

ANTHONY KALDELLIS and NIKETAS SINIOSSOGLU, eds., *The Cambridge Intellectual History of Byzantium*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. viii, 791; 1 chart. £120. ISBN: 978-1-107-04181-3.

Table of contents available online at <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107300859>
doi:10.1086/703824

There is almost no Byzantinist scholarship that has self-defined as “intellectual history.” Fully aware of this, Anthony Kaldellis and Niketas Sinioglou in their introduction clarify the theoretical underpinnings of intellectual history and define the place of *The Cambridge Intellectual History of Byzantium* in contemporary Byzantine studies. They argue that the approach of intellectual history allows us to find a middle way between a “history of ideas” that describes the development of concepts and thoughts, and a cultural history that considers expressions of thought and knowledge as determined by a narrowly defined historical context (8, 15). The authors appeal to a study of Byzantium that is approached as less monolithic, less dependent on written texts alone, and with definitions that are cut loose from modern assumptions. This substantial book thus fills in a gap, by covering the developments of philosophy, theology, science, and political thinking in Byzantium, and connecting them to each other.

Part 1, “The Transmission of Knowledge,” and part 2, “Sciences of the Word,” include overviews of institutional settings, books, and one textual genre (question-answer literature). Three chapters discuss the way Byzantines received, investigated, and put to use the literary heritage of the ancients (including rhetoric), while there are also contributions on theories of art and law. Part 3, “Sciences of the World,” has a conceptual chapter followed by overviews of individual sciences. Some (on astrology, magic, and alchemy) discuss the ramifications of potentially subversive scientific pursuits, while others (on astronomy and medicine) present a more neutral state of the art.

Parts 4 and 5 (on philosophy and theology, in middle and late Byzantium respectively) form the meat of the volume. Part 4, which is more oriented towards philosophy, is again introduced by a conceptual chapter. Three chapters are each time dedicated to the fate of Platonic and Aristotelian ideas in Byzantium. Three thinkers (Maximos the Confessor, John of Damascus, and Michael Psellos) receive a chapter of their own, with Damascus’s one, together with chapter 8 on theories of art, covering Iconoclasm.

Part 5 is dedicated to the intertwinement of philosophy and theology in later Byzantium, with much attention going to the Hesychast controversy and theological disputes with the West. A last part is devoted to political thinking, with two chapters focusing on notions of decline and emergency in the later period, while the volume closes with a chapter on the political legacy of Byzantium.

The focus is on Greek-speaking Byzantium (after 600) interacting with the ancient Greek heritage, but there is attention to intercultural contact between Byzantium and the Latin West, the Arab world, and Jewish culture. Chapter 5 reflects on what this “ancient Greek heritage” means, for either Byzantium receiving it in its own language, or the Arab world through a translation movement.

From this volume, one certainly gains the sense that Byzantium was an intellectually vibrant society. Knowledge and ideas circulated, were commented upon, redefined, adapted into new systems of thought, and engaged in contemporary debates, disputes, and decision-making. Rather than being a pursuit on its own or an inconsequential game, knowledge and ideas mattered, for political, religious, social, and material reasons.

At the same time, intellectual pursuits in Byzantium were bound by limits. The chapters on sciences especially point to the gap between theory and practice in Byzantium (for instance those on rhetoric and alchemy). Moreover, many chapters (especially those authored by the editors) conclude that there is an unresolved tension between a fully committed reception of ancient thinking and the Christian worldview imposed by Orthodoxy (see for example Sin-

Speculum 94/3 (July 2019)

iossoglou on the debate between Plethon and Scholarios on p. 635). In chapter 16, Dimitri Gutas and Siniosoglou state that Christianity and Hellenism are at “opposite conceptual poles,” rejecting the terms “negotiation” or “recontextualization” for the Christian handling of ancient pagan thinking (280–81). The emphasis is on conflict: ancient thinking cannot be read and applied in a wholesome, consistent way without clashing with “Orthodoxy,” risking violence and repression (see Tuomo Lankila on Neoplatonism on pp. 323–24, and the editors’ introduction on p. 19). The only viable way for philosophical ideas to survive in Byzantium was by being plucked apart or redefined. Chapters variably approach this conflict. Richard Greenfield, in his chapter on magic, depicts a spectrum between standard orthodoxy and non-conforming thought and behavior (218). Others emphasize the ambiguous nature of science (e.g., Paul Magdalino on astrology in chap. 12). Byzantine thinkers sometimes expressly opposed themselves to pagan philosophers, but clearly owed much to their ideas and concepts (see Andrew Louth about Evagrius and Plato on p. 518). In chapter 23, Michele Trizio rightly—and somewhat against the grain of the whole volume—warns us for fashionable narratives of heroic freethinkers fighting a relentlessly repressive Orthodox censorship apparatus (474).

Many chapters diachronically trace the fate of knowledge, ideas, and terminology through Byzantine history. This allows us to see how Byzantines redefined notions so as to use them for their own purposes (e.g., David Bradshaw on Aristotle in Byzantine theology in chap. 22) or how political changes induced different formulations, with varying emphases, of the same concepts (e.g., Magdalino on monarchism in chap. 34). Moreover, chapters 10 (by Dominic O’Meara) and 16 are insightful and much-needed essays that critically reassess modern scholarly assumptions about science and philosophy. By dissecting the various uses of salient terminology in Byzantium, they make us reconsider the Byzantine perspective. Chapter 16 somewhat provocatively but fruitfully asks whether there was such a thing as “Byzantine philosophy” at all.

Less attention goes to intellectual practices in their historical context. Trizio’s chapter on the study of Aristotle stands quite alone in considering the manuscript context of philosophical inquiry. This emphasis, coupled with an insistence to take seriously *what* the Byzantines had to say, instead of how, why, and to whom (18), results in a volume that rather gravitates towards a history of ideas than a contextualized history of concrete intellectual practices (think of education, manuscripts, or social networks), and does not benefit from a more literary or discourse-oriented approach taking into account misrepresentations, playfulness, and rhetorical strategies.

In the end, the volume successfully combines thought-provoking essays with well-informed contributions on an interesting range of subfields. It invites us to bridge gaps between philosophy, theology, and science, and elucidates the tensions between philosophical inquiry and religious discourse. Without a doubt, it marks a huge step forward in our understanding of Byzantine thinking in a Byzantine context, defined by Byzantine purposes.

FLORIS BERNARD, Ghent University

FRÉDÉRIQUE LACHAUD and MICHAEL PENMAN, eds., *Absentee Authority across Medieval Europe*. Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2017. Pp. xi, 264; 2 black-and-white figures and 2 maps. \$99. ISBN: 978-1-78327-252-5.

Table of contents available online at <https://boydellandbrewer.com/absentee-authority-across-medieval-europe.html>

doi:10.1086/703834

The editors’ decision to allow their contributors to interpret “absentee authority” as they chose is vindicated by the stimulating content of these essays. Inevitably, some authors have

Speculum 94/3 (July 2019)