

REVIEW–DISCUSSION

A NEW LOOK AT ZONARAS

Theofili Kampianaki, *John Zonaras' Epitome of Histories: A Compendium of Jewish-Roman History and Its Reception*. Oxford Studies in Byzantium. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. xiv + 200. Hardback, £71.00/\$90.00. ISBN 978-0-192-86510-6.

In the years since Anthony Kaldellis' *The Argument of Psellos' Chronographia*, a quiet revolution has taken place in the historiography of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. A series of book-length studies by Holmes and Kiapidou (Skylitzes), Krallis (Attaleiates), Neville (Bryennios), Buckley, Viliminovic and Neville (Anna Komnene), Nilsson (Manasses), and Simpson (Choniates) have engaged with the histories and chronicles that lay out the landscape of Medieval Roman history in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.¹

This body of scholarship turned its focus on different aspects of Roman historical production in the Middle Ages, from intellectual and political culture to dissidence, contemporary political ideology, gender, classicism, and, inevitably, Romanness. What is more, to a different extent in each case, chronicles and histories have been situated in the peculiar historical context that engendered their production and which, in turn, they helped illuminate. In the process, these Roman authors emerged from modern analysis as historical agents often active in the very historical reality their narratives helped reconstruct. Thus, even in the one study on Manasses where engagement with authorial intention is programmatically limited, the question of the author as a purposeful social agent inevitably emerges.²

Theofili Kampianaki's book on Ioannes Zonaras' *Epitome of Histories* joins works by the aforementioned scholars to offer a rich and fruitful investigation of a text that has proved hard for scholars of Byzantium to evaluate in its entirety, by virtue of its daunting length (more than 2000 pages in the CHSB edition).³ With this in mind, it is all the more admirable that while treating the

¹ Kaldellis (1999); Holmes (2006); Kiapidou (2010); Krallis (2012); Neville (2012); Buckley (2014); Viliminovic (2018); Neville (2018); Nilsson (2020); Simpson (2013).

² Nilsson (2020) 89–91 and 110 for the evident distress caused by the idea of 'empirical' authorship.

³ Banchich and Lane (2008) for an excellent recent partial commentary and translation of Zonaras' work.

work's dual character, as an epitome of Jewish and Roman histories, Kampianaki offers a gateway into the intellectual concerns of an otherwise elusive character, whom she places as an actor on the socio-political scene of twelfth-century Komnenian Romanía. Kampianaki's achievement is as all the more significant when one considers the fact that unlike Attaleiates, Psellos, and Anna Komnene, whose works survive in but a few codices, Zonaras proved so popular that upwards of seventy-four manuscripts survive in libraries around the world, preserving either fragmentary or complete versions of his work. To that, one must add, as Kampianaki notes in her introduction, the work's *metaphrases* in lower Greek register and its out-and-out foreign, Slavonic and Aragonese translations (covered in Chapter 7 of her book).

While the book's title, with its focus on the text and its reception, limits expectations, preparing the reader for a philological engagement with the text, its actual content escapes this narrower remit and delivers a tableau with important socio-cultural and political implications. Philology thus becomes here the handmaiden of history, with Kampianaki's Zonaras emerging as a purposeful and capable political user of historical narrative. The book's argument is scaffolded on seven chapters, themselves framed by an introduction and a short concluding chapter. The progression from 'John Zonaras: Biography and Oeuvre' (Ch. 1) to 'The Composition of the *Epitome*' (Ch. 2), 'Zonaras' Working Method and Treatment of his Sources' (Ch. 3), 'The Political and Ideological Context of the *Epitome*' (Ch. 4), 'Zonaras' Keen Interest in Roman Antiquity' (Ch. 5), 'Intellectual Networks and Intended Readers, and Readers' Responses' (Ch. 6) and finally 'The Reception of the *Epitome*' (Ch. 7) produces a narrative that, while at times technical given its philological nature, nevertheless gives rise to a world of writers, readers, students, teachers, and state officials that enriches our understanding of twelfth-century Constantinople.

Each chapter dovetails with the previous one, all together producing a steadily fuller image of the work and its author. Chapter 1 adds depth to the study of the *Epitome* by bringing it into conversation with Zonaras' wider oeuvre. Here we find a useful discussion of his work on the canons, his homiletic and hagiographical production, his ecclesiastical poetry, and exegetical work on poetic material, as well as his possible dabbling in lexicography. Combined with prosopographical material, which while admittedly scant (7–10) nevertheless establishes Zonaras as a member of a family with history in the Roman polity's civilian administration (more precisely its legal apparatus), the material on the author's oeuvre provides a temporal and social framework for imagining the conditions for the production of the *Epitome*, while also hinting at a possible earlier career in teaching (10). Zonaras' traditionalism, as revealed in responses to marriage and haircut practices found in canonical commentary (12), but also the flexibility implicit in his conception of nature, expressed clearly in his discussion of nocturnal emissions

(17–18), emerge from Kampianaki's readings of his oeuvre in this chapter better to frame the analysis of the *Epitome* that will follow.

Chapter 2, dedicated to the composition of the *Epitome*, is effectively an introduction to Zonaras' historical work. Kampianaki outlines here the *Epitome's* division into Jewish and Roman materials to highlight the sequencing and pace of the work's composition. She does this by noting that the earlier Jewish section of the *Epitome* appears distinct from the remainder of the completed project in ways that differentiate Zonaras' work from that of Malalas or George the Monk, who more seamlessly connect Jewish and Roman history (33–4). Furthermore, Kampianaki explains that offhand statements in this segment of the *Epitome* directing his readers to Polybios and Cassius Dio for Greek and Roman materials tangential to the Jewish story (34–5) suggest that Zonaras had likely not decided, at the time when the Jewish materials were produced, to proceed with the composition of a universal chronicle. What is more, such statements hint at the realities of 'exile', already discussed in Chapter 1, and the demands of 'exile' on both Zonaras' time and pen. Kampianaki here suggests that the scope of the work changes as source material gets collected under challenging conditions (36).

Her elegant analysis in Chapter 3, however, on the careful and purposeful use of the Plutarchan material (53–4) from a variety of *Lives* for the production of a complex and ever-shifting, historical-agent-specific point of view, suggests a thoughtful collection of source materials aligned perhaps with a wider vision of what the *Epitome* would look like once completed. In Chapter 3 we also get a sense of Zonaras' method and taste, his disinterest in speeches and battles scenes and his commitment to a praxis-driven historical narrative. Such themes affect not only the nature of his work but also the engagement with his sources, of which Plutarch and Dio are most productively analysed in Kampianaki's pages. While Dio and Plutarch take pride of place, the more 'Byzantine' material of the *Epitome*, such as for example Theophanes (59), reveals Zonaras' limited interest in questions ecclesiastical, contrary to what he himself had indicated in the proem to his work. With that in mind, it is perhaps no surprise that the praxis-focused author, while confined to the Pantanassa Monastery, was treated by his friends as *σχολάζων* (39) from the life of a Polybian *ἀνὴρ πραγματικός*.

Chapter 4 is nodal to the book, not simply because it stands at its very middle. It engages with *Kaiserkritik* but also it connects the previous chapter's discussion of working method and sources to what follows in Chapter 5, where Zonaras' interest in Roman antiquity is discussed in greater detail. It is apposite then that in the footnotes of the chapter's very first page Kaldellis and Magdalino feature prominently, as Kampianaki lays her analysis within a context defined by the wider republican reconceptualisation of Roman politics by Kaldellis, on the one hand, and the more focused study of *Kaiserkritik* by

Magdalino, on the other.⁴ Kampianaki shows the *Epitome* to be in dialogue with prevailing themes in Komnenian propaganda (77) and argues persuasively that the faults of Alexios that emerge from Zonaras' work are by no means peculiar to him. His handling of the state as family business, the granting of state property to friends and family, and the squeezing of his subjects by means of excessive taxes (75) constitute, in Zonaras' mind, a regime of unfreedom (74) not uniquely associated with Alexios. In fact, careful reading of the *Epitome* allows Kampianaki to detect antecedents to such behaviour in the reigns of Constantine the Great, Justinian, Michael III, Konstantinos VII, Nikephoros I and Nikephoros Phokas, as well as Basil II (72–3). Thus, the ostensible target of Zonaras' *Kaiserkritik*, Alexios, now becomes the endpoint of a thoughtfully planned journey through a historical examination of lawful rule. Kampianaki therefore traces the contours of a historically informed theory of lawful rule, in which an aristocratic patriciate that 'includes prominent lineage, remarkable intellectual qualities, and exemplary conduct' must play a critical role (78).

So far, it is clear that Kampianaki's goal is not to read the *Epitome* as a cabinet of antiquarian curiosities. She is interested in Zonaras as a Roman of the Middle Ages and treats his engagement with the *Epitome*'s source material as a culturally and socially grounded activity with an eye to contemporary Roman sensibilities. Zonaras emerges from her work as more than fodder for classicists of the modern era, hungry for the tiniest crumb of republican trivia. Kampianaki instead examines the many interesting ways in which Zonaras mines a body of literature available to him in order to generate a deep historical time that serves his Medieval Roman sensibilities. Zonaras emerges from her work as a purposeful compiler of ancient materials, with a distinct agenda, operating in an era of shifting social realities and increased contacts with the west (4).

The author's argument may, so far, be summed up in the following manner. Zonaras was a member of the Byzantine *noblesse de robe*, which found itself relatively marginalised under the Komnenoi, and he, from a position of relatively flexible exile, produced in stages, with feedback from his peers both inside and outside the monastery where he was confined, a cleverly arranged, erudite chronicle of Jewish and Roman histories, with a notable focus on the republican era and a peculiar interest in the evolution of Roman customs and institutions. Zonaras' interest in and position on questions of institutional history, in turn produce a clear conception of proper and lawful rule against which Roman rulers of all ages were judged, through the production of nuanced and complex portraits of figures of power. This analysis turns Zonaras into a thoughtful political thinker. In view of Kampianaki's analysis,

⁴ Kaldellis (2015); Magdalino (1983).

the *Epitome's* anti-Komnenian *Kaiserkritik* emerges as much more than dissatisfaction with political marginalisation. It is rather the logical conclusion of sustained and thoughtful engagement with Roman history, custom, practice, and ideology.

I skip for the moment Chapter 5, on Zonaras' interest in republican Rome to which I will return below, in order to quickly address the book's final two chapters on intellectual networks and reception. Chapter 6 adds to the arguments in Chapter 1 by outlining further possible points of connection between Zonaras and his peers and contemporaries, both inside the monastic establishment and beyond. It speaks to the flexible boundaries of the world of monastic confinement but also of the Pantanassa's direct personal and institutional links to Komnenian monastic behemoths such as the Pantokrator. Chapter 7 is a nod to the book's title and engages with the question of the *Epitome's* afterlife. In this chapter Kampianaki outlines the many interesting ways in which Rome's deep past, as reconstructed by Zonaras, was read, misread, and used by its numerous readers, both Romans and foreigners, for whom the *Epitome* became a useful prism for imagining and understanding their worlds.

In the remainder of this review, I focus on specific observations and claims that Kampianaki makes as she methodically builds her argument in order to explore their implications for our reading of Medieval Roman political and intellectual culture. It is a testament to the author's success that what critique of her work might follow can only lead to what are hopefully productive discussions on an author she has opened up to her readers in new and effective ways.

Granted Kampianaki's assessment of the political nature of Zonaras' work and her convincing laying out of the evidence for his interest in the institutional development of the Roman polity over the centuries of its existence (33), one peculiar aspect of his chronicle emerges as a site for further study. In her analysis of the composition of the *Epitome* in Chapter 2, the author explains (28) that Zonaras explicitly marks the late Republic, from the fall of Corinth in 146 BCE to the career of Pompey, as a period that he was unable to cover properly, given the sparsity of source material in his place of exile. Kampianaki accepts Zonaras' claim, especially as it seems to accord with what we know about the surviving materials from Cassius Dio. And yet we should surely probe the question further. Kampianaki in fact notes that Zonaras was a capable user of Plutarch, able to bring together vignettes and carefully arranged narrative fragments from different books of his work to recreate lively accounts of late republican period. What is more, she clearly shows that Zonaras' seclusion in the monastery was less than absolute, a claim which accords with Leonora Neville's assessment of the nature of Anna Komnene's

roughly contemporary monastic confinement.⁵ We can therefore safely assume that he most likely could, should he have wanted to, procure works unavailable on the island of St. Glykeria.⁶

With that in mind, we must ask whether the omission of Roman affairs from the third Punic War to the rise of Pompey, a time when according to Zonaras Rome was in effect a monarchy in disguise (28–9, 106), was in fact a programmatic decision. Kampianaki convincingly demonstrates (Chapter 4.2) that Zonaras, who was suspicious of the people at large as a political agent, had a clear conception of lawful rule. In his mind such rule was embodied in monarchs whose authority was buttressed but also checked by a meritocratic aristocratic elite represented in the Roman senate. Kampianaki demonstrates Zonaras' belief in the right to censure an emperor by directly citing his commentary on the 84th Apostolic Canon, according to which 'the canon, nevertheless, does not forbid [one] from rebuking them in the event that they do something improper, even if the words of rebuke are perhaps so fierce that they may be regarded as insults by those being rebuked' (76).

Here then we return to the *Epitome's* missing years of the republican era and must ask if their absence was not less the result of inadequate sources and more the product of embarrassment and thematic incongruity with his work's wider message. For an advocate of meritocratic senatorial power, the period from the Third Punic War to the rise of Pompey was one of steady institutional collapse of that very system. Marian merit and Sullan lineage clashed during Zonaras' missing republican years to produce warlordism and quasi-perpetual civil war, which led inexorably to the rise of Augustan Monarchy. To a critic of the Komnenoi, themselves warlords, who imposed a new political regime restrictive of the senate and its *parrhēsia* after an intense period of civil war, any excuse would be good to avoid covering embarrassing material.

The role of republican Rome in Medieval Roman narratives brings us to two related problems, which Kampianaki's book sets before the reader. Both raise questions regarding Zonaras' method and historical approach. On different occasions Kampianaki marks the ways in which the *Epitome* dives into ancient Roman material to make statements on political and more broadly on personal virtue. Thus, in her discussion of Numa Pompilius she demonstrates Zonaras' manipulation of Numa's Plutarchan biography and notes the effective editorial 'Christianisation' of the Roman king (52). Returning to the wider question on the instrumentalisation of the past in Chapter 5, which is focused on Zonaras' interest in Roman antiquity, she compares the *Epitome* to

⁵ Neville (2018) 133–9

⁶ The tenth-century *Codex Sangermanensis* and eleventh-century *Codex Seitenstettensis* give us a sense of the Plutarchan material available in Zonaras' time. They contain Roman *Lives* from Tiberius Gracchus to Pompey that would have helped cover the years apparently unavailable through Dio.

the work of Michael Attaleiates and comments on what she sees as the moralising bent of the latter's work (93). Here, while recognising the essential importance of a parallel study of the *Epitome* and the *History*, I would like to offer a point of disagreement with Kampianaki on her reading of Attaleiates. Unlike Zonaras, the eleventh-century judge does not attempt to 'Christianise' the Romans of the republican era. He does not render their paganism anodyne by way of historical editing. His narrative rises above confessional divisions to develop a conception of universal values that transcends religion. In doing so he delivers a harsh critique of contemporary Romans, who, despite their access to God's dispensation, are unable to match pagan virtue.⁷ Attaleiates' moralising, for he is indeed spinning a morality tale as Kampianaki correctly diagnoses, is predicated on pagan virtue, much like in an earlier era Tacitus' or Salvian's scathing critiques of their contemporaries were predicated on varieties of barbarian virtue.

In seeking a historical context for Zonaras' republican interests Kampianaki points in two directions. On the one hand eleventh- and twelfth-century legal culture becomes a backdrop for Byzantine engagement with republican institutions and norms, while on the other intensified contacts with the so-called Latin world and its quasi-republican city-states are proposed as stimuli for the intensification of engagement with pre-imperial Rome. Of the two possible avenues to a republican imagination in the twelfth century, the Western one is the one more akin to an afterthought in Kampianaki's study. It is mentioned in passing in Chapter 5 over two pages (95–6) and is not particularly developed. The legal path to republican Rome, on the other hand, is more developed. In following it, Kampianaki ropes into the conversation judges like Attaleiates and legally trained individuals, such as Psellos, whose dabbling with history betrays the influence of republican ideas. Solid as the connection might be, it inevitably limits Medieval Roman engagement with 'deep' Roman history to external and temporally circumscribed stimuli. It consequently makes it impossible to consider deeper republican undercurrents in the Roman polity, which would have made Rome's long past relevant to historians of the Middle Ages. It is as if Roman law (which is all too often studied as an intellectual activity in isolation from the society that invested so much to keep it alive and operational) and the West become veils behind which to hide other extensive substantive engagements with the Roman past, such as that by Konstantinos VII's research team in the tenth century, engagements which demonstrated a continued, sustained interest in that very past.⁸

⁷ Kaldellis (2007); Krallis (2012) 192–9.

⁸ Nemeth (2018).

This same engagement with Konstantinos VII and his circle raises the spectre of Polybios, an author critical to the Constantinian initiative.⁹ Kampianaki intriguingly notes in her analysis of the Jewish history segment of Zonaras' *Epitome* that the author addresses his readers and asks them to turn to Polybios, among others, for more information on the Roman and Greek context of the affairs discussed in his text so far. She then uses this reference to convincingly make the case for Zonaras' *Epitome* being produced in stages, with the Jewish chapters produced and disseminated early on, before the Roman books were ever conceived (34–5). The reference to Polybios, however, also raises a question that remains unaddressed by Kampianaki. What was it that made Cassius Dio and Plutarch better sources for a *longue durée* history of Rome than Polybios, whom Zonaras otherwise considers an essential source his readers should consult? Recent work has suggested that Polybios could serve as a critical ideological crutch for Romans in the Middle Ages and that his work was used by the judge Michael Attaleiates, whose position in the state apparatus was not dissimilar to that of Zonaras prior to his monastic confinement.¹⁰ What, then, other than availability of manuscripts (23) and taste—which can of course never be discounted as factors—might have made Polybios incompatible with Zonaras' agenda?¹¹

Might it be that Polybios gets us back to the vexed question of Zonaras' political ideology? Is it possible that the 'inventor' of the mixed constitution (Polybios, *Histories*, Book 6), with his inconvenient inclusion of a 'democratic' populace in Rome's political mix, a populace which Zonaras did not feel sympathy for, made his work all too Greek for an author, whose preference for Dio and Plutarch suggested a more conservative Roman sensibility? Kampianaki's work allows this question to emerge fruitfully in the reader's mind even if she does not directly address it herself. And it is here where much of this book's value resides. With erudite philology and the meticulous examination of both Zonaras' careful and purposeful use of source material and the reception of his work by later authors both Roman and foreign, Kampianaki's scholarship lays avenues on which to take historical enquiry as readers of her book pick up the threads of her argument and exposition.

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⁹ Nemeth (2018) 5.

¹⁰ Krallis (2012) 52–69.

¹¹ Treadgold (2013) 310–11 on Cassius Dio's surviving books.

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