Obituary: Gilbert Dagron (January 26, 1932 – August 4, 2015)

Gilbert Dagron (1932–2015)

© COURTESY OF ARTYOM TER-MARKOSYAN
 VARDANYAN

For Gilbert Dagron to appear, all four hundred years of Byzantine studies in France had to unfold. Dagron knew everything about Byzantium, but for the 16th century, Pierre de Giles also knew everything about it, as did Charles du Cange for the 17th century, Charles Diehl for the early 20th century, or Paul Lemerle, Dagron's mentor, for the middle of the last century. Continuity of tradition is as important as it is irreplaceable.

Dagron was the champion of Paris in fencing. When he arrived in Moscow as the French Embassy's cultural attaché (1962–1964), he managed to obtain permission to attend a local fencing club (oh, this was a serious victory, he used to recall with a chuckle). In all other respects, Dagron tried to live an active life in the Soviet Union: he made friends among the liberal *intelligentsia*, whose cause was still important to him 45 years later (cf. his article "Pour l'honneur de M^{me} Z. À propos de Sartre et de la Russie," *Commentaire* 113 (2006), pp. 173–176). He also travelled around the Soviet Union, which was unusual for a diplomat in those days. During one such trip, his car was crushed by a truck, and he always insisted that there was no more to it than just an accident. He maintained

a life-long friendship with the surgeon who saved his life, but fencing was over: the accident left Dagron disabled. Yet he retained his graceful bearing: when he had to cross the street quickly, he hopped along on his good leg rather than hobbling with a cane.

By today's standards, Dagron began to publish very late – he was already 36 when his first article appeared. There were several reasons for this: teaching school, serving in the army, pursuing a diplomatic career, but the main one was the “feudal” nature of French academic life at the time: an apprentice had to wait for years before a *maître* allowed him to publish. Yet Dagron's scholarly output after 1968 strikes one not only in terms of volume, but first and foremost in terms of its diversity. Indeed, his *Doctorat de troisième cycle* (1967) was *Thémistios. L'Empire romain d'Orient au IV^e siècle et les traditions politiques de l'hellénisme*, and his *Doctorat ès lettres et sciences humaines* (1972) was *Naissance d'une capitale : Constantinople et ses institutions de 330 à 451*. This became his first book, translated into Italian and Greek. Several years later he proved himself as an expert in hagiography [*Vie et Miracles de sainte Thècle, Texte grec, traduction et commentaire* (Subsidia Hagiographica 62), Brussels, 1978], as a connoisseur of Byzantine diplomacies (*Archives de l'Athos XII : Actes de Saint-Pantéléimon*, édition diplomatique par P. Lemerle, G. Dagron, S. Cirković, Paris, 1982), epigraphy [*Inscriptions de Cilicie (Travaux et mémoires, Monographies, 4)*, Paris, 1987, with D. Feissel], and original text editing (*Le traité sur la guérilla (De velitatione) de l'empereur Nicéphore Phocas (963–969)*, Paris, 1986, with H. Mihaescu).

The breadth of Dagron's interests and expertise is demonstrated by the two-volume collection of his 36 articles *Idées byzantines* (Paris, 2012, 821 p.). Let us simply enumerate the titles of that book's sections: “Causes, signes, miracles”, “Espaces et temps chrétiens”, “Langues, peuples”, “Droit, coutumes, pratiques”, “Économie urbaine”, “Orient/Occident”, “Mémoire et oubli”. Yet the book presents impressive evidence of Dagron's continuity and persistence in approaching Byzantium as a vivid and interconnected cultural system. He was always interested in culture, but while pursuing his research, he did not shy away from economics, the administrative system, and religious dogmatics.

He began with Constantinople as a cultural phenomenon, and that great metropolis always remained in his sphere of interest (*Constantinople imaginaire, études sur le recueil des Patria*, Paris, 1984; *L'hippodrome de Constantinople. Jeux, peuple et politique*, Paris, 2011). Other major themes were imperial ideology (*Empereur et prêtre. Étude sur le « césaropapisme » byzantin*, Paris, 1996, with subsequent Serbian, English, Bulgarian, Spanish, and Russian translations), religious studies (parts of *Histoire du Christianisme*, Paris, 1993; *Juifs et*

chrétiens en Orient byzantin, Paris, 2010, with V. Déroche), and the culture of icon painting (*Décrire et peindre. Essai sur le portrait iconique*, Paris, 2007).

One often hears in today's Russia that only an Orthodox Christian is capable of understanding Byzantine art. Indeed, it is easier to discuss the subject of icon painting in Russian because its very vocabulary is well-suited for it. But in reality, a foreigner can easily make up for this handicap, and Dagron brilliantly proved that the main thing is to look deeply into the subject – if you have a good command of the sources, you do not need to be Orthodox to analyze Orthodoxy.

When he became Professor of Collège de France in 1975, Dagron had to commit much time and effort to his administrative duties which multiplied constantly: Chief Administrator of the Collège de France, President of the International Association of Byzantine studies, President of the French Academy, etc., etc., until he fully retired from all his positions in 2006. But administrative burdens did not diminish his scholarly output. He was not able, however, to complete the project on which he toiled for many years – the translation of and commentaries to Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *De caerimoniis*. This enormous *œuvre* will be published soon and in some sense will become a monument on his grave. Neither was he able to fulfill his dream of writing a memoir of his most traumatic experience – his participation in the Algerian war (1957–1960); in his own words, “as senseless as it was morally dubious”.

Dagron was a likable man, warm and friendly, yet it was impossible to forget that you were in the company of a *maître*. His charming smile always disarmed you, his rare praise was priceless. Most appealing in Dagron's manner was the ineffable ease with which he bore the huge burden of his erudition. The scholarly apparatus was always there, but one could easily miss it: Dagron always examined the source material afresh, not bound by his predecessors' opinions. His great strength was his perfect ability to look at Byzantine sources from new angles and to probe them with unexpected questions. For Dagron, the course of history was always organic, and even iconoclasm for him was not a zigzag, not an anomaly, but “the last stage in the long process of acculturation during which Christian Byzantium borrowed from its Romano-Hellenic past as much as it could”. And one more quote:

On the superficial level, the Byzantines demanded ‘all or none’, but this principle camouflaged their aptness at avoiding a head-on clash; their meager style walked hand in hand with inventive practice; puckered brows screened an eyewink. If we dig deeper into Orthodoxy, we find Greek humor.

Dagron's language was elegant and metaphorical, yet as precise as the thrust of a sword. Translating him was a huge challenge.

Dagron's academic legacy is invaluable in destroying the countless clichés, both positive and negative, that are commonly associated with the word "Byzantium". He was an ideal mediator between the East and the West which still have so much trouble understanding each other.

Sergey A. Ivanov

School of Philology, National Research University "Higher School of
Economics", Moscow, Russia