CLASSICAL SCHOLARSHIP IN TWELFTH-CENTURY BYZANTIUM

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This chapter aims to survey what may justly be called classical scholarship in twelfth-century Byzantium, especially the commentaries on ancient texts. By discussing the different methods, goals, audiences, and ideological parameters of these largely neglected works, I intend to situate the commentaries on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* into a vibrant culture of scholarly production and consumption. But the very notion of classical scholarship in Byzantium calls for explanation and requires an ideological accounting.

1. Byzantium vs. the Classics

Byzantine “classicism,” both creative and scholarly, has received a mostly negative press in modern discussions. It has been denied its rightful place in the history of classical scholarship largely because its strengths and contributions have been taken for granted by those who have delighted in highlighting its shortcomings. This calls for a swing in the opposite direction. But the ideological obstacles are formidable, especially the notion that has been widely disseminated in the West regarding the position of Byzantium in our “system of civilizations.” This notion is fatally entangled in the ideological construction of the enlightened West itself and its leading nations in opposition to designated Others. The effect can be observed in popular perceptions, where Byzantium stands in conceptual opposition to the classical (both the ancient and its modern “rightful” heirs), and in specialized literature on the history of classical scholarship, which practices a special form of forgetfulness. The two volumes of R. Pfeffer’s *History of Classical Scholarship* cover antiquity to the end of the Hellenistic Age and then the years 1300–1850 (of course, in the West). The entries on “schol-

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arship” in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* reflect this division while the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* has no entries on scholarship. Studies of the “transmission” of ancient texts overwhelmingly favor the Hellenistic and modern periods, limiting discussion of the Byzantine period—which was as long as the other two put together and just as crucial if not more so for the formation of the classical “canon”—to just a few pages.¹ N.G. Wilson’s *Scholars of Byzantium*, the only study devoted to the issue, is useful and immensely learned but also condescending: virtually every page contains derogatory comments and unnecessary adjectives. One can stand in awe of its erudition yet find it an unpleasant read delivering an unfair verdict. Wilson takes the Byzantines’ groundbreaking contributions for granted and focuses on their failings. I will do the opposite.

In modern scholarship, Byzantium as a cultural system has rarely been studied on its own terms, free of comparison, that is, with its neighbors and antecedents. I will concentrate here on the most influential of these comparisons, the one with classical antiquity. Byzantine literature, philosophy, and society have until recently been measured and basically defined against the yardstick of their classical antecedents—and found wanting. Theology is the one exception among textual genres, though normally the modern scholar has to be a believer for the balance to tilt in its favor. Byzantine art and architecture have established themselves on their own terms. But when it comes to intellectual history and literary culture, antiquity stands for reason, originality, and “literature” while Byzantium is associated with “rhetoric,” imitation, and superstition. Countless quotations can be given to this effect from both Byzantinists and non-specialists. There are historical and disciplinary reasons why this culture has been so closely linked to another and defined in relation to it. Many Byzantinists were and often still are trained in Classics before moving to “later” material. Byzantine history, including the state, society, and language, emerges gradually during the course of late antiquity, allowing for the transference of scholarly skills from one culture to the other, a temptation that occludes many pitfalls. As their written languages were virtually identical, classical Athens

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¹ E.g., Sandys (1921) devotes 37 pages (out of 1700 in the three volume set) to Byzantium (namely v. 1, 387–424); Groningen (1963) almost none. Reynolds and Wilson (1991) offer 26 pages (48–54, 58–78) out of 240, which is an improvement. Dickey (2007), a major new resource, appeared after this chapter was finished; only targeted citations to it could be included.