CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY (641–1204)

Robert Bonfil

Among the concepts of crucial importance for the historians’ business, those of continuity and discontinuity (or change) appear to have constantly retained the greatest attention. Although “in a sense this is what all historians study all the time,” one can hardly say that historians really do refer to this pair of apparently opposite concepts in the same way.¹ Since historical narratives are inevitably shaped by historians’ different outlooks, we can reasonably expect that things will not be different for Byzantine history as a whole and for the history of Byzantine Jews in particular. One cannot escape the constraint of dealing with such complexity in approaching the topic, even though, at least at first glance, questions related to continuity and change may have been of greater relevance for Western European than for Byzantine history, especially the transition from Late Antiquity toward the early Middle Ages.

In a seminal essay published almost twenty-five years ago,² Anthony Cutler and Alexander Kazhdan endeavored to set the stage by arguing against Günter Weiss’s article on the continuity of the social structure of Byzantium³ which according to them opened a new phase in the development of Byzantine studies.⁴ The keyword in the above sentence is structure. Was there a structural change? That is to say: having assumed axiomatically that over a sufficiently large span of time

---

⁴ Cutler and Kazhdan, art. cit. p. 430: “Weiss was the first in western historiography to undertake the task of proving the thesis of the continuity of the social structure in the transition from Antiquity to the Byzantine Middle Ages.” By means of the qualifying phrase ‘in western historiography’ in the above sentence, they suggested an association between Weiss’s perspective and the works of the Russian scholar M. Ja. Sjusjumov who “developed, in a crisp and consistent way, the concept of Byzantine continuity” before Weiss (ibidem; the reference is to: M. Ja. Sjusjumov, “Nekotorye problemy istoričeskogo razvitija Vizantii i Zapada,” VizVrem 35 (1973): 3–18).
alterations within certain aspects of life are unavoidable, the question would be whether the transition from Antiquity to Byzantium entailed qualitative structural changes or just superficial alterations in particular aspects of life. In order to answer this question, one should compare the structure of Antiquity with the medieval one of Byzantium. According to Cutler and Kazhdan, “in all probability, the most appropriate definition” of the structure of Antiquity “would understand it as an urban social structure, that is based on the polis or municipium, in which structure the existence of the city as the prime social unit determined both the forms of ownership, the relationship of social groups or classes, the nature of the microstructures (microgroups) and the ideological, socio-psychological, religious and esthetic self-consciousness of society.” An articulated scrutiny of the major manifestations concerning the above-mentioned elements would unequivocally show discontinuity in the transition from Antiquity to medieval Byzantium. And yet, in their own words, the substantial difference between their approach and that of Weiss and others who would rather maintain that the idea of continuity “consists in the fact that from his point of view the alterations in social life with which he is concerned were insignificant and incidental, that they were realized slowly during the long span both of Roman and Byzantine history,” whereas for Cutler and Kazhdan “[the alterations] seem to be united by a structural unity and to occur chronologically in the main about the seventh century, in the maelstrom of the urban catastrophe.” Following this line of reasoning, phenomena which would appear to show clear signs of continuity are ingeniously assessed the other way around, by especially stressing how “the idea of continuity was strictly implanted in the social thought of the Byzantines who considered themselves as successors to both the Biblical and the Roman past,” an ideological bias that modern historians may also, perhaps unintentionally, have adopted as a guideline.5

Cutler and Kazhdan’s argumentation offers a convenient starting point for our discussion: when viewed from the standpoint of Jewish

5 Cutler and Kazhdan, art. cit. p. 464.
6 Caveats against the danger of possible falsification of the truth have always been standard declarations of serious professional commitment to the “historian’s craft.” It is therefore superfluous to reiterate the fashionable mantra about how misleading previous readings of the sources could have been, not to mention the sources themselves, written as a rule in the Middle Ages at the service or at the demand of the powerful and seeking to embellish their image.