
CHRISTOS MALATRAS, *Social Stratification in Late Byzantium* (Edinburgh Byzantine Studies). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023. 608 pp., 12 b/w ill., 29 b/w tables. – ISBN 978-1-474-46088-0

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CHRISTOS MALATRAS' book is a revised version of his doctoral thesis on 'Social structure and relations in fourteenth-century Byzantium' completed under the supervision of RUTH MACRIDES and submitted to the University of Birmingham in 2013. Its first part examines the various forms and criteria of social organisation in the Byzantine Empire in the late period (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries); the second one focuses on two case studies, the society of the city of Serres in the fourteenth century and that of Constantinople in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

MALATRAS outlines in great detail the way in which society was structured during the last two centuries of Byzantine history. On the basis of texts from the period, he proposes a model based on the traditional notions of *taxis* (order) and hierarchy. These were reflected in many aspects of Byzantine life: access to the court, access to certain offices, behaviour, and even the way people dressed or spoke (pp. 50–58). A set of visual or performative codes allowed Byzantines to signal their status and place in society. Many principles and foundations of social structure and hierarchy are not specific to late Byzantium but go back to earlier centuries: MALATRAS points out that the old system of titles and offices was maintained in the Palaeologan period and, together with epithets, qualified one for membership of a social elite that we usually label 'aristocracy' (pp. 81–85; MALATRAS notes the difference from 'nobility', which is determined solely by birth and lineage: pp. 85–88). Wealth was equally essential for being part of the highest social stratum. A very heterogeneous group categorized as 'archons' dominated society as a whole. Certain intellectuals or clerics could belong to this category by virtue of their charisma or social prestige and through exercising some form of authority (pp. 103–106).

MALATRAS draws attention to various ceremonies, often codified in manuals such as that of Pseudo-Kodinos, as well as other more or less informal rituals that reflected hierarchy: bowing to a superior, using certain vocabulary, remaining on horseback, and so on (pp. 58–66). For the Byzantines,

the implications of such conduct went far beyond the purely formal, since it could also have far-reaching political consequences. Regrettably, MALATRAS makes almost no reference to one of the most important and significant rituals of the Palaeologan period: the oath. ÉVELYNE PATLAGEAN has already pointed out in *Un Moyen Âge grec: Byzance, IX^e–XV^e siècle* (Paris 2007) that oaths became an essential element in the articulation of Byzantine society, particularly within the elite, and in the relations of domination. Whether individual or collective, an oath was inextricably linked to the way in which Byzantium's aristocratic elite forged its clientelistic networks. Oaths thus shaped the real political factions that determined the internal life of the empire during the Palaeologan centuries.

The extreme diversity that characterises Byzantine society is an aspect often neglected by historians who tend to present a rather monolithic picture of its dominant group. MALATRAS, on the other hand, devotes a great deal of attention to it, analysing in detail different levels within the aristocracy (pp. 129–153). He stresses a very clear distinction between the great families of the imperial aristocracy and those, for example, of the much more modest provincial one. The author speaks of a functional difference based on careers and offices: ecclesiastical positions, for example, were often the prerogative of a middle rather than the high aristocracy (pp. 141–142). Landed property and other forms of wealth were also essential elements of social stratification, but only as sources of income and not as elements of prestige, since a great landowner exercised no jurisdiction (p. 98; I will return to this issue below). However, MALATRAS does not pay enough attention the role of kinship, especially kinship with the imperial dynasty, which remained a fundamental element in articulating the dominant group in the Palaeologan period: narrative sources such as Cantacuzenus' *Histoires* place enormous emphasis on blood ties with the emperor.¹ This model stems directly from the system established by the Comnenes at the end of the eleventh century, which made the imperial dynasty the backbone of the state. For contemporaries, there was a real 'biological boundary' between those related to the emperor and the rest of the aristocracy: only marriage to an imperial princess allowed a very small number of people to enter a

1. See for example LUDWIG SCHOPEN (ed.), *Ioannis Cantacuzeni eximperatoris historiarum libri IV*, vol. 1, Bonn 1828, p. 117: at the beginning of the Second Civil War, Emperor Andronicus II felt insulted by his grandson, Andronicus III, because the latter had sent Alexius Apocaucus instead of an imperial relative to negotiate peace.

second circle made up of ‘relatives by marriage’.² Most provincial or local notables remained below these two levels.

In the Palaeologan period, certain merchants and businessmen come to occupy top positions in the empire’s administration, an area traditionally reserved for members of the highest aristocracy. MALATRAS examines these groups (pp. 153–167) but does not conclude that there was any change in the social structure of the empire and thus, in power relations: an earlier article of his denies that confrontation between the old aristocracy and the group of merchants and businessmen could have provoked internal conflicts.³ While MALATRAS alludes to the rising power of this latter group, he does not recognise a political role for it. In fact the old aristocracy did not completely lose its influence, but the collapse of agricultural incomes and the state’s loss of territories led to its ruin and decline.

MALATRAS pays little attention to the profound changes that took place in the late Byzantine countryside. His conclusion regarding the absence of peasant revolts during this period is particularly noteworthy, as he attributes it to a certain degree of prosperity and to the maintenance of agricultural incomes (pp. 75–79). However, an analysis of the sources, in particular of documentation preserved in the archives of Mount Athos, shows that falling agricultural yields led to massive sale of land (which explains the stability, if not fall, in its prices) and worsened the situation of the peasantry.⁴ These changes were also closely linked to the impoverishment of *pronoia*-holders and to the First Civil War (1321–1328), which, just like Second Civil War (1341–1347), had deeper causes than a simple clash between aristocratic factions.⁵

MALATRAS’ reconstruction of economic and social relations in the rural world, and consequently of the main sources of wealth in society, is highly questionable. While here is not the place to go into all the arguments in

2. MALATRAS does not see such matrimonial alliances as a mechanism for social advancement: see pp. 109–110.

3. CHRISTOS MALATRAS, The ‘Social Aspects’ of the Second Civil War (1341–1354). In: MARIE-HÉLÈNE CONGOURDEAU (ed.), *Thessalonique au temps des Zélotes (1342–1350)* (Centre de recherche d’Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance. Monographies 42). Paris 2014, pp. 99–116.

4. On this question see RAÚL ESTANGÜI GÓMEZ, *Byzance face aux Ottomans : exercice du pouvoir et contrôle du territoire sous les derniers paléologues (milieu XIV^e – milieu XV^e siècle)* (Byzantina Sorbonensia 28). Paris 2014, pp. 27–37 (with bibliography).

5. On the causes of the first civil war, see the always stimulating reflections of KLAUS-PETER MATSCHKE, *Fortschritt und Reaktion in Byzanz im 14. Jahrhundert* (Berliner byzantinistische Arbeiten 42). Berlin 1971, pp. 47–49.

detail, his definition of *pronoia* or *oikonomia* as a grant of land or property and the peasants who are to exploit it must be rejected out of hand (cf. pp. 167–168). *Oikonomia* is simply a grant of taxes and not of property: it is true that receipt of property tax gave one access to a concrete source of income, for example land, but it did not grant full ownership (it is simply a transfer of taxes). In the same way, the ‘concession de parèques’ only involved the transfer of the taxes they would normally have paid to the tax authorities. I have had occasion to describe the different types of *paroikoi* elsewhere.⁶

This difficulty in understanding the functioning of Byzantine taxation and land tenure prevents us from grasping the true nature of aristocratic wealth. It also leads to erroneous conclusions about the relationship between the emperor and the dominant group, and even about the role of the latter in the functioning of the state. What is more, MALATRAS returns to the old thesis of Ottoman influence on Byzantine taxation at the end of the period (p. 184), a thesis that has long been debated and against which he offers no new arguments.⁷

According to MALATRAS, the absence of stable collective structures capable of representing the middle and lower segments of the population made it impossible to provide a political response to the crisis which the empire was experiencing at the time. He writes that ‘the middle classes could not profit socially – either as pressure groups or through professional associations – from the empire’s transformation into a sort of Constantinopolitan “city-state”, as most of its hinterland was lost in the late fourteenth century’ (p. 274). The author argues that political power always remained in the hands of the upper stratum, the archons. However, several historians have already shown the profound changes that took place within this dominant group during the last century of the empire as a result of the emergence of the entrepreneurs and businessmen to whom we have already alluded: some of this new political elite came from the former provincial aristocratic circles and others, from territories that were no longer under Byzantine rule.⁸

6. RAÚL ESTANGÜI GÓMEZ, Richesses et propriété paysannes à Byzance (XI^e–XIV^e siècle). In : OLIVIER DELOUIS – SOPHIE MÉTIVIER – PAUL PAGÈS (eds.), *Le saint, le moine et le paysan. Mélanges offerts à Michel Kaplan* (Byzantina Sorbonensia 29). Paris 2016, pp. 171–212 ; RAÚL ESTANGÜI GÓMEZ – MICHEL KAPLAN, *La société rurale au XI^e siècle : une réévaluation*. Travaux et Mémoires 21/2 (2017) pp. 531–560.

7. On this issue see ESTANGÜI GÓMEZ, *Byzance face aux Ottomans*, pp. 456–484 (with bibliography).

8. See, for example, THIERRY GANCHOU, *La famille Koumousès (Κουμούσης) à*

As for the functioning of the state, MALATRAS acknowledges a certain solidity till the mid-fourteenth century, but note that gradual fragmentation and lack of consensus that eventually undermined its foundations. Once again it seems to me that the author does not make sufficient use of the vast bibliography that has been produced on the subject in recent years, and that he is working from a point of view that is now considerably out of date.⁹

As said at the beginning, the last two chapters deal with two case studies: the society of a provincial town, Serres, and that of the capital at the end of the fourteenth century. Each example is based on a particularly rich corpus of primary sources: the Codex B of the Monastery of Saint John Prodromus near Serres and the Synodal Register of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The conclusions reached confirm many of the features mentioned by the author above, although the same problems remain regarding the nature of the tax concessions and the status of the peasantry, which underlies the whole question of the nature of the bonds of domination and aristocratic wealth. In studying Constantinopolitan society at the end of the 14th century, MALATRAS notes the rise of merchant and business families such as the Notaras and the Goudeles. He even goes so far as to suggest that some of these individuals became rich through the blockade and the black market. Politically, he considers this new aristocracy to be more autonomous, as it was less dependent on emperor's privileges in order to enrich itself. However, representatives of the old families remained in the emperor's entourage, supporting him and still occupying high positions in the administration (pp. 426–427). This question has recently been addressed by TONIA KIOUSOPOULOU and THIERRY GANCHOU in works that MALATRAS does not mention often enough,¹⁰ but it is a subject that still requires further in-depth research.

Despite the limitations outlined above, MALATRAS' work forms an impor-

Constantinople et Négrepont, avant et après 1453. In : CHRYSA MALTEZOU – CHRISTINA PAPAΚOSTA (eds), Βενετία – Εύβοια. Από τον Έγριπο στο Νεγροπόντε (Istituto Ellenico di Studi Bizantini e Postbizantini di Venezia 10). Venice 2006, pp. 45–107.

9. The literature on this subject has multiplied in recent years: apart from my book *Byzance face aux Ottomans*, see more recently MARIE-HÉLÈNE BLANCHET – RAÚL ESTANGÜI GÓMEZ, *L'Empire byzantin sous les Paléologues, entre déclin et ruine : révision en six étapes d'un legs historiographique ancien*. Travaux et Mémoires 25/1 (2021) pp. 7–85, here pp. 61–74 (with bibliography).

10. TONIA KIOUSOPOULOU, Βασιλεύς ή οικονομός: Πολιτική εξουσία και ιδεολογία πριν την Άλωση. Athens 2007, is cited in the general bibliography but not in this chapter; see also THIERRY GANCHOU, Nikolaos Notaras, μέσενγος τὸν Αὐσονῶν, et le μέσastikion à Byzance au XV^e siècle. *Bizantinistica* 14 (2012) pp. 151–181.

tant contribution to our knowledge of Palaeologan society, both in terms of its method and its ambition. I am certain that it will be a very useful tool for future research, given the wealth of material used and the global approach to the question.

Keywords

Byzantine social history; Palaiologan period