VIII Palaeologus to the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453. It focuses on the vibrant literary culture at the court of the Palaeologan emperors, represented by the polymath Maximus Planudes, the orator Theodore Metochites, and the poet Manuel Philes. The chapter also explores literature from other regions, e.g. the Peloponnese where a *Chronicle of Morea* was composed in the spoken Greek of the time. RHOBY then surveys literature from the time of the civil wars between John VI Cantacuzene and John V Palaeologus and from the Empire of Trebizond (focusing on the local historiographer Michael Panaretus). He discusses Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus' religious polemic, noting that a passage from it was controversially quoted by Pope Benedict XVI in 2006, leading to criticism in the Muslim world (pp. 128–129). The chapter concludes by spotlighting the last witnesses to the fall of Constantinople in 1453, demonstrating the resilience of Byzantine literature even as the Empire approached its final moments.

Chapter 8 ('Retrospectiva e Prospettiva') sums up some key themes covered in the book, beginning with the notion that Byzantine literature is a direct continuation of Ancient Greek literature and concluding with the observation that it maintained its unique and enduring influence even after the Fall of Constantinople. RHOBY stresses that Byzantine literature was not merely imitative; it creatively combined elements of antiquity and Christianity with paganism and theology, resulting in something fresh and vibrant. Byzantine literature not only experimented with established literary forms, producing hybrid works that blurred genre boundaries, but also embraced innovation, evident in genres such as hagiography, chronicles, and letter-writing. Moreover, it continued to thrive after 1453, with later works reflecting classical themes and lamenting the end of the Byzantine Empire. Its influence also extended beyond the empire's core, notably influencing the poetic tradition and folk songs of Venetian Crete. This adaptability and enduring impact demonstrate the lasting legacy of Byzantine literature.

RHOBY's subtitle 'a historical profile' ('un profilo storico') stresses the contextualising of Byzantine literature within its broader setting. His book skilfully blends contextual inquiry with literary analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of its subject. Each chapter addresses a specific period, presents detailed biographies of key authors, analyses their works, and discusses recurrent themes – with interesting parallels drawn across different chapters. The inclusion of translated excerpts from select significant works allows readers to connect directly with Byzantine literature. RHOBY should be commended for examining not only a variety of genres but also

literature from various regions across the Byzantine Empire: beyond the central Byzantine territories, his book extends its focus to Cyprus, Epirus, and so on. This inclusive approach enriches the reader's understanding of the cultural and geographical diversity within the empire, offering a more nuanced view of Byzantine literature as a whole.

Despite its many strengths, the book also has some shortcomings. The transitions between authors can be unclear because RHOBY does not always proceed in strict chronological order, occasionally opting for a thematic approach. In Chapter 1, for instance, after presenting the sixth-century historian Malalas, he shifts to the fourth-century church father Chrysostom, before addressing the even earlier historian Eusebius. This can be confusing for readers who prefer a more linear exposition. Another issue is the treatment of technical terms: some are explained in the text or in footnotes (e.g. 'ethopoea' on p. 128) but others remain unclear. Thus, the difference between 'kontakion' and 'canon' in hymnography would have benefited from further discussion. Glossaries or more extensive footnotes would have made the author's terminology easier to understand. RHOBY's ignoring of lesser-known authors was inevitable, but he also omits some significant literary phenomena, such as the compilatory literature (catenae, florilegia, epitomes) that played a key role in preserving patristic writings and some other texts. The book does not adequately stress Byzantium's crucial role in the manuscript transmission of Greek literary works, nor does it sufficiently acknowledge the importance of scribes and monks for the preservation of written knowledge. Given the large number of authors and works mentioned, the lack of brief conclusions at the end of each chapter is unfortunate. Short summaries would have stressed key points and provided smoother transitions; as it is, readers may find it challenging to navigate through the dense material and track the most important information.

In sum, this book is a valuable work of scholarship and a must-have for academic libraries and for the private bookshelves of those interested in Byzantine studies. (Eliminating its gaps and inconsistencies in future editions would make it even more coherent and informative.) RHOBY has provided us with an accessible guide to a vast literary tradition.

Keywords

mediaeval Greek literature