

# Was innovation unwanted in Byzantium?

APOSTOLOS SPANOS



*In memory of Tomas Hägg*

IT IS OFTEN SAID that Byzantium and the Byzantines were negative, if not inimical and hostile, to innovation.<sup>1</sup> Albeit not thoroughly studied<sup>2</sup> and contradicted, directly or not, by a number of modern studies,<sup>3</sup> the notion of Byzantium as a static and changeless civilization has influenced a great number of historians, who have presented the Byzantine understanding of innovation in negative light, particularly in the fields of politics and religion, where the Byzantines are supposed to have perceived innovation as rebellion and heresy respectively.<sup>4</sup> But, really, did the Byzantines have only one understanding of innovation? Were they negative or sceptical towards innovation as such? And furthermore, did they evaluate innovation in a way that was originally their own?<sup>5</sup>

This paper aims to answer these questions by studying Byzantine lexis, textual sources related to Byzantine politics, as well as religious texts.<sup>6</sup> After some preliminary reflections on the study of *innovation* in historical writing, it looks briefly at the Byzantine explanation of innovation in Byzantine lexis. Then it considers if the Byzantine understanding of innovation in politics, that is to say innovation as rebellion, was as monolithic as modern scholarship seems to believe. Finally, it deals with innovation in theology, or, according to modern historians, innovation as heresy. While studying innovation as rebellion and as heresy, the paper employs

\* I would like to thank Prof. Emer. Jonny Holbek (University of Agder) for having shared with me thoughts on innovation, types of innovation and innovation in Byzantium; this essay would not be the same without our discussions, which I am deeply grateful for. I am also thankful to Prof. Benoît Godin (INRS, Montreal) and Dr. Vasileios Syros (Finnish Centre of Political Thought and Conceptual Change), for their comments, corrections and criticisms.

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., the entry on innovation in *ODB* 2.997: “The Byzantines did not appreciate innovation and claimed to have stuck to tradition. Imitation or repetition of the standard authorities was praiseworthy. [...] Reforms were usually couched in terms of the restoration of the past rather than of innovation.”

<sup>2</sup> See Spanos 2010.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Littlewood 1995; Kazhdan & Epstein 1985; Ödekan, Akyürek & Necipoğlu 2010.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., *ODB* 3.997: “More often the word [*kainotomia*] was used in a broader sense of novelty and breach of tradition and applied predominantly to heretical doctrines or even rebellions.”

<sup>5</sup> This paper will not enter in the discussion of whether the Byzantines had a *notion* of innovation similar to our own, a problem that still remains to be studied.

<sup>6</sup> As the sources studied are not more than a drop in the ocean of Byzantine literature, the thoughts presented here could be nothing but preliminary.

ancient Greek sources, to examine whether the Byzantines understood innovation in politics and religion in a way different than that of the ancient Greeks.

#### INNOVATION IN HISTORICAL WRITING

A classical definition of *innovation* presents the modern concept of the term as “any idea, practice, or material artifact perceived to be new by the relevant unit of adoption”.<sup>7</sup> By focusing on the crucial role of the adoptive unit in the process (and eventually the result) of any innovation, this definition points to the main problem of the historical study of innovation, namely the oversimplification of the relation between innovation(s) and unit(s) of adoption.<sup>8</sup> To make the point clear: by speaking about Byzantine innovation in general, the historian creates and applies a unit of adoption (Byzantium or the Byzantine civilization) that was enormous both in space (at its largest from present Middle East to Spain and from the Danube to North Africa) and time (from the fourth to the fifteenth century). Furthermore, and this is the most important in our case, this superstructure, inhabited by a large number of very different peoples, with varying interests and sets of concerns and priorities, is supposed to have been homogeneous enough to have articulated a single understanding of what innovation was. Even more, it is also supposed to have had and applied the same criteria concerning which new ideas, practices, or artefacts were to be accepted as positive innovations, and which were to be rejected as negative or even dangerous.

While speaking about innovation in Byzantium, or any other civilization, a historian should consider the civilization as a mega-system encompassing countless units of various types, including – to name but a few – the state, the church, the emperor, the army, society in general, various local societies and social groupings, local aristocracies, or monastic communities. A new idea, for example a theological doctrine, or a new practice, such as a fiscal system, could be accepted or enforced by the central government and opposed by the church or the society. An innovative law could be accepted by the state and the largest part of the society but opposed by the big landowners or the nobility. An innovation could be rejected immediately after its first appearance but be accepted later, by the same or another unit of adoption, or could be introduced to just one of the cities or the provinces of the empire (that is to say: to one unit of adoption) to be adopted later by some other provinces or the whole empire.

<sup>7</sup> Zaltman, Duncan & Holbek 1973, 10; cf. Rogers 1995 [1962], 11. On the variety of definitions of innovation, see Bereghel, Rowley & Sambrook 2009. Let it be noted that the term *innovation* is used in the rest of my text in its modern meaning; when referring to the Byzantine understanding of innovation I will use the two words mainly used by the Byzantines themselves, namely *kainotomia* and *neōterismos*.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the questions related to the use of concepts such as innovation, novelty, invention, and the like in historical writing are to be studied in a paper in preparation under the working title: “Rethinking Innovation in Historical Studies”.

Another problem in the historical study of innovation is that modern scholarship presents, more often than not, concepts as originality, novelty, invention, and the like as synonyms to innovation,<sup>9</sup> something that may easily lead to perplexity and wrong conclusions. These concepts are not identical, neither in modern times nor in a historical perspective. This can be made clear by focusing only on originality: it is not an axiomatic truth that every innovation by default is an *original* idea, practice, or artefact. There are cases in which an innovation indicates simply the creative use or realization of an old idea, or a newly-imported or transplanted idea or practice, that was originally invented or set up by another unit, as for example an individual, a group, a state, a civilization etc. (it is also possible that two or more old ideas add up to an innovation). The adaptation of this(-ese) old idea(s) and its appropriation, transformation or reinvention by the new unit may result in so great a change that the new product or practice becomes an innovation, even though the idea on which it is based is not original.

Another point should be added: unlike common practice in other fields, in historical writing innovation is used as an unambiguous concept, without any reference to the various types of innovation.<sup>10</sup> Due to the scope and the limitations of this essay, there is space enough to refer, by way of example, to only two distinct types of innovation, namely the *radical* and *incremental* innovations. *Radical* innovations require a high degree of new knowledge and skills and they introduce fundamental and, at least sometimes, revolutionary changes. *Incremental* innovations may be achieved with a low degree of new knowledge and they introduce minor improvements or simple adjustments in current ideas<sup>11</sup> (it should be noted though that a series of incremental innovations might result in a radical innovation). The aphorisms on an anti-innovative Byzantium in modern scholarship refer most probably to Byzantium's scepticism towards radical innovation, particularly in politics and religion. Yet, a study of various types of sources demonstrates that the Byzantines were not hostile to innovation as such, neither to radical nor to incremental innovations.

<sup>9</sup> One example will suffice: summing up the anthology *Originality in Byzantine Literature, Art and Music*, A. Cutler realizes that "the authors of the papers that precede this treat originality variously as a synonym for creativity, invention, or innovation"; Littlewood 1995, 203.

<sup>10</sup> Zaltman, Duncan & Holbek 1973, 17–32, present a typology based on whether an innovation is: (a) programmed or non-programmed, (b) instrumental or ultimate, and (c) radical or not. On types of innovation see also King & Anderson 2002, 141–145; Zaltman & Lin 1971; Dewar & Dutton 1986; Chesbrough & Teece 2002.

<sup>11</sup> See Dewar & Dutton 1986, 1422–1423.

## INNOVATION IN BYZANTINE LEXICOGRAPHY

The study of Byzantine texts and lexis<sup>12</sup> shows that the Byzantines used mainly two words for innovation: *kainotomia* (καινοτομία) and *neōterismos* (νεωτερισμός).<sup>13</sup> The verb *to innovate* occurs in Byzantine lexicographical sources as *kainotomein* (καινοτομείν), *neōterizein* (νεωτερίζειν) and *kainourgein* (καινουργεῖν). Modern scholarship seems to accept that the Byzantines used all these words in the same meaning; and, mainly, in a negative way. But was it so?

The largest surviving Byzantine lexicon was composed in the fifth–sixth century and is attributed to Hesychios. This lexicon defines the verb *kainotomein* in a neutral way: “to innovate: to make/do something new” (Καινοτομήσαι· καινὸν ποιῆσαι).<sup>14</sup> This definition appears in a number of later Byzantine lexis, deriving from or influenced by that of Hesychios, who adds that the word also means the opening of a new mining field (Καινοτομείν· καινήν λατομίαν τέμνειν).<sup>15</sup> An innovator (*kainourgekōs*) is someone who works/produces new things (Καινουργηκότα· νέα πράγματα ἐργασάμενον).<sup>16</sup> The verb *neōterizein* is presented as having a different meaning from *kainotomein*; while *kainotomein* is defined as *making* new things, *neōterizein* has the meaning of *doing* new things (Νεωτερίζει· καινὰ πράττει).<sup>17</sup>

A lexicon ascribed to Cyril, the fifth-century patriarch of Alexandria (412–444), under the title *Συναγωγή*, also presents the verbs *kainotomein* and *neōterizein* as not having exactly the same meaning. *Kainotomein* is described as *working/producing* something new (Καινοτομεί· καινουργεῖ), while *neōterizein* is defined as *doing* new things (νεωτερίζει· καινὰ πράττει).<sup>18</sup> Somebody who deals with *neōterismos*, a *neōteropios*, is characterized as rebel, tyrant, plotter (Νεωτεροποιός· ἀντάρτης, τύραννος, ἐπιθέτης).<sup>19</sup>

Photios, the great ninth-century Byzantine statesman, scholar, and patriarch of Constantinople (858–867 and 877–886) composed a lexicon in which he presented *kainotomia*, *neōterizein*, and *neōteropios* in exactly the same way as Cyril of Alexandria (Καινοτομεί· καινουργεῖ;<sup>20</sup> Νεωτερίζει· καινὰ πράττει; and Νεωτεροποιός· ἀντάρτης τύραννος ἐπιθέτης<sup>21</sup>).

The tenth-century *Etymologicum Gudianum* presents *kainotomia* as something changed against the rules and the laws of nature (Καινοτομία, ἔστι πρᾶγμα, παρὰ

<sup>12</sup> On Byzantine lexicography see Alpers 2001 and 1990.

<sup>13</sup> The word *kainourgēma* (καινούργημα) was also used, but not very often.

<sup>14</sup> Hesychios, *Lexicon* κ 246.

<sup>15</sup> Hesychios, *Lexicon* κ 247. The definition is not originally Byzantine, as it appears for example in Xenophon, *De vectigalibus* 4.27.

<sup>16</sup> Hesychios, *Lexicon* κ 248.

<sup>17</sup> Hesychios, *Lexicon* ν 431.

<sup>18</sup> *Synagoge* κ 34 and ν 70.

<sup>19</sup> *Synagoge* ν 71.

<sup>20</sup> Photios, *Lexicon* κ 68. The lexicon also includes an entry on the infinitive *kainotomein*, which presents the literal meaning of the word in mining, identically to the lexicon by Hesychios: “mainly to cut fresh into a mine” (καινοτομείν· καινήν λατομίαν τέμνειν κυρίως [κ 59]).

<sup>21</sup> Photios, *Lexicon* ν 70; 72.

τοὺς τῆς φύσεως ὄρους καὶ νόμους παρηλλαγμένον).<sup>22</sup> This definition most probably correlates to a theological understanding of *kainotomia*, that is to say the Incarnation of Christ, which took place against the rules and the laws of nature. We may consider, for example, the definition of *kainotomia* as the Incarnation of Christ in the entry of a thirteenth-century lexicon wrongly attributed to Ioannes Zonaras (twelfth century). This lexicon presents innovation as “what is by any means changed against the common nature and not identified in anything to the human custom. It is necessary to gain a deep knowledge of this term because of those who misunderstand the innovation in Christ. Because although he innovated nature by being born without semination, after his birth and as he was growing, many (of the features) of his body [...] he did not have in innovation but in sameness to us, with only the exception of sin”.<sup>23</sup>

The so-called *Souda Lexicon*, a compilation of lexica, *etymologica* and other sources, most probably produced around 1000, defines the verb *kainotomein* as meaning “to produce/work something new; as *kainotomein* is related to ruling” (Καινοτομεῖ· αἰτιατικῆ· καινουργεῖ· ὅτι τὸ καινοτομεῖν ἐπὶ τοῦ ἄρχειν).<sup>24</sup> In the entry on the lyric poet Melanippides, the verb *kainotomein* is used in a manner reminiscent of the modern use of the verb *to innovate*, as the lexicon relates that Melanippides innovated a lot in the composition of the dithyramb.<sup>25</sup> The noun *kainotomia* is also listed in *Souda*, without any explanation. *Souda* presents the verb *neōterizei* as meaning doing something new (Νεωτερίζει· καινὰ πράττει).<sup>26</sup> It also includes a passage by Thucydides under the entry *neōterizein*,<sup>27</sup> and explains *neōterismos* as rebellion and *neōteropoios* in exactly the same manner as Cyril and Photios, as rebel, tyrant, plotter (Νεωτερισμός· ἀνταρσία and Νεωτεροποιός· ἀντάρτης, τύραννος, ἐπιθέτης).<sup>28</sup>

All the lexica studied present *kainotomia* and *kainotomein* in a neutral way, without reflecting any negative understanding of the term. An *argumentum ex silentio* may be offered here, as a number of other Byzantine lexica and *etymologica*

<sup>22</sup> *Etymologicum Gudianum* 292 Sturz.

<sup>23</sup> Pseudo-Zonaras, *Lexicon* 1154 Tittmann: Τὸ κατὰ πάντα τρόπον παρηλλαγμένον τῆς κοινῆς φύσεως, καὶ ἐν μηδενὶ τῆ τῶν ἀνθρώπων συνηθείᾳ ἐξομοιούμενον. Τοῦτον δὲ τὸν ὄρον ἀναγκαῖον ἐπίστασθαι διὰ τοὺς κακῶς νοοῦντας τὴν καινοτομίαν ἐν Χριστῷ. Εἰ γὰρ ἐκαινοτόμησε τὴν φύσιν ἀσπόρως γεννηθεὶς, ἀλλ’ ὅμως μετὰ τὸν τόκον τὴν αὐξήσιν τῆς ἡλικίας, καὶ τὰ πολλὰ τὰ ἐν τῷ σώματι ... οὐ κατὰ καινοτομίαν ἔσχεν, ἀλλὰ καθ’ ὁμοιότητα ἡμῶν χωρὶς ἁμαρτίας. Translations are mine, unless noted otherwise.

<sup>24</sup> *Suidae Lexicon* κ 1177.

<sup>25</sup> *Suidae Lexicon* μ 454: Μελανιπιδῆς, [...] ὃς ἐν τῆ τῶν διθυράμβων μελοποιῖα ἐκαινοτόμησε πλείστα. Let it be noted that in this entry the verb *kainotomein* is used in the same meaning as in the lexica of Hesychios, Cyril and Photios studied above.

<sup>26</sup> *Suidae Lexicon* ν 243 Adler.

<sup>27</sup> *Suidae Lexicon* ν 244 Adler: Νεωτερίζειν. Θεουκιδίδης· τῆς ἡμέρας τὸ πνίγος ἐλύπει, νύκτες δὲ μετοπωριναὶ καὶ ψυχραὶ τῆ μεταβολῆ ἀσθένειαν ἐνεωτέριζον. ὁ δὲ βάρβαρος οὐδὲ ἐπὶ τὴν νεωτερίζουσαν τὰ πράγματα τύχην ἔσχεν ἀνενεγκεῖν τὴν αἰτίαν, ὡς ἂν ἐννομόν τινα καὶ ὑπαιθρον ἀγωνισάμενος μάχην. Cf. Thucydides, *Histories* 7.87.1 (τῆς ἡμέρας–ἐνεωτέριζον) and Eunapius, *Historical fragments* 226 Dindorf (ὁ δὲ βάρβαρος–μάχην).

<sup>28</sup> *Suidae Lexicon* ν 245 and 24. The words are also used in this sense when employed in other entries of the lexicon.

that have been examined do not include an entry on these ‘innovation-terms’; this probably indicates that the lexicographers did not find the words worthy of an explanation, as they would have done – I am tempted to think – had *kainotomia* been generally understood as something negative, or even dangerous or harmful. This is, more or less, the case for the verb *neōterizein* as well, while *neōterismos* is clearly presented as a negative change, or effort to change or alter, usually with regard to the political order or existing regime.

Thus, we may say that the study of the verbs *kainotomein* and *neōterizein* and their derivatives in Byzantine lexis does not support the theory of an unchanging, negative understanding of innovation in Byzantium. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that in Byzantine lexicography the words *kainotomia* and *neōterismos* do not have the same meaning, since *kainotomia* is presented in a neutral way, while *neōterismos* includes negative meanings, as for example that of rebellion or sedition. This is also confirmed by the study of the manner in which Byzantine lexicographers introduced *kainotomia* and *neōterismos*: the word *kainotomos* (καινοτόμος), was not deemed important enough to be honoured with an entry, while a *neōteristes* (νεωτεριστής) was presented only negatively as “rebel, tyrant, plotter”. To examine this theory further, let us turn to Byzantine historiography and theology.

#### INNOVATION IN BYZANTINE POLITICAL LIFE

According to modern scholarship, in the field of politics the Byzantines understood innovation as rebellion, revolt, or revolution. One of the main arguments for this interpretation, expressed in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, is a text by the eleventh-century Byzantine scholar Michael Psellos. In his *Chronographia*, Psellos comments on a revolt against the emperor Michael V (1041–1042), writing that “by the majority the act was understood as an irrational innovation”.<sup>29</sup> But is this passage indicative of a Byzantine hostility towards innovation? First of all, the established argument does not pay attention to a word that is of importance, namely the word irrational, or senseless (ἄλογος). The fact that Psellos uses this adjective to define the kind of innovation means that in the Byzantine mentality of his time there were also rationally founded, or non-senseless, innovations. Furthermore, Psellos uses *kainotomia* and *kainotomein* no fewer than twelve times in his *Chronographia*, in a variety of contexts; he refers, for example, to innovations by the

<sup>29</sup> Michael Psellos, *Chronographia* 5.27 Renault: Τοῖς μὲν οὖν πολλοῖς καινοτομία τις ἄλογος τὸ πραττόμενον ἔδοξεν (“To most of the others it seemed a senseless revolt”, tr. Sewter 139). This text is used as an argument for the Byzantine understanding of *kainotomia* as revolt in *ODB* 2.997.

divine justice<sup>30</sup> or by the emperor himself.<sup>31</sup> In another text, his encomium on the patriarch of Constantinople Constantine Leichoudes (1059–1063), he praises the patriarch for having opened for him the path to education; the verb used by Psellos for this ‘opening’ is *kainotomein*.<sup>32</sup>

A number of other passages from various periods demonstrates that Byzantium had also developed a positive understanding of innovation in politics. I could refer, for example, to Anna Komnene and her *Alexiad*, in which she commends her father Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118) for introducing (*kainotomia*) new political roles, writing that

if anyone were to reckon the art of ruling as a science and a kind of high philosophy, as if it were the art of all arts and the science of all sciences, then he would certainly admire my father as a skilful scientist and artist for having invented [*kainotomounta*] those new titles and functions in the Empire.<sup>33</sup>

To depart from the eleventh century, let us recall Pseudo-Kodinos and his *Treatise on the Dignities and Offices* (*De officiis*, composed between 1347 and 1368), in which he makes clear that “it is possible for the emperors to *kainotomein* unhindered, both in functions and titles”.<sup>34</sup>

Let us note that in all these cases in which the concept of innovation is used in a neutral or positive way, the verb expressing the concept is *kainotomein* and not *neōterizein*. Thus, it could be argued that the positive understanding of innovation in politics was expressed with the use of the word *kainotomein* and its derivatives, while *neōterizein* was almost always, if not always, used for negative, unacceptable, and radical changes in political life and state organization. But was this negative

<sup>30</sup> *Chronographia* 5.24 Renault: Λέξω ..., ὡς ἂν οἶός τε ὦ, ὅποσα μετὰ τὴν τῆς βασιλίδος ὑπερορίαν ἡ θεία δικη τῷ τε καιρῷ καὶ τοῖς πράγμασιν ἐκαινοτόμησεν (“I will tell [...], to the best of my ability, an account of all those things that the Divine Justice innovated in relation to time and the circumstances”, cf. tr Sewter 137: “At all events, to the best of my ability, I will tell my story – an account of all those strange happenings that followed the empress’s exile, events that Divine Justice brought to pass at this moment in history”).

<sup>31</sup> Even if the evaluation of the *kainotomia* is here clearly negative, it could not be understood as rebellion and the like. *Chronographia* 6.104 Renault: Ὡιοντο δὲ μηδὲ τοὺς ἐν τῇ Πόλει τῷ βασιλεῖ προσθήσασθαι, τούτοις δὲ ἀντιστήσασθαι, δι’ ὀργῆς τε τὸν αὐτοκράτορα ἔχοντας, ἐπειδὴ καὶ καινοτομεῖν τι κατ’ αὐτῶν ἤρξατο, καὶ τὴν προεδρίαν αὐτοῦ δυσχεραίνοντας, καὶ βουλομένους στρατιώτην ἰδεῖν αὐτοκράτορα, σφῶν τε προκινδυνεύοντα καὶ τὰς ἐπιδρομὰς τῶν βαρβάρων ἀνείργοντα (“Besides, they were under the impression that the inhabitants of Constantinople would not remain loyal; they expected no opposition there, because the emperor had made himself unpopular by introducing reforms which curbed the liberty of the citizens. The people loathed him as a ruler and wanted to see a soldier-emperor, a man who would endanger his own life on their behalf and put an end to barbarian incursions”, tr. Sewter 209–210).

<sup>32</sup> Michael Psellos, *Encomium on the patriarch Constantine Leichoudes* 420 Sathas: Αὐτός γάρ μοι τὴν τῆς παιδείας ὁδὸν πρὸ τῶν ἄλλων ἐκαινοτόμησας. Psellos also uses positively *kainotomia* in theology; see, e.g., n. 45 and 46 below.

<sup>33</sup> Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 96 Kambylis & Reinsch: Εἰ γὰρ τις εἰς ἐπιστήμην καὶ τινα ὑπερτάτην φιλοσοφίαν ἀνάγοι τὴν βασιλείαν ὡσπερ τέχνην οὖσαν τεχνῶν καὶ ἐπιστήμην ἐπιστημῶν, θαυμάσαιτο ἂν καὶ τὸν ἐμὸν πατέρα οἶόν τινα ἐπιστήμονά τε καὶ ἀρχιτέκτονα τὰ ὑπὸ τὴν βασιλείαν καινοτομοῦντα καὶ πράγματα καὶ ὀνόματα; tr. Dawes 79.

<sup>34</sup> Pseudo-Kodinos, *Treatise on the Dignities and Offices* 135 Verpeaux: “Ἐξεστι δὲ καὶ τοῖς βασιλεῦσι καινοτομεῖν καὶ πράγματα καὶ ὀνόματα ἀκωλύτως.

understanding of *neōterismos* as rebellion, revolt, or revolution an originally Byzantine understanding? Or was it something the Byzantines inherited from their predecessors?

A study of ancient sources demonstrates that a negative understanding of *neōterizein* and *neōterismos* in political thinking existed at least from the fifth century BC. One may refer, for example, to Plato,<sup>35</sup> Aristotle,<sup>36</sup> or Demosthenes.<sup>37</sup> Almost half a millennium later, the great biographer Plutarch (c. 46–120 AD) used the word with the same negative meaning, for example in his biography of the second king of Rome, Numa Pompilius (715–673 BC).<sup>38</sup> To the evidence given by Greek sources we may add an *argumentum* related to the Roman precursors of the Byzantines: in Latin sources the concept of revolution could be expressed as *novae res* (= new things), that is to say radical changes, or *neōterismoι*.

#### INNOVATION IN BYZANTINE RELIGION

When it comes to the Byzantine understanding of innovation in religion, modern scholarship demonstrates that the word *kainotomia* was used in Byzantine theology mainly in relation to: (a) the mystery of the Incarnation of Christ and (b) radical changes in dogma, which were not in accordance with the official doctrines and teachings of the Church.<sup>39</sup>

Innovation as unacceptable change in dogma is presented clearly in the so-called *Synodikon of Orthodoxy*, a liturgical document produced in the period between 843 and 920.<sup>40</sup> The study of Byzantine theological and religious texts reveals a number of passages in which *kainotomia* is used in this meaning. But was this use of the word indicative of the Byzantine understanding and evaluation of innovation in religion? Many theological texts show clearly that innovation was anathematized

<sup>35</sup> Plato, *Republic* 8.565b: Αιτίαν δὴ ἔσχον ὑπὸ τῶν ἐτέρων, κἂν μὴ ἐπιθυμῶσι νεωτερίζειν, ὡς ἐπιβουλεύουσι τῷ δήμῳ καὶ εἰσιν ὀλιγαρχικοί.

<sup>36</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* 1262b: ...δεῖ δὲ τοιοῦτους εἶναι τοὺς ἀρχομένους πρὸς τὸ πειθαρχεῖν καὶ μὴ νεωτερίζειν.

<sup>37</sup> Demosthenes, *On the Accession of Alexander* 17.15: Ἔστι γὰρ ἐν ταῖς συνθήκαις ἐπιμελεῖσθαι τοὺς συνεδρεύοντας καὶ τοὺς ἐπὶ τῇ κοινῇ φυλακῇ τεταγμένους ὅπως ἐν ταῖς κοινωνοῦσαις πόλεσι τῆς εἰρήνης μὴ γίνωνται θάνατοι καὶ φυγαὶ παρὰ τοὺς κειμένους ταῖς πόλεσι νόμους, μηδὲ χρημάτων δημεύσεις, μηδὲ γῆς ἀναδασμοί, μηδὲ χρεῶν ἀποκοπαί, μηδὲ δούλων ἀπελευθερώσεις ἐπὶ νεωτερισμῶ.

<sup>38</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Numa* κ 5: Οὕτε γὰρ πόλεμος οὕτε στάσις οὕτε νεωτερισμὸς περὶ πολιτείαν ἱσθόρηται Νομᾷ βασιλεύοντος. The sentence is quoted by the Byzantine historian John Zonaras in his *History* 2.111 Dindorf.

<sup>39</sup> This is, once again, an oversimplification of the study of innovation, as innovation in religion could be studied from many different viewpoints. One may focus on innovations in religion as theory (belief, theology) and as practice (ritual). Another possibility could be to study innovation in religions as independent systems of cognitive beliefs or as systems that function within one or more wider cultures that host them. Related aspects are discussed in Disbrey 1994.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., *Synodikon of Orthodoxy* 313 Gouillard: Τοὺς παραχαράττοντας τὰς ἀποστολικὰς καὶ πατρικὰς καὶ συνοδικὰς παραδόσεις τῆς ἐκκλησίας καὶ ἄλλο τι καινοτομοῦντας ἢ ἐπινοοῦντας κατὰ τῆς πίστεως, ἀνάθεμα (“To those falsifying the traditions of the apostles and the fathers and the councils of the Church, and any other thing innovating or excogitating against the faith, anathema”).



when it reflected drastic changes in faith and/or the ecclesiastical traditions and practices, but only if these changes were not accepted by the Church; this means that the understanding of innovation was no different from that in the Byzantine lexica: the making/doing something new, the opening up of new paths. The problem for the Church was that novelties *in specific fields* or *with specific content* were not acceptable, as they would threaten its foundations. The discussion, for instance, on Christology was not just a theoretical debate but directly connected to the salvation of the human being. Thus, the Arius' innovation of the concept of Jesus as created by the Father was not to be accepted. At the same time, the innovative theologies of the *homoousios* and the triune God were accepted by the First Ecumenical Council, thus becoming doctrines of the church.

The opinion that the Byzantine Church was not hostile to any theological innovation as such may be strengthened by an argument on which modern scholarship agrees, namely that the Byzantine Church understood – as we have seen previously – the Incarnation of Christ as a *kainotomia*.<sup>41</sup> And this was an innovation understood in a very positive way. The *Synodikon of Orthodoxy* demonstrates this clearly by anathematizing those who do not believe in this *kainotomia*.<sup>42</sup> It should be noted here that in the passages studied, the Incarnation is presented as *kainotomia*, not *neōterismos*, which may indicate that Byzantine theology was acutely aware of the specific differences between *kainotomia*, which could be either positively or negatively evaluated, and *neōterismos*, which was always a negative change in doctrine or practice. This should be studied further on the basis of a sufficient number of sources.

Furthermore, Christianity seems to have understood itself, from the very beginning, as a religion defined by innovative changes in concepts taken from the ancient world. We should note on beforehand that some of Christianity's fundamental doctrines were not completely new. Let us use the doctrine of Resurrection as an example: gods, deities, as well as mythical figures resurrected, in some instances reborn, were known before Christ, the Sumerian Tammuz, the Egyptian Osiris, the Greek Adonis and the Persian Mithra being characteristic examples. However, there were also Christian doctrines drastically innovative, as, for example, the dogma of the single, supreme God being at the same time one nature and three persons. This doctrine was a thoroughly innovative concept in Late Antiquity, not only in theology but also in philosophy. The same may be said for the doctrine on afterlife,

<sup>41</sup> Let us refer here to John Chrysostom, *In sancta lumina*, PG 36.348: *καινοτομοῦνται φύσεις, και Θεός άνθρωπος γίνεται* ("Natures are innovated, and God becomes a man").

<sup>42</sup> *Synodikon of Orthodoxy* 57 Gouillard: *Τοῖς [...] λόγοις διαλεκτικοῖς [...] ἐπὶ τῆς ὑπὲρ φύσιν καινοτομίας τῶν δύο φύσεων τοῦ Θεοῦ και ἀνθρώπου λογομαχεῖν πειρωμένοις, ἀνάθεμα* ("To those who by conversational words try to argue against the over the principles of nature *kainotomia* of the two natures of God, anathema").

which was not original, but was given a new content and meaning in the Christian world.

Thus, we may say that Byzantine theology was not innately hostile to the concept of innovation as such. This fact is made clear by the new theology and practices that originated during two very important theological controversies in Byzantium, namely Iconoclasm and Hesychasm.

Iconoclasm (ca. 720–843) has been viewed, studied, and understood from diverse perspectives: political, ecclesiastical, economic, and theological. For the purposes of the present paper, let us focus on only one dimension: the argument that the iconoclastic part of the church (and, of course, the state and society) represented a conservative understanding of ritual and ecclesiastical practice. This theory argues that during the iconoclastic debate iconoclasts upheld “the unbroken and continuous tradition which existed between the views they expressed and the teachings of Christ, the Apostles, and the Fathers of the Church, in contrast to the false and *innovative* doctrine of their opponents”.<sup>43</sup> The iconophiles, on the other hand, supported the veneration of icons, which was indeed an innovation (in many ways, including the painting’s technique and style). After some hundred and fifty years of turbulence and the persecution of iconophiles by the iconoclasts, the innovative veneration of the icons evolved into the official dogma of the church as a result of the Council of Nicaea (843). Thus, the way was open to other innovations regarding the painting and the production of icons, such as, for example, the production of the so-called *narrative icons*, from the twelfth century onwards.<sup>44</sup>

Hesychasm (fourteenth century) was the last great theological controversy in the Byzantine world, related to a specific type of monastic praying, which – according to the theologian Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) and his followers – led to the physical experience of the divine energy, through the so-called *silent prayer* (the word Hesychasm derives from the Greek *ἡσυχία*, in the meaning of tranquillity, or inner stillness). It was through this debate that new doctrines, such as the distinction between the divine essence and the divine energies, were canonized as dogma, in the Council of Constantinople in 1351, even in cases in which they had previously been refuted by parts of the church (the patriarchate of Antioch for example) as innovations. Once more, innovative understanding and argumentation won the battle.

Apart from these two great eras of theological innovations, one could also refer to passages from other periods, as for example Psellos arguing that “faith equal to a grain of mustard seed removes mountains and innovates [*kainotomei*] the impos-

<sup>43</sup> Brubaker 2010, 331 (my emphasis).

<sup>44</sup> See Chatterjee 2007.

sible”,<sup>45</sup> or that it is not the apostle Paul who first innovated [*kainotomei*] the third heaven, as he based himself on the Bible.<sup>46</sup>

Let us now try again to compare the Byzantine understanding of innovation in theology to the understanding of the ancient Greeks. Was innovation in theology and philosophy always acceptable before Byzantium?

Religion in ancient Greece was not as systematic and doctrinal as in Byzantium. Its ethical system was not so dominating as the Christian one and the priesthood had neither the authority nor the power to intervene in the political and social life as the Byzantine church did. Furthermore, we tend to think that polytheism facilitated the introduction of new gods, new ideas and new doctrines, in contrast to the Byzantine theocracy, in which the powerful and conservative church could prevent innovations in theology and religious practices. But was this really the case? The famous trial, indictment, and execution of Socrates suggests otherwise. Let us not forget that the Athenian philosopher was sentenced to death for corrupting the youth, not believing in the established gods of the city and *introducing new gods* in Athens.<sup>47</sup> One can hardly avoid thinking that the last accusation in reality means innovating in religion. Thus, a negative evaluation of such innovation is demonstrated to be much older than Byzantium, at least in specific cases (as was also the case in Byzantium).

#### CONCLUSIONS

Taking into consideration the evidence presented above regarding the use and the meanings of ‘innovation terms’ in Byzantine lexicography, historiography, and theology (albeit in a limited sample), we may deduce that the Byzantine understanding of innovation was not as monolithic as has been argued in previous scholarship. The first striking element is that in Byzantine thinking, *kainotomia* and *neōterismos* seem not to have had exactly the same meaning. While *kainotomia* was understood in both a positive and a negative way, *neōterismos* seems to have been used mainly, if not exclusively, in a negative sense. Even if this should be studied on the basis of more sources, we may at this stage say that *neōterizein* seems to have been more closely related to undertaking or attempting something against well-established traditions, customs, or conventions, while *kainotomein* also had the meaning of

<sup>45</sup> Michael Psellos, *Oration on the decapitation of John the Baptist* 222–223 (= 300 Fisher): Πίστις εοικυία κόκκω σινάπεως ὄρη μεθιστάνει καὶ καινοτομεῖ τὰ ἀμήχανα.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Psellos, *Theological works* 27 Gautier: Τὸν δὲ τρίτον τοῦτον οὐρανὸν οὐ πρῶτος καινοτομεῖ ὁ ἀπόστολος, ἀλλὰ τοῖς τῆς γραφῆς ἀποχρώμενος ῥήμασι καὶ τρίτον φησὶν οὐρανὸν.

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., Plato, *Apology of Socrates* 24b–c (Σωκράτη φησὶν ἀδικεῖν τοὺς τε νέους διαφθείροντα καὶ θεοὺς οὐς ἡ πόλις νομίζει οὐ νομίζοντα, ἕτερα δὲ δαιμόνια καινά), and Xenophon, *Socratic dialogues* 1.1 (Ἡ μὲν γὰρ γραφή κατ’ αὐτοῦ τοιάδε τις ἦν· Ἀδικεῖ Σωκράτης οὐς μὲν ἡ πόλις νομίζει θεοὺς οὐ νομίζων, ἕτερα δὲ καινὰ δαιμόνια εισφέρων· ἀδικεῖ δὲ καὶ τοὺς νέους διαφθείρων).

changing the *status quo* in a way that leads to positive results or, at least, does not harm the unit of adoption.

As to the overall Byzantine understanding of innovation, there were of course fields in which most Byzantines understood innovation as something negative. In other fields, however, innovation was not only accepted, but also appreciated and encouraged. Furthermore, skepticism towards innovation, or at least certain types of innovation, or innovation in specific fields, seems to have existed long before Byzantium, as the study of ancient Greek sources may demonstrate.<sup>48</sup>

The widespread modern evaluation of Byzantium as anti-innovative can be proven wrong by the study of various innovations in Byzantine architecture<sup>49</sup> (one need only study the pendentives of Hagia Sophia), military techniques and practices<sup>50</sup> (Greek fire being an excellent example, though far from the only one), technology (see for example the fifth-century mechanical sundial treasured today at the British Museum of Science,<sup>51</sup> or the famous tenth-century hydraulic systems of the imperial palace described by Liutprand of Cremona<sup>52</sup>), painting (the narrative icon), theology (see above, on Iconoclasm and Hesychasm), or music.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, we may conclude that the modern theory that innovation was more or less unwanted in Byzantium is contradicted by a great number of sources of various types. Hence, one can assume that this theory is a result of (a) a minimal study of the Byzantine understanding (or understandings?) of innovation and (b) neglect of a principle in innovation studies that almost every innovation meets resistance, whose power depends upon the specific characteristics and valence of the adoptive unit (whether, for example, the majority of its members is receptive and amenable to adopting new ideas and changes).<sup>54</sup> Thus one is tempted to think that since innovation seems not to have been unwanted in Byzantium, it is more likely the study of Byzantine innovation that has not, thus far, been wanted by modern scholarship.

<sup>48</sup> See Godin 2012.

<sup>50</sup> See Haldon 2007, Treadgold 1995, Bartusis 1992, Luttwak 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Squartiti 2007, 197–198.

<sup>54</sup> See for example the chapter “Resistance to change” in King & Anderson 2002, 195–220.

<sup>49</sup> Ousterhout 1995.

<sup>51</sup> Field & Wright 1985.

<sup>53</sup> Velimirović 1995.

## ANCIENT AND BYZANTINE TEXTS

- Anna Komnene, *The Alexiad*. Ed. A. Kambylis & D.R. Reinsch, *Annae Comnenae Alexias*. Berlin & New York 2001. Tr. E.A. Dawes, *The Alexiad*. London 1928.
- Etymologicum Gudianum*. Ed. F.W. Sturz, *Etymologicum Graecae linguae Gudianum et alia grammaticorum scripta e codicibus manuscriptis nunc primum edita*. Leipzig 1818.
- Eunapius, *Historical fragments*. Ed. L. Dindorf, *Historici Graeci minores*. Leipzig 1870, 1.205–274.
- Hesychios, *Lexicon*. Ed. K. Latte, *Hesychii Alexandrini Lexicon*, vols. 1–2 (α–ο). Copenhagen 1953–1966.
- John Zonaras, *History*. Ed. L. Dindorf, *Ioannes Zonarae Epitomae Historiarum*, vols. 1–3. Leipzig 1868–1870.
- John Chrysostom, *In sancta lumina*. PG 36.336–360.
- Michael Psellos, *Encomium on the patriarch Constantine Leichoudes*. Ed. K.N. Sathas, *Encomium in patriarchem Constantinum Leichudem, Ἐπιτάφιοι Λόγοι*. Athens & Paris 1874, 388–421.
- *Oration on the decapitation of John the Baptist*. Ed. E.A. Fisher, *Michaelis Pselli orationes hagiographicae*. Stuttgart 1994, 289–323.
- *Theological works*. Ed. P. Gautier, *Michaelis Pselli theologica*. Stuttgart 1994.
- *Chronographia*. Ed. E. Renault, *Michel Psellos: Chronographie ou histoire d'un siècle de Byzance (976–1077)*, 2 vols. Paris 1926–1928 (repr. 1967). Tr. E.R.A. Sewter, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*. New York 1966.
- Photios, *Lexicon*. Ed. C. Theodoridis, *Photii patriarchae lexicon*, vols 1–3 (α–φ). Berlin & New York 1982–2012.
- Pseudo-Kodinos, *Treatise on the Dignities and Offices*. Ed. J. Verpeaux, *Pseudo-Kodinos. Traité des offices*. Paris 1966.
- Pseudo-Zonaras. Ed. J.A.H. Tittmann, *Iohannis Zonarae lexicon ex tribus codicibus manuscriptis*, 2 vols. Leipzig 1808.
- Suidae Lexicon*. Ed. A. Adler, *Suidae Lexicon*, 5 vols. Leipzig 1928–1938.
- Synagoge*. Ed. I.C. Cunningham, *Συναγωγή λέξεων χρησίων: Texts of the Original Version and of MS: B*. Berlin & New York 2003.
- Synodikon of Orthodoxy*. Ed. J. Guillard, “Le Synodikon de l’Orthodoxie. Édition et Commentaire”, *Travaux et Memoires* 2 (1967) 1–316.

## SECONDARY LITERATURE

- Alpers, K. 1990. “Griechische Lexikographie in Antike und Mittelalter”, in *Welt der Information*, ed. H.-A. Koch. Stuttgart, 14–38.
- 2001. “Lexikographie. B. I–III”, in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*. Tübingen, 194–210.
- Beregheh, A., J. Rowley & S. Sambrook 2009. “Towards a Multidisciplinary Definition of Innovation”, *Management Decision* 47:8, 1323–1339.
- Bartusis, M.C. 1992. *The Late Byzantine Army. Arms and Society, 1204–1453*. Philadelphia.
- Brubaker, L. 2010. “Icons and Iconomachy”, in *A Companion to Byzantium*, ed. L. James. Chichester, 323–337.
- Chatterjee, P. 2007. *Narrating Sanctity: The Narrative Icon in Byzantium and Italy*. PhD thesis, University of Chicago.
- Chesbrough, H.W. & D.J. Teece 2002. “Organizing for Innovation: When Is Virtual Virtuous?”, *Harvard Business Review* 80, 127–135.
- Dewar, R.D. & J.E. Dutton 1986. “The Adoption of Radical and Incremental Innovations: An Empirical Analysis”, *Management Science* 32, 1422–1433.
- Disbrey, C. 1994. *Innovation and Tradition in Religion*. Aldershot.
- Field, J.V. & M.T. Wright 1985. “Gears from the Byzantines: A Portable Sundial with Calendrical Gearing”, *Annals of Science* 42, 87–138.
- Godin, B. 2012. (with the collaboration of P. Lucier) “Innovation and Conceptual Innovation in Ancient Greece”, *Project on the Intellectual History of Innovation – Working Paper No. 12*, (Montreal/INRS). <http://www.csiic.ca/PDF/Antiquity.pdf> (accessed 1 March 2013).
- Haldon, J. (ed.) 2007. *Byzantine Warfare*. Aldershot.
- Kazhdan, A.P. & A.W. Epstein 1985. *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*. Berkeley.
- King, N. & N.J. Anderson 2002. *Managing Innovation and Change. A Critical Guide for Organizations*. London.
- Littlewood, A.R. (ed.) 1995. *Originality in Byzantine Literature, Art and Music. A Collection of Essays*. Oxford.
- Luttwak, E.N. 2009. *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*. Cambridge.

- Ödekan A., E. Akyürek & N. Necipoğlu (eds) 2010. *First International Sevgi Gonul Byzantine Studies Symposium. Change in the Byzantine World in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*. Istanbul.
- Rogers, E.M. 1995 [1962]. *Diffusion of Innovations*. New York.
- Spanos, A. 2010. "To Every Innovation Anathema'(?). Some preliminary thoughts on the study of Byzantine Innovation", in *Mysterion, strategike og kainotomia. Et festskrift til ære for Jonny Holbek*, ed. H. Knudsen et al. Oslo, 51–59.
- Squartiti, P. 2007. *The Complete Works of Liudprand of Cremona*. Washington, D.C.
- Treadgold, W. 1995. *Byzantium and its Army 284–1081*. Stanford.
- Zaltman, G.N., R.B. Duncan & J. Holbek 1973. *Innovations and Organizations*. New York.
- Zaltman, G. & N. Lin 1971. "On the Nature of Innovations", *American Behavioral Scientist* 14, 651–683.