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Classicising histories, chronicles, and the advantages and disadvantages that are associated with these terms as used by modern scholars to describe Byzantine historical narratives

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In Byzantine literature (which we nowadays know historical writing to be),² there was a relative (but not strict or clear) distinction between histories (“*ἱστορία*”) and chronicles (“*χρονικόν*” or “*χρονογραφία*”). Histories were written in classical Attic Greek, according to the stylistic rules set by the ancient Greek tradition of history writing (mainly by Herodotus³ and Thucydides), and covered a relatively short period of time, close to the times when historians themselves had lived. Chronicles, on the other hand, were written in a simpler, less difficult language (although not in the vernacular). They either covered the period from the Creation of the world to the time of their composition (or perhaps a little before that), or continued the chronicle of another author, which had again started with the Creation. Early chronicles, such as the *Chronicon Paschale* of the seventh century and that of Theophanes Confessor (eighth/ninth century), were rather laconic, as they were structured year by year in order to record various events in a very succinct way. Subsequently, chronicles, such as those of John Skylitzes (late eleventh century), John Zonaras, Constantine Manasses and Michael Glykas (all dated to the twelfth century), were written in a language that combined Attic Greek and forms that were close to the spoken language. Certainly by the twelfth century, these texts were structured around rulers, kings and emperors, and included an account of the great empires, namely the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Macedonian, Roman and Byzantine, while presenting the events that had taken place during their existence.⁴

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² Macrides 2016: 258.

³ For the transliteration of Greek names, I have followed Kazhdan 1991.

⁴ Bourbouhakis and Nilsson 2010; Kakalidis 2012; Krumbacher 1897; Macrides and Magdalino 1992.

Modern scholars use the term classicising histories (“κλασσικίζουσα ιστορία”) for the first of the above-mentioned texts, although it was not a term in use in Medieval Greek, and, according to Neville, Byzantine vocabulary does not reflect any distinction between histories and chronicles.⁵ Classicising histories tend to be thought of as superior to chronicles, which are considered works of poorly educated monks, as opposed to the highly literate authors of the former. In addition, scholars have regarded chroniclers’ audience as correspondingly uneducated masses, with low literary expectations, which had to be addressed in a simple style.

This division of Byzantine historiography started with Karl Krumbacher’s *Geschichte der Byzantinischen Litteratur von Justinian bis zum Ende des Oströmischen Reiches (527-1453)*, where he stated that ‘histories and chronicles were two separate branches of historiography, each with its own independent origin and with little interconnection to the other’.⁶ This notion was challenged by Hans-Georg Beck almost seventy years later.⁷ Beck, in his article ‘Die byzantinische “Mönchschronik”’, suggested that the majority of chronicle-writers were actually not monks and that there is no absolute distinction between the two kinds of writing.⁸

The above-mentioned use of the terms “classicising history” and “chronicle” to describe Byzantine historical narratives comes with both advantages and disadvantages.

One obvious advantage is one of convenience.⁹ Scholars are able to better understand the genre the text they are studying belongs to, and its general characteristics, by terming it as either a “classicising history” or a “chronicle”. Moreover, this classification is essential for making literary judgements of different kinds of texts.¹⁰ People who study these texts should always keep in mind the sort of text they are dealing with and the way that histories and chronicles were written, namely their starting point, the time span they cover

⁵ Neville 2018: 8-9.

⁶ Krumbacher 1897, as quoted in Ljubarskij 1993: 133.

⁷ See Croke 2016: 33-34.

⁸ Neville 2018: 9.

⁹ Ljubarskij 1998: 11.

¹⁰ Duffy 1998: 32.

and the events they record. This categorisation, therefore, facilitates their work and enables them to talk about Byzantine historical writing without causing any confusion.

A further advantage could be the fact that, based on certain examples, it can be said that this distinction was indeed acknowledged and used (at least up to a degree) by Byzantines themselves.¹¹ According to Magdalino, some authors stressed whether they were writing a history or a chronicle, and the genres' boundaries were always present and never merged.¹² Therefore, it could be said that they should exist in modern scholarship as well, since they are dictated by the very nature of the texts.

On the other hand, this terminology might pose a restriction, as it prevents scholars from appropriately studying the work of medieval writers. One well-known example is related to the evaluation of the work of Prokopios. According to Cameron, his work has not been evaluated in the way it should: his books (the *Wars*, the *Buildings* and the *Secret History*) have not been treated in their totality as an entity written by the same author, because only the first one has been characterised "classicising history", thus giving the impression of being superior to the others.¹³ Every writer, though, should be examined as having special characteristics, which are adopted accordingly to the genre that is being written each time, and no modern prejudices or barriers regarding form should be imposed on texts.

This categorisation's major disadvantage, however, is the disregard for the authors and the content of chronicles it brings with it (Ljubarskij has actually stated that chronicles have been subjected to "humiliation"¹⁴ and has talked about "the madness of genre").¹⁵ Chroniclers have been considered uneducated and incompetent, while their work has been characterised as boring and worthy of studying only as a source for the information it entails, and

¹¹ Theodore Skoutariotes and Michael Glykas, for instance, seem to acknowledge the distinction when they criticise histories and highlight chronicles' superiority (Scott 2006a: 48, 52). See also Duffy 1998: 32; Jeffreys 1998: 39.

¹² Magdalino 2012: 222.

¹³ Cameron 1996: 3-4.

¹⁴ Ljubarskij 1993: 135.

¹⁵ Ljubarskij 1998: 21.

not in terms of their literary or cultural value.¹⁶ Nonetheless, nowadays more and more scholars have reevaluated this notion and agree that we should not base our assumptions about Byzantines' education on a modern distinction between historians and chroniclers.¹⁷ This argument is further enhanced since we now accept that most chronicle writers (such as Constantine Manasses or Michael Glykas)¹⁸ were also highly educated and came from a similar social and professional background to historians, while their use of a simpler form of Greek was probably a deliberate choice,¹⁹ and the audience they addressed was an equally literate part of the society. Finally, scholars have now recognised the rather difficult task that chroniclers had, namely summarising a very broad time span²⁰ while integrating Byzantine history in the narrative of world history.

The distinction of Byzantine historical narratives into "classicising histories" and "chronicles" then, is a construct that scholars have made, and it has given rise to a partial view of these genres. Particularly since the boundaries between the two gradually started to blur, especially as early as the tenth century, this categorisation should not be treated as a rule but rather as a set of useful guidelines.²¹ These two different literary modes are equally important for our knowledge and our understanding of Byzantine literature, which should be thought of as a unity.

¹⁶ Ljubarskij 1993: 134-135; Macrides 2016: 259; Neville 2018: 9; Scott 2006b: 69.

¹⁷ Scott 2006a: 40.

¹⁸ Treadgold 2013: 487.

¹⁹ See Neville 2018: 12-13.

²⁰ Ljubarskij 1993: 135.

²¹ Neville 2018: 8, 15.

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