

ANTHONY KALDELLIS, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2024. xxiv + 1133 pp., 8 plates. – ISBN 978-0-197-54932-2 (hardback)

• BORIS TODOROV, Zlatarski International School, Sofia
(boris_todorov@hotmail.com)

Following upon at least eight major monographs and extensive research on variegated topics in its political, ethnic, institutional, cultural and intellectual history, ANTHONY KALDELLIS has produced a magisterial single-volume narrative of what he has elected to refer to as the New Roman Empire and what is usually labelled by academics and general readers Byzantium or Byzantine Empire. KALDELLIS consistently discusses the polity (and not empire) of Romanía (and not Byzantium) whose population were / are Romans. Towards the end of his text (p. 915) he observes that ‘only a few east Romans survive in modern Turkey’.

To those aware of KALDELLIS’ substantial publishing record, his stances that Romanía shall be treated more like a nation-state and not a multiethnic empire, that the Greek-speaking population of the Balkans and Asia Minor were Romans, and not Greeks or even Hellenes, because this is how they identified, are well-known, most recently exposed in his *Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium* (Cambridge MA 2019). Throughout the rich source base of more than a thousand years of historical developments and across the extensive space of the entire Eastern Mediterranean, including Syria and Egypt before the Arab conquest, KALDELLIS finds support for his perspective that all citizens of the polity shared similar identities and kept loyal to their emperor (or if they did not, this requires specific analysis and explanation beyond presumed dividing lines based on territorial, linguistic, or confessional differences). An example in his discussion of the proliferation of Syriac literature (p. 239): ‘Speakers of Aramaic were not thought, either by themselves or by others, to form an ethnic group or nation. They were united and divided by the same passions as other Romans’.

This is a comprehensive and detailed survey of Byzantium from Constantine’s rededication of the City in 330 to its fall to Mehmed the Conqueror, in 1453. The extensive bibliography covers published source material and secondary studies on the many topics the narrative touches upon, with

a clear bias toward recent work. No OSTROGORSKY, OBOLENSKY, or JENKINS in the bibliography; KALDELLIS is not interested in contributing to redundant debates and lines of research that previous generations pursued; he is focused on a succinct, structured, readable, and manageable narrative of the politics of the New Roman Empire away from antiquated claims, approaches, or interpretive schemes. The narrative provides the bare minimum of content on developments outside Romanía such as Sasanian Persia, the growth of early Islam, with an important emphasis on the growth of Norman-ruled polities in southern Italy and beyond, and largely or totally omits traditional themes like the steppe peoples, the immediate neighbors to the north, Kievan Rus', Venice, even the rise of the Ottomans. This is a study of Roman policies, including wars and diplomacy but interested in what and why Romans themselves achieved or mishandled. KALDELLIS reiterates, against stereotypes widely accepted in the field, that the Roman understanding of *oikoumene* keeps to the real-time boundaries of the state and bears no universalist connotations whatsoever. The volume pays due attention to religious controversies, since they were an essential part of domestic policies over the entire course of New Roman history, yet KALDELLIS breaks clearly away from Orthodox (Chalcedonian) paradigms: we do not follow the stages in a struggle against heresies or papal claims for supremacy but observe the dynamic processes behind new or revived clashes, the cultural and intellectual background of participants and multiple occurrences of misunderstanding, incl. on purely linguistic grounds (such as the very formulation of the concept of *nature* [*physis*] in the fifth-century Christological disputes). As in his surveys of cultural production in general, KALDELLIS is meticulous in discerning the nuances between continuity and discontinuity with every new generation, such as, for instance, the consequences of the suppression of pagan intellectual pursuit since Justinian, or the much-later collapse of education in the Empire or Nikaia. On many occasions the well-known heroes in a Christian (or even Chalcedonian) reading of Byzantine history such as Maximos the Confessor or Theodore Stoudites are projected as destructive, intolerant, and even aberrant agents of conflict and division. KALDELLIS falls in line with scholarship of the previous generation on western heresies, like ROBERT I. MOORE or CARLO GINZBURG, in that he sees opposition movements in the development of Christianity – Monophysites, Nestorians (the latter he avoids actually labelling at all) – more as the product of the negative perspective of their enemies than as consistent, self-conscious traditions. This is made particularly salient on the topic of icono-

clasm. Throughout the survey, from Constantine up to the last Palaiologoi, KALDELLIS emphasizes the role of the emperor in raising the theological issues of the day and providing for possible solutions, always in search for unity and agreement between diverging schools of Christian thought and the social groups behind them.

Emperors are the true heroes and, in the last section dealing with the late Palaiologoi, villains of Roman history. The narrative carefully assesses their financial and institutional resources and unravels their political agendas behind the prejudice of the extant narrative source material. KALDELLIS is typically critical of sensationalist narrative lines, such as the rise of Basileios I or of Tzimiskes, and prefers to see the elevation of new *basileis* as the ever-renewed compromise between the different stakeholders in the political process – court, army, Senate, Church, bureaucracy, people. Of all rulers of the New Roman Empire, it seems Anastasios is portrayed as the best example how one accedes to the supreme authority not on account of personal power, charisma, ambition, or networking but for the sake of public good. Between the lines of critical, even hostile narratives extolling sins, crimes and heresy, KALDELLIS deciphers consistent politics of using available resources for the common benefit of citizens in Constantinople and the provinces alike. Throughout the entire course of Romanía's history, the main instruments of imperial power remain legislation, jurisprudence and taxation. Readers are introduced, matter-of-factly, to the principles of legislation under Constantine and his heirs, under Justinian, under the Isaurian and then the Macedonian dynasties. The author consistently brings, whenever possible, evidence as to the real-time financial resources of the empire (an intriguing appendix on pp. 919–920 is a table of all attested tributes by the empire to foreign powers like the Huns, Avars, Persians, etc.) and evaluates the successes and failures of emperors' acts against the background of economic realities. It is only during the very last century of collapsing Roman power – the Palaiologoi after Kantakouzenos' civil wars – that the *basileis* practically renounced these instruments on account of the shrunken taxable assets. Yet KALDELLIS refuses to see any trace of feudalization similar to Latin Europe's, even under the Komnenoi, emphasizing the tax-related stature of the *pronoia* and the unshakeable prerogative of the monarch to tax land and people.

KALDELLIS somewhat strangely omits to evaluate the rise of the power that brought Romanía to destruction – the Turks and specifically the Ottomans. There is no tangible attempt to provide an assessment of the centuries of Turkic takeover of Asia Minor, any steps, or lack thereof, towards

accommodation between the Roman population of the eastern provinces and either Islam or pastoralism. The Christian population either emigrated to Constantinople and the Balkans or converted to Islam, or simply fell under the radar: they ceased to be Roman and dropped off the narrative. To the contrary, there is a consistent thread in providing critical analysis of the growth of the Norman principalities in southern Italy and objectifying the Normans and Franks – Robert Guiscard, Bohemond, then Charles of Anjou – as colonialist thugs who disrupted the legal and administrative framework of Romanía in a manner reminiscent of the later colonial expansion towards other continents. The shrinking and ultimate collapse of the Roman Empire resulted from the gradual entanglement of its agriculture-based economy with the expanding colonial-trade networks of the Italian cities, which tipped the balance of the empire’s budget and made it impossible for emperors to efficiently tax, administer and defend their polity. Since no Balkan power – Bulgaria, Serbia, Pechenegs, Vlachs, Cumans, etc. – was ever in a similar position, the narrative rarely deals with the northern neighbors. Even less is the author interested in the presumed, and probably exaggerated, importance of ethnic or religious (or both) minorities in Romanía: for KALDELLIS it was rarely a true empire anyway, apart from the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Cultural developments are covered with notices of notable works of art (altogether the book contains 67 images of buildings, monuments and various artefacts, all of them referring to specific passages in the text) yet people interested in Byzantine art, literature and intellectual traditions shall need to look in other places. Still, KALDELLIS has produced valuable research on intellectual history as well and this shows in inspiring analyses of the *Zeitgeist* of different periods with writers, such as Psellos, Metochites or Theodore II Laskaris placed within carefully outlined contexts of personal connections, text transmission and philosophical exchange. A very important narrative thread in the chapters dealing with the late antique period is always accounting for the mostly silent yet real majority (and perhaps only in the fifth century – minority) of pagans (*hellenes*) not only in the cultural creativity and exchanges of the period, but in state administration, diplomacy, and military leadership as well.

The book will be of use for general readers interested in the long history of Romanía (Byzantium) and will provide them with crisp analysis of different periods along concepts of statehood, administration, legislation, citizenship, taxation, loyalty, consensus, etc. The narrative of wars with some foreign powers – Persians, Arabs, Goths, Normans – is extensive, a little

too detailed for people just getting acquainted with Byzantine matters. The different chapters consistently follow developments in Italy, which is atypical for other general Byzantine surveys. A few, but rich, pages are devoted to the oft-disregarded Empire of Trebizond. The 21 maps by IAN MLADJOV are clear and mutually complementary. Yet, little will be learned about interactions with pastoral communities – Huns, Avars, Bulgars or Turks. Regarding under- and post-graduate studies in the Byzantine field, the book will have to fight its way against OSTROGORSKY's master narrative, or TREADGOLD's, or more compact surveys, for the simple reason that it clearly dismisses the very concept of 'Byzantine' and skips over themes that Byzantinists typically like: theological controversy, monasticism, art, the supranational *oikoumene*, ethnic diversity (specifically the Armenian connection), and last but not least – scandals, intrigue, and Byzantine perfidy.

Keywords

East Roman Empire; Byzantine Empire