

FOTINI KONDYLI, *Rural Communities in Late Byzantium: Resilience and Vulnerability in the Northern Aegean*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2022. 302 pp. – ISBN 978-1-10-884549-6

- PAVEL MURDZHEV, Santa Fe College (pavel.murdzhev@sfccollege.edu)

Based on archaeological evidence, archival material, and ethnographic research, FOTINI KONDYLI's *Rural Communities in Late Byzantium* offers a comprehensive study of late medieval villages on the Aegean islands of Thasos and Lemnos. Continuity is fundamental to KONDYLI's view of rural communities as multi-temporal sites. Rather than focusing on the desertion and decline that affected Lemnos and Thasos, she highlights strategies that enabled the islanders' survival through the disastrous 14th and 15th centuries. Her study contends that non-elite communities can not only adapt and become resilient in the face of crises and sudden change; they can also effectively prompt action from political authorities. Resilience, a key concept in KONDYLI's thesis, is defined as 'the ability to cope with adversity, learn from past experiences, and create new conditions' (p. 20). The historical invisibility of ordinary people is not an exclusive problem of Byzantine studies, since it reflects the nature of available historical evidence. Traditional top-down approaches to medieval social and spatial organization often prioritize socioeconomic and political structures relevant to state functioning and elite interests in production and surplus extraction. Despite this, KONDYLI successfully reconstructs the history of non-elite rural communities through archaeological finds from numerous late Byzantine sites, through monastic documents, and through ethnographic studies of early modern villages.

Although the late Byzantine village did not function as a collective economic unit, KONDYLI approaches it as a community bound together by inherent social ties. Strategies for coping with crises and changes were often influenced by social affiliations, collective representation in disputes with landowners, collaborations among villagers, and links with religious foundations.

KONDYLI explains in the Introduction and in Chapter 1 that her decision to focus on the rural communities of Lemnos and Thasos was motivated by her personal connection to the Greek countryside and by the two islands' unique geography. She describes these as 'ideal desertscapes, exposed to the calamities of the 14th and 15th centuries, isolated from the

rest of the empire, ravaged by enemy and pirate attacks, and devastated by poverty, harsh weather, and plague' (p. 23). Consequently, Lemnos and Thasos serve as an exemplary case study for examining how global changes – the Latin domination, Byzantine reconquest, Ottoman invasion, Bubonic Plague, and so on – prompted responses from the local communities.

Chapter 2 offers an in-depth analysis of Late Byzantine villages on Lemnos and Thasos, examining the interactions among *paroikoi*, *pronoia*-holders, monks and nuns, large landowners, and state authorities, all of whom played active roles in the rural landscape. KONDYLI emphasizes the diversity within communities in terms of economic activity, networks, and social and political identities. This challenges the notion of rural society as uniform and cohesive. It was precisely diversity, KONDYLI argues, that allowed communities to develop – both within and beyond the respective settlements – economic and social networks which could be mobilized and adapted in times of crisis.

Chapter 3 is crucial to KONDYLI's main thesis, as it examines how rural communities employed specific strategies in order to cope with economic and demographic change. The chapter begins by analyzing archaeological data on spatial organization and settlement patterns at several sites in Lemnos (Kotzinos, Moudros, and Myrina) and Thasos (Kake Rache, Theologos, Melissa, and Kastro). KONDYLI shows that decisions regarding settlement geography – such as relocating, constructing fortifications, churches, and cisterns, and accessing trade networks and economic resources – were central to communal strategies of response to economic and military crises. On Thasos, shifts in habitation patterns were tied to the island's overall defense strategy: the abandonment of coastal fortifications (excluding Limenas) and the shifting of the defense line inland, near diverse microenvironments, reflect the concentration of Late Byzantine villages and monastic estates. Whether this shift was driven by local economic activities or was part of a broader Byzantine defense strategy remains uncertain. The situation is even more ambiguous on Lemnos, where 'old capitals were not abandoned but coexisted and competed with new economic and political centers that were accessible by sea and well defended' (p. 88).

The second part of Chapter 3 examines peasants before and after the Black Death to illustrate their adaptability to new economic and demographic conditions, and even their skill at benefiting from a demographic crisis. On the basis of monastic records, KONDYLI interprets the mobility of *paroikoi* within and beyond village communities as a form of 'voting with their feet',

which can be understood as both economic and political response to unfavorable conditions. To further explore the mechanisms of community-building – an essential component of resilience – the author emphasizes the importance of social ties formed through daily interactions, collaboration, shared knowledge, and collective responsibility.

Chapter 4 looks at community-building and the struggle for survival through the prism of defense mechanisms that relied both on heavenly protection and on strong fortifications. By studying the location of relevant buildings on both Lemnos and Thasos, their multiple functions, and relation to other sites, KONDYLI argues that they formed part of a complex defensive landscape requiring the direct and active participation of rural communities and their collaboration with lay and religious authorities. The islands' defense was a multi-agent participatory endeavor that contributed to the cohesion of rural communities. While churches ensured divine protection and strengthened the islanders' confidence, building and manning of fortifications made protection visible on a monumental scale and forged local identities and common interests. Churches and fortresses became symbols of collective action, local pride, and solidarity in times of need. They reflect communities' daily lives, experiences, and modes of self-representation.

Chapter 5 delves deeper into the social mechanisms of community-building, exploring how rural landscape informed shared experiences, spatial practices, symbolism, and collective memories that strengthened social networks. KONDYLI's detailed analysis and mapping of these networks reveal diverse socioeconomic relations within and beyond the village, stressing that certain individuals served as 'bridges' to the outer world. A large portion of this chapter examines collective memory of the past as a crucial element in community-building. For example, KONDYLI explores the use of spolia in Late Byzantine fortifications and churches, viewing spoliation as expressing renewed interest in antiquity, nostalgia, and hope for a brighter future. On both Lemnos and Thasos, ancient and Early Byzantine columns were often repurposed in iconostases or as doorjambs and lintels, while column drums and marble reliefs adorned church façades. Imperial inscriptions also contributed to the construction of collective memory. KONDYLI argues that they should be seen as more than mere symbols of imperial presence and power. Inscriptions were visual markers that fostered loyalty and represented the authority of the imperial office as a whole – an authority that transcended any particular dynasty and harked back to the first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great.

In her final chapter, the author reflects on resilience and explores how this concept can reshape our understanding of the roles different social groups play in managing crises and how it highlights the non-elite groups often underrepresented in historical narratives. While most historical knowledge about the Late Byzantine period is based on mainland examples such as Constantinople, Macedonia, Asia Minor, and the Peloponnese, a focus on island communities provides valuable new insights into Byzantine society during times of crisis.

FOTINI KONDYLI has undeniably made a significant methodological contribution with her integrated approach to Byzantine history, which combines archival documents, archaeological finds, and ethnographic data. Her book highlights the importance of non-elite mentalities and perspectives for historical research. It also reveals some surprising parallels with contemporary responses to crisis.

**Keywords**

landscape archaeology; late Byzantine social history; Byzantine villages