

George Akropolites: The History

Review Number:

656

Publish date:

Tuesday, 1 April, 2008

Editor:

Ruth Macrides

ISBN:

9780199210671

Date of Publication:

2007

Price:

£70.00

Pages:

400pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

Christopher Wright

The *History* of George Akropolites describes an exceptional period in Byzantine history, between the loss of Constantinople to the forces of the Fourth Crusade in 1204 and the reconquest of the city by Michael VIII Palaiologos in 1261. Ruth Macrides's English translation of the text, a long-awaited publication based on her 1978 doctoral thesis, is sure to be invaluable to the future teaching of the later history of Byzantium and makes this important source readily accessible to a wider anglophone audience.

While English translations of the 11th- and 12th-century histories of Michael Psellos, Anna Komnene, John Kinnamos and Niketas Choniates are available, as are the 15th-century works of Doukas and Sphrantzes and the early books of Laonikos Chalkokondyles, the lack of access to the histories of the intervening period in this language provides a considerable impediment to undergraduate teaching of the era. This publication marks a major step in the remedying of this deficiency. In addition to the value of the translation itself, the exceptionally thorough and detailed commentary and apparatus accompanying the text firmly locate the work in the context of its author's career and preoccupations, and the evidence supplied by other sources regarding the events and individuals it describes. They illuminate the shaping of the text by Akropolites's perspectives, interests, and political and personal agenda, showing how these inform both the presentation of its content and its omissions and evasions. The commentary amounts to a major contribution to the study of Byzantine historiography and a historical and prosopographical companion to the period as a whole which will be of great use to specialists as well as those new to the subject. This work is of particular value given that in the past there has been a conspicuous shortage of searching analysis of this author and the forces shaping his history, when compared to research on other Byzantine historians.

One of the most immediate effects of the fall of Constantinople to the Latins was the emergence of multiple

durable successor regimes, whose ruling dynasties each at one time or another laid claim to the imperial title. Yet this new plurality is not reflected in this period's historiographical legacy. No narratives have survived to relate the development of the regimes based in Epiros or Trebizond from the point of view of their inhabitants, or to express the perspectives of their rulers. The Byzantine historians whose work supplies the backbone for our knowledge of the successor states were all adherents to the Nicaean empire or of its direct continuation, the Byzantine empire restored to its ancient capital. Of these, only Akropolites supplies a contemporary account spanning the period. Niketas Choniates covers only a few years after 1204 and George Pachymeres a few years before 1261 with some allusions to the events of the preceding decades, while the chronicle of Theodore Skoutariotes adapted Akropolites's account from a contrasting political and religious perspective. Thus, while his portrayal can be supplemented and his perspectives balanced by other sources, we are heavily reliant on Akropolites both for our understanding of the history of the Nicaean regime in Anatolia and that of its rivals in the Balkans. His text supplies the necessary starting point for any study of the Byzantine world as it emerged from the cataclysm of 1204.

Paradoxically, despite its role as the linchpin of our knowledge of this unique period, Akropolites's account is not especially reflective of its distinctive character, as Macrides has argued previously. (1) Originating from Constantinople himself, writing after the reconquest of the capital and being an adherent of Michael VIII, who had ousted the dynasty that had ruled the Nicaean empire and was on bad terms with the population of the Asian provinces on which it had been based, Akropolites produced a history of an Anatolian regime which reveals remarkably little about Anatolia and a history of an imperial dynasty which is geared to the needs of the usurper who had overthrown it. Unsurprisingly, the viewpoint of the Byzantine rulers in the Balkans also receives unsympathetic treatment in this work. Akropolites treated them, for the most part, as renegades against legitimate authority and rejected their claims to represent the continuation of the Byzantine empire to the extent that he even declines to regard their people as Romans. He relays to us the history of the regimes of Nicaea and Epiros but he does so from a perspective fixed firmly in the Byzantium of the Palaiologoi.

In recent years Akropolites has attracted the attention of a number of translators who have rendered the work into Russian, German and modern Greek; this publication, however, is the only published English translation. (2) The translation is founded on Heisenberg's edition of 1903, taking into account Wirth's emendations of 1978, and largely follows Heisenberg's organisational structure. (3) Macrides has, however, made very occasional emendations to Heisenberg's and Wirth's readings, which are noted and justified in the apparatus. The translation remains close to the original wording and Macrides has sought with considerable success to convey directly Akropolite's style and its variations, and to avoid polishing awkwardness where it exists in the text. This method is well suited to a text whose language and style is clear and straightforward by the standards of Byzantine classicising histories and is, therefore, in less need than some of interpretative clarification. As well as accurately and lucidly conveying the form and content of the original, through this approach Macrides succeeds in reflecting the contrast between the largely plain and straightforward prose which characterises most of the work and the more florid passages which occasionally intrude and whose more elaborate rhetoric reflects their importance to Akropolites's agenda.

What most conspicuously sets this publication apart from existing English translations of other Byzantine historians is the sheer scale of the accompanying commentary, founded on wide-ranging research whose thoroughness is reflected in the extensive bibliography. This supporting work is delivered in three forms: the introduction, passages of commentary accompanying each section of the text and the apparatus of notes; between them they approach four times the length of the text itself. The introduction gives a detailed and comprehensive account of Akropolites's career and writings and an examination of the work as a whole. This includes analysis of his sources and influences; literary aspects of his work, such as its approach to nomenclature and chronology, and its classicising elements; and the light cast on his work by the differing viewpoints of his historiographical successor Pachymeres and his adapter Skoutariotes. The introduction also provides a series of studies on the text's presentation of particular subjects. These include Akropolites's treatment of the career of Alexios III Angelos, the origins of the empire of Nicaea, the Nicaean army and navy and the portrayal of the Turks, Latins, Bulgarians and Epirots. They amount to a valuable overview of

the picture Akropolites presents of the political landscape around him, and in the case of the studies on the army and navy, a compendium of the precious fragments of information he offers on matters on which little evidence is available. Each of the sections into which the text is divided is accompanied by a passage of commentary summarising its content while discussing particular points of interest. These passages also supply cross-references, references, pertinent secondary works and other sources relating to the same events, as well as highlighting those events known only from Akropolites. The notes are particularly impressive in their historical discussion of individual points in the text, providing supplementary information and references, comparisons of Akropolites's account with other relevant sources and discussion of specific problems or matters of interest in unusual breadth and depth, while also attending to textual ambiguities and terminological questions. Especially notable here is the volume of prosopographical material supplied regarding the individuals mentioned in the text. The overall effect is to leave little or nothing in the text lacking necessary contextualisation, clarification or illumination, and Macrides is to be greatly applauded both for the extent of the painstaking scholarship on display and for its effective deployment.

In its characterisation of the text as a whole, the central argumentative thrust of Macrides's commentary is an effort to illuminate the partisan proclivities which shaped Akropolites's work, elaborating the arguments she has made in previous articles. (4) The importance of such analysis is increased by the fact that his matter-of-fact, rational and largely dispassionate approach has encouraged a widespread perception of Akropolites as a broadly objective and impartial witness, despite recognition of his alignment with Michael VIII. It is Macrides's contention that the extent to which Akropolites's political and personal purposes pervade the work have tended to be insufficiently recognised. Chief among the factors distorting the history's portrayal of events was Akropolites's association in the latter part of his career with Michael VIII. Unusually among Byzantine historians, he still held high governmental office at the time of writing, a fact which must have magnified the pressure on him to please the current regime. This was further intensified by the fact that Akropolites was not only a beneficiary of the patronage of Michael's predecessors John III Vatatzes and Theodore II Laskaris but one of the latter's closest friends and assistants. Having survived the purge which killed all the other members of Theodore's inner circle at the time of Michael's coup d'etat and having then managed to return to high office - apparently thanks to the fact that he was a prisoner of Michael II of Epiros at the time and that he was married to one of Michael's relatives - there was clearly a great incentive for Akropolites to emphasise his loyalty to the new regime by distancing himself from his former benefactors and what they stood for. Macrides suggests that the profundity of this rupture with his own past has been under-estimated because Akropolites has successfully misdirected later historians by associating himself with the aristocratic milieu around Michael VIII while disparaging Theodore II's other protégés and their lowly origins. By comparing what is known of their families and the course of his career, she convincingly argues that Akropolites came from the same social background as the ministers he denigrates and like them owed his eminence entirely to the favour of the Laskarid emperors - facts he was at pains to conceal.

In light of this characterisation of his circumstances and motives, Macrides illustrates in detail the ways in which Akropolites skewed his portrayal in the service of the emperor and in his own interest. Michael and his family appear in a prominent and positive fashion from an early stage in the history, with potentially discreditable incidents in his career, such as his trial for treason and his flight to the Turks, being turned to his advantage and the detriment of his predecessors. She shows how this favourable portrayal and the unfavourable one of John, Theodore and their associates reinforce one another through a juxtaposition of the qualities and behaviour of the individuals concerned. Meanwhile Akropolites's own closeness to the old regime is underplayed and a transient incident of acrimony between him and Theodore given elaborate coverage.

Akropolites has been able to retain his reputation for objectivity because he steered clear of blatant polemic and the means by which his partisan portrayal of the past is conveyed are often discreet. Macrides is most persuasive in her enumeration of the manifold ways in which the text reveals a central preoccupation with elevating Michael VIII, and presents a personally flattering and politically apposite picture of Akropolites's own career. The view that emerges is of a work which, although it deals largely with the empire of Nicaea and its Laskaris-Vatatzes rulers, is in effect a prehistory for the regime of Michael VIII Palaiologos. Through

the comparison with the contrasting portrayals presented by Skoutariotes and Pachymeres, Macrides underlines the idiosyncrasies of Akropolites's version of events. Thus the commentary supplies the reader with the necessary context for a sensitive understanding of the text.

In addition to this compellingly argued central theme, which expands and reinforces the arguments made in her previous publications, Macrides's commentary also offers other important insights into the roots and nature of Akropolites's outlook. Notably, she convincingly documents a close correspondence between his interests and attitudes and those of his teacher Nikephoros Blemmydes, particularly in his treatment of ecclesiastical matters. Another of the most striking elements of the commentary is the argument that Akropolites presents the bonds of kinship as the principal causative force in political affairs, which is again well supported with abundant citations from the text. It is only a pity that no more extensive treatment could be given to this fascinating argument, with its resonance with wider Byzantine social, cultural and political developments, and with the tension between Theodore II's governmental approach shaped by friendship and meritocracy and the more aristocratic ethos represented by Michael VIII in particular. While constraints of space clearly applied here, it could at least have been given greater prominence rather than being fitted into a section on the role of classicism in the work. It is to be hoped that Macrides will return to the theme at greater length in future publications.

Despite the excellence of the content, some criticism may be made of the organisation of the commentary. Jarringly, the passages of commentary accompanying each section of the text follow rather than preceding the section in question. This arrangement is baffling considering that most of these commentaries begin by summarising the content of the section; this would be a logical and helpful inclusion in a prefatory passage, but it is futile when it appears only after the reader has finished reading the section itself. As is common in translations, the notes to the text also follow each section and its commentary, requiring the reader to flick back and forth between them and the text. While awkward, this choice is probably justified in this case, given the sheer extent of the notes.

Besides the inevitable occasional errors in the index and cross-references, there are some factual mistakes, principally in the treatment of the immediate aftermath of the Fourth Crusade. The individual mentioned by Choniates as wielding authority in the Maiander valley and fighting against Theodore Laskaris was Manuel Maurozomes not Theodore Maurozomes as stated (p. 84). (5) The assertion that Leo Sgouros had fought effectively against the Latins prior to his marriage to Eudokia Angelina, daughter of Alexios III (p. 81) is unfounded: there is no indication that Sgouros had fought the Latins at all at the time of this marriage, and his subsequent efforts to halt their advance were conspicuously ineffective. (6) Geoffrey of Villehardouin does not describe the siege of Varna in 1201 as stated (p. 91) - his cited descriptions of Bulgarian siege methods actually relate to the sieges of Didymoteichon and Adrianople in 1206-7. However, as all such errors are minor and confined to matters peripheral to the subject, they do not seriously impair the work as a whole.

In addition to the commentary, the text is also accompanied by maps depicting the Balkans and Anatolia and by family trees of the leading Byzantine families of the period. The maps are specifically and very effectively geared to the purpose of acting as a companion to the text, identifying the location of all the settlements and regions in Anatolia, the Balkans and the Aegean mentioned by Akropolites - and those alone. Similarly, the 'Macedonia' marked is not the region to which we would normally apply that term but rather the area referred to under that name by Akropolites, that is to say the Byzantine *theme* actually located in Thrace. All known locations are clearly and accurately placed, while conjectural positions are given for places of uncertain identification, with due acknowledgement of that uncertainty. The depiction of the physical landscape is also unusually thorough, with comprehensive coverage of rivers. However, the area covered by the maps leaves Trebizond and Karitana just outside their boundaries and the location of these two places is shown using small inset maps, an awkward device which could readily have been avoided with only a small modification of the area covered by the main maps. The organisation of the family trees likewise emphasises their relevance to the text, specifying which of the individuals shown Akropolites mentions by name, which of them are unnamed in his text but are identifiable from other sources, and which of them are not present in his history at all. While generally clear and informative, there are some

unfortunate elements of sloppiness in the presentation of these tables. Connecting lines leading nowhere appear without explanation and occasionally, as in the case of the descendants of Isaac Doukas on Table 3 or of Theodore Komenos Doukas's daughter Eirene on Table 4, it is unclear which member of a married couple is descended from the identified parents.

In translating this work, Macrides has enabled readers to gain easier access to the most important source on the period; in supplementing it with a masterful and meticulous commentary, she has illuminated the problems and peculiarities that must be understood to achieve a proper appreciation of its value and its limitations. The publication as a whole is the most impressive translation of a Byzantine historian yet to appear in English.

May 2008

This is a comprehensive and complimentary review and I am pleased to have received it. I thank the reviewer for correcting the factual errors which are indeed errors.

Notes

1. R. Macrides, 'The 13th century in Byzantine historical writing', in *Porphyrogenita: Essays on Byzantine History, in Honour of Julian Chrysostomides*, ed. C. Dendrinos, J. Harris, E. Harvalia-Crook and J. Herrin (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 63-76 at pp. 68-9, 72-6. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. E.g. *Georgios Akropolites (1217-82) - Die Chronik*, trans. W. Blum (Stuttgart, 1989); *Georgii Akropolit - Historia*, trans. P. I. Zavoronkov (St. Petersburg, 2005). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Georgii Akropolitae Opera*, ed. A. Heisenberg, 2 vols. (Leipzig 1903), reprinted with corrections by P. Wirth (Stuttgart, 1978). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. R. Macrides, 'George Akropolites's rhetoric', in *Rhetoric in Byzantium*, ed. E. Jeffreys (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 201-9; 'The historian in the history', in *FILELLHN: Studies in Honour of Robert Browning*, ed. C. N. Constantinides, N. M. Panagiotakes and A. D. Angelou (Venice, 1996) pp. 205-24 at pp. 221-3; and, Macrides in Dendrinos. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Niketas Choniates Historia*, ed. J. A. van Dieten, (Berlin, 1975), pp. 626, 638. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. van Dieten, pp. 608-9, 611. [Back to \(6\)](#)

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/656#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3630>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>