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

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 Mme 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 IVe siècle et les traditions politiques de l'hellénisme, and his Doctorat ès lettres et sciences humaines (1972) was Nais-sance 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 diplomatics (Archives de l’Athos XII : Actes de Saint-Pantéleimon, 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