

TOBY BROMIGE, *Armenians in the Byzantine Empire: Identity, Assimilation and Alienation from 867 to 1098*. London: I. B. Tauris 2023. 208 pp. – ISBN 978-0-7556-4242-7

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This monograph is based on the author’s doctoral thesis completed in 2019 at Royal Holloway, University of London. Its aim, as stated in the introduction, is ‘to explore the development of the Byzantine-Armenian relationship during the period c. 850–1100, mainly from an internal standpoint of Armenians operating within the Byzantine Empire’ (pp. 1–2). To this end, Bromige proposes an analytical model of the Byzantine-Armenian relationship as a sequence of phases, each assigned a distinct timeframe and associated with general tendencies (assimilation, annexation, alienation, and separatism). The study understands this relationship rather narrowly, as one between Armenian nobility and Byzantine state institutions, largely leaving beyond its scope questions of social, economic, and cultural history. The author’s source base, accordingly, is limited to major chronicles, administrative, legal, and military treatises, as well as seals.

The book opens with a brief overview of the scholarship on the topic of Armenians in the Byzantine Empire and the problem of identity. BROMIGE opposes the ethnocentric perspective advanced by PETER CHARANIS and other scholars who insisted on the ‘Greekness’ of the Byzantines and hence on the Armenians’ inherent inability to assimilate. Instead, citing mainly ANTHONY KALDELLIS, he adopts the view of the Byzantines as Romans, their ‘Romanness’ defined as a set of institutions, administrative and cultural practices, into which one could be assimilated regardless of one’s ethnic and linguistic background. BROMIGE also embraces KALDELLIS’s critique of the tendency displayed by many Armenologists to assume that ‘Armenian identity was propagated genetically’ and to project modern understandings of national identity onto terminology used in medieval sources (pp. 6–7). The underlying premise of the book is that to understand the evolving relationship of the Byzantine Empire and Armenians, one must focus on Armenian participation in Byzantine institutions and cultural practices instead of getting caught up in interpreting the problematic ethnic labels used in Byzantine and Armenian sources. That said, BROMIGE also

underlines that the ‘Armenians’ studied in his book – and hence all his conclusions about their identity and levels of assimilation – are confined to members of Armenian aristocracy whose names, actions, and voices are preserved in written sources (p. 18).

Chapter 1, ‘Armenian Assimilation in Action, c. AD 867–1000’, focuses on the first phase of the model proposed by the author – the assimilation – and the period when assimilatory tendencies were arguably most pronounced. The chapter polemicizes against the historiographical tradition that viewed Armenian assimilation as superficial or incomplete. To offer a more nuanced and dynamic view of assimilation which could account for heterogeneity of Armenians’ experiences, BROMIGE proposes understanding the mechanics of assimilation through several factors: the geography of Armenians’ settlement within the empire, Armenians’ adoption of ‘Roman customs’, Armenians’ integration in Byzantine administrative and military institutions and inclusion in Byzantine nobility ranks, and finally religious conversion and conformity. The chapter is divided into subsections devoted to each of these topics. Examining geography of Armenian settlement in the Empire, BROMIGE concludes that geographical factors significantly influenced the speed and extent of assimilation: Armenians who settled close to Constantinople assimilated more quickly than those in the eastern provinces. In or near the capital, one was quick to adopt ‘Roman customs’, which BROMIGE defines as ‘sharing the behaviour of other Byzantine nobles’ (p. 28) and developing a keen understanding of Byzantine political ideology and loyalty structures. BROMIGE bases this observation on his examination of the careers of several Armenian noblemen in Constantinople in the late ninth and tenth centuries (Constantine the Patrician, Melias the Great, the Taronite princes Grigor and Bagrat, and Ashot Taronites). Along with serving the imperial court, individuals – and more often whole families – of Armenian background came to occupy key positions in the Byzantine army during the ninth and tenth centuries. Drawing on evidence from chronicles, a military manual, ceremonial and administrative treatises (*De Ceremoniis* and *De Administrando Imperio*), and sigillography, BROMIGE supports his argument with case studies of several families and individuals (the Skleroi, the Phokades, the Lekapenoi, the Kourkouai, and other lesser-known families and individuals). Finally, turning to the issue of religious conversion, BROMIGE contends that the ninth and tenth centuries were characterized by a high level of tolerance on the part of the imperial Orthodox Church towards Apostolic Armenians. The chapter refutes the idea that religious conversion was a prerequisite for

cultural/political assimilation, arguing instead that many Armenians maintained their faith while engaging with Byzantine institutions. BROMIGE contends that geography, rather than a specific Byzantine policy, played the key role in the tendencies of religious conversion: in the west, due to the proximity to the imperial capital and demographics, ‘the migrants simply merged with the Orthodox majority’ (p. 39), while in the east the situation was just the opposite, as Armenian bishoprics quickly expanded following the Byzantine policy to settle Armenians in depopulated borderlands taken by conquest from Muslims.

Chapter 2, ‘The Byzantine Annexations of Armenia, 1000–1064: Ideology and Opportunism?’, shifts the focus to the first half of the eleventh century, arguing that this period represents a new phase in Byzantine-Armenian relations, defined by Byzantium’s direct annexation of Armenian territories along the empire’s eastern frontier. The chapter examines the political and military contexts of a series of agreements concluded between Byzantine emperors and Armenian princely families, following which Armenians surrendered to the empire Ani and Vaspurakan, and later Edessa and Kars, in exchange for noble titles and estates in Cappadocia and in the region of Sebasteia. While acknowledging that available narrative sources provide only minimal information about these ‘exchange’ agreements themselves, about the migrations of Armenians, and about the fates of Armenian migrant populations in Cappadocia, the author adopts a confident position when interpreting the evidence. He refutes the historiographical tradition that saw Byzantium’s annexation of Armenian territories as part of a grand imperial strategy, polemicizing against GEORGE OSTROGORSKY and NINA GARSOÏAN who, in the author’s view unjustly, painted Byzantium as ‘a typical expansionist imperialist state’ (p. 48). Rather, BROMIGE argues, Basil II’s intervention in the Caucasus must be understood in the context of particular events and viewed as a pragmatic move motivated by his desire to halt Georgian expansion in the region of Tao/Tayk’, to undermine the power of magnates on Byzantium’s eastern frontier, and to populate ‘problematic’ regions with immigrants connected by personal ties of loyalty to the emperor. The chapter’s second contention is that the annexations project, while politically successful for the empire in the short term, had unexpected consequences in the long term: the bonds of loyalty between Armenian migrants and Basil II, which were personal rather than institutional, dissipated soon after the emperor’s death, creating fertile grounds for growing alienation and discontent among the migrant population.

Chapter 3, ‘The alienation of the Armenians, c. 1020–1071’, overlaps with Chapter 2 in its chronological focus but shifts the attention from the annexations themselves to political and cultural processes that contributed to the ‘alienation’ of the Armenians in the period following the annexations. BROMIDGE argues that the established patterns of migration and assimilation discussed in Chapter 1 started to break down in the eleventh century, and seeks to explain why this happened. Religious antagonism played a significant role in the process, as the more oppressive stance taken by the imperial Church vis-à-vis the Armenian Apostolic Church engendered resentment among Armenians and solidified lines of religious division. In the climate of religious antagonism and persecution, which culminated in the imprisonment of the leaders of the Armenian Church (Catholicoi Peter and Khach‘ik), former patterns of cultural assimilation whereby members of Armenian nobility could be both Armenian and Roman regardless of their religious identity were no longer tenable. BROMIDGE argues, however, that religious antagonism, while significant, was not the main cause of growing alienation of the Armenian nobility in the empire. The main reason, he contends, was in the ‘actions and ideologies’ (p. 73) of some of the migrant ‘Royal Armenians’ – like Abusahl and Atom Artsruni, or Gagik II of Ani – who grew increasingly distrustful of the imperial court and developed alternative loyalties. While available sources do not allow BROMIDGE to understand the workings of Gagik’s political success, he observes that when Gagik arrived in Cappadocia in the 1060s, the local Armenian nobility clearly perceived him, and not the Byzantine emperor, as their leader. The chapter concludes that by the time of the Byzantine defeat at Manzikert (1071), the ground for Byzantine ‘separatism’ of the late eleventh century was already well prepared. Hence, what happened after Manzikert was not simply a consequence of Byzantium’s military defeat but rather an outcome of processes that had been gaining pace for decades.

Finally, Chapter 4, ‘Separatism, 1071–1098’, turns to what BROMIDGE defines as the ‘final destination’ (p. 101) of the Byzantine-Armenian relationship. The chapter examines the fate of the Armenian nobility active along Byzantium’s eastern frontier in the decades after the Battle of Manzikert. Following the disintegration of imperial authority, these Byzantine-Armenians who once served the empire quickly transformed into warlords operating within local and regional loyalty networks completely independent of Constantinople. To illustrate this transformation, the chapter zooms in on the career of Philaretos Brachamios – a Byzantine general who became *de facto* ruler of the region of Cilicia and northern Syria and engaged

in diplomacy both with Byzantium and neighboring Muslim polities not as an imperial agent but as independent princeling. The chapter shows that the career of Philaretos was not an exception but rather a manifestation of a new political reality, and Philaretos was one of many ‘post-Byzantine’ Armenian lords who competed for power in the region. The authority within the Armenian Church followed the same pattern of fragmentation, with several *Catholicoi* competing for authority in the environment of ephemeral political structures and personal alliances. Concluding the chapter, BROMIGE reaches the final chronological point of the study: the arrival of the First Crusade in 1098, which he views as the end of the story of the Byzantine-Armenian relationship investigated in the monograph. The intervention of the crusaders would create conditions for a new Armenian state to be formed out of the fragmented world of warlords. This state, however, would be politically independent of the Byzantine Empire and does not form part of BROMIGE’s story.

The analytical model around which the narrative of the book is built is simultaneously compelling and problematic. The author takes up a challenging task: to inscribe extremely complex, fragmentary, and contradictory source material pertaining to Byzantine-Armenian relations into a simplified model and a coherent chronological narrative. The result is at first glance attractive: the book does offer the readers a synthesis of a wide array of sources and a very accessible conceptual framework. Yet, as almost any study based on a model, *Armenians in the Byzantine Empire* inevitably succumbs to the risk of imposing convenient interpretations onto sources or picking convenient sources to fit the model – at the expense problems and inconsistencies. Thus, for instance, while BROMIGE concedes that the sources concerning the fate of Armenian migrants in Cappadocia and Sebasteia are extremely limited and fragmentary, he nonetheless proceeds to make confident conclusions about the nature and the causes of the ‘alienation’ experienced by migrant populations and their leaders. Experts may find themselves troubled by the book’s generalizations, if not outright teleology (e.g. ‘separatism’ as ‘the final destination’ of Armenian-Byzantine relationship). The book may find more receptive readers in non-specialists who, to the contrary, will be appreciative of generalizations and the easy flow of the narrative. It is, therefore, unfortunate that the author has chosen to adopt a very narrow understanding of the Byzantine-Armenian relationship and to structure his narrative around political and military history. Had *Armenians in the Byzantine Empire* also touched upon aspects of social and economic history, archaeology and environmental history, history

of art and architecture, as well as literature and philology – fields which along with political history have produced much scholarship relevant to the history of Armenian populations within the Byzantine Empire and along Byzantium’s eastern frontier – it could attract a much wider readership of non-specialists.

As a study meant to bridge distinct historical and historiographical traditions, *Armenians in the Byzantine Empire* faces the challenge of integrating multiple perspectives and making clear one’s own position and limitations. While the author does not discuss it explicitly in the introduction, his ‘Byzantinist bias’ makes itself strongly felt throughout the book. Occasionally, the choice of words suggests that, whether intentionally or not, the author adopts the perspective of the empire as his own and identifies with the empire’s interests. Thus, he often finds himself evaluating the success of certain policies, sometimes explicitly expressing his approval or disapproval (e.g. ‘the response of the imperial centre [...] contributed to their biggest mistake’ p. 67, ‘the original thinking on Basil’s part should be lauded’ p. 71, ‘Gagik’s imprisonment in Constantinople in 1045 [...] was a very stupid move’ p. 71). The perceived ‘Byzantinist bias’ also becomes apparent in the author’s treatment of primary and secondary sources. While quotations from Greek-language texts are very helpfully provided in the original in the endnotes, this is not the case with Armenian ones. Armenian source editions are cited, but the author seems to have fully relied on English and French translations. There are inconsistencies and mistakes in the transliteration of Armenian personal names (e.g. Khachik p. 85 vs. Xacik p. 111 vs. Xaç’ik p. 40, Senek’erim instead of Senek’erim throughout the book), which likely stems from the fact that the author followed transliteration conventions used in translations but makes an impression of insufficient attention having been given to Armenian source material. The same concerns secondary sources in Armenian. The topics of Chalcedonian Armenians, Armenian nobility in the service of the Byzantine state, and Armenian-Byzantine frontier have received much attention from Armenian and Soviet scholars. Sadly (probably due to language limitations) *Armenians in the Byzantine Empire* does not engage with or even simply acknowledge the contribution of this scholarship, and not a single work in Armenian or Russian is included in the bibliography.

Finally, it is a pity that the detailed and helpful discussion of the sources and historiography, which comprises most of the introductory chapter of the dissertation, is severely abridged in the published book. Given that, apart from the introductory chapter, the contents of the dissertation and the

book are almost identical, non-specialist readers not already familiar with historiography and the sources might find it easier to read the dissertation rather than the book.

Keywords

Armeno-Byzantine relations; medieval ethnicity; migration; assimilation