



EDITED BY

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≡ The Oxford Handbook *of*  
**BYZANTINE**  
**LITERATURE**



THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

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BYZANTINE  
LITERATURE

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## CHAPTER 1

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# WHAT IS BYZANTINE LITERATURE?

### *An Introduction*

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THE question posed in the title may be read as a query for two related, but distinct definitions: what “Byzantine literature” might be, and also how “Byzantine literature” is understood in the present *Handbook*. The latter definition is easier to present concisely, dictated as it is by practical considerations: the title’s “Byzantine literature” is a shorthand for “literature in Greek, during the Byzantine period.” With it, two conventions are invoked. The first concerns the usage of the word “literature” that, for a modern audience, signifies written works of verbal art, which are assumed to have some “value” (aesthetic or cultural, at the very least). The second convention pertains to the term “Byzantine” as denoting a chronological period defined by the continuous existence of what we usually call “Byzantium”: the predominantly Greek-speaking and largely Christian Eastern Roman Empire, centered in Constantinople, from this capital’s inauguration by Constantine the Great in the fourth century (330 CE) to its capture by the Ottomans in the fifteenth (1453 CE).

Conventions offer solutions, but always also come with complications, sometimes serious ones. This introductory chapter attempts to sketch out the complexity of both of our conventions, while introducing the volume at hand and the choices behind its makeup. Along the way, we shall also raise a series of issues regarding the first, more intricate definition, the one that pertains to the nature of that protean creature we call “Byzantine literature.”

## BYZANTINE

There are some advantages in using the term “Byzantine” in order to denote merely a chronological period and in choosing to focus on a single language, as we propose to do here. Handbooks must start and end *somewhere*, and 330 and 1453, with their immediate recognizability in the political history of the eastern Mediterranean world, offer sensible (as any) boundaries for our survey. Stretching the examination from the fourth to the fifteenth century allows us, additionally, to reunite in perspective a literary tradition that has gained, but equally has lost in understanding and appreciation by having its bookends often subsumed under treatments of Modern Greek literature, in regard to its so-called vernacular production and with respect to the late period (see, e.g., Knös 1962; Kechagioglou 2009), and the so-called late antique literature, as far the early Byzantine Greek literary tradition is concerned (e.g., Saïd, Trédé, and Le Boulluec 2010; McGill and Watts 2018).

Similarly, looking only at literature produced in Greek in this period is legitimized by the fact that while Greek was not, as we shall see, the only “Byzantine” language, and thus literature written in Greek does not equal *all* the discourse produced and consumed in Byzantium, the overwhelming majority of texts that survive from the Byzantine world (however generously conceived, in its various phases and transmutations), are indeed in Greek—ἑλληνιστί, ἑλλάδι φωνῆ, or ἑλλάδι γλώττη as a Greek-speaking Byzantine might have said.<sup>1</sup> After all, though by no means a closed system, neither ideologically nor simply formally (i.e., in terms of grammar, syntax, or vocabulary), a language nevertheless defines a spoken and textual literary world, a dense mesh of forms, notions, and emotions, a particular window into human experience. As such, Byzantine *Greek* literature deserves a focused perspective.

But such a very concrete (chronological and linguistic) usage of the term “Byzantine” works only if we steer clear from invoking any kind of cultural *essence*, some set of coherent, homogeneous, and impermeable features, which we could unambiguously call “Byzantine.” For the term “Byzantine,” as an epithet for literature, could raise expectations among modern audiences for a literature that expressed or belonged to some kind of unified entity—for instance, a nation in the long tradition of modern national literatures as these are commonly understood. But of course “Byzantium,”<sup>2</sup> as any

<sup>1</sup> Depending on context and circumstance, especially in the middle and late Byzantine period, the term ῥωμαϊστί and related adjectives and nouns (such as ῥωμαϊκός and ῥωμαϊκά; see the relevant entries in the LBG) were also used in order to denote “Greek,” whenever ῥωμαϊστί did not retain its original meaning as “Latin” (on Latin in Byzantium, see Garcea, Rosellini, and Silvano 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Leaving aside here all the problems associated with the term “Byzantium” itself when used to signify the Eastern (or Medieval) Roman “Empire”—another debated term—in its many transformations from the fourth into the fifteenth century. The related debates have shown, in any case, the shortcomings not only of “Byzantium” but also of many alternative designations (for the most vocal recent treatments, see Kaldellis 2015, 2019a, and 2019b).

society (modern “nations” included), was always many things at the same time; unified by shared habits, beliefs, or identities, and simultaneously multifarious, fragmented, and disjointed by personal choices and tastes, as well as divisions, changes, and evolutions of different sorts—social, ethnic, indeed religious,<sup>3</sup> linguistic, or, to name a rather fundamental kind, geographic. And so was—if the obvious needs to be repeated here—“Byzantine” literature, and as such it is treated in this volume.

Even in its circumscribed use as a convenient designation of a period and a language, “Byzantine” is still not freed of complications. Let us tackle these briefly here, starting with chronology.

### 330–1453?

As will become clear from several chapters in this volume, many crucial aspects of Byzantine literature were set in place before the fourth century and, conversely, continued well beyond the political end of the Byzantine Empire. Take language, for instance. Most of the major features of Byzantine Greek as a spoken and written language—its phonology, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary—were already in full swing by the 330s CE (see, e.g., the relevant chapters in Horrocks 2010; a comprehensive, we might note, history of *Byzantine* Greek language remains a desideratum). These major features were the result, among other things, of the fact that Greek, as the language of administration and the ruling elite of the Hellenistic kingdoms in the wake of Alexander the Great’s death, became a shared as well as a privileged language<sup>4</sup> among varied populations in the eastern Mediterranean. It is during this period, namely the last three centuries BCE, that one of the two most important “works” (i.e., collections of several “texts”) for the Byzantine literary tradition was produced: the so-called Septuagint or the “Old Testament,” as it is called in Greek—the other work being the “New Testament” of the Christian Bible. At that, from a certain perspective, the most *Byzantine* (in terms of circulation and citation) of texts, namely the *Psalms* attributed to King David (Figure 1.1<sup>5</sup>), was composed long before “Byzantium” appeared in the course of history.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, while, for almost the entire period, Christianity was in Byzantium the dominant religion (whether accepted, resisted, or rejected; however fluid in its definition and its multiple manifestations; and whatever we understand “religion” to be) several phenomena or discursive agents discussed in the volume cannot be described as Christian, nor were they defined or even affected by Christianity.

<sup>4</sup> Or an “imperial” (Høgel 2018) or a “prestige” (Johnson 2018) language.

<sup>5</sup> Sinai, gr. 36 and NE gr. MG 9 (cf. Géhin and Frøyshov 2000: 172), an eighth–ninth-century CE bilingual parchment *Psalter* with the nine Odes, in Greek (in *Slanted Ogival* script) and facing Arabic in parallel columns; f. 123r: Ps. 105:12–16.



FIGURE 1.1. Sinai, Μονή τῆς Ἁγίας Αἰκατερίνης, gr. 36; parchment; ninth century; Greco-Arabic Psalter with the nine Odes; f. 123r: Ps. 105:12–16.

© Sinai, Μονή τῆς Ἁγίας Αἰκατερίνης.

Similar things can be said about seminal trends in the Greek discursive as well as book culture of the Roman period (i.e., the first three centuries CE) that continued to have a deep impact in the Byzantine period which followed it. Two such trends might be mentioned here: the further establishment of Greek also as a “sacred” language (for the

term: Bennett 2018) with the dissemination of the New Testament next to the Septuagint (e.g., Rogerson and Lieu 2006); and, at other corners of Roman literary culture, the flourishing of the so-called Second Sophistic movement, which championed a shared learned, rhetorical-cum-philosophical discourse for the Greek-speaking elites of the Roman world (e.g., Richter and Johnson 2017).

Similarly uninterrupted remained a few “Byzantine” key aspects of Greek literature, which we encounter after 1453, well into the sixteenth century, and sometimes even beyond that. This latter continuity resulted from the fact that the technologies, ideologies, and corresponding tastes that dominated western European literatures in the early modern period infiltrated Greek linguistic, discursive, and textual habits at a relatively slow pace.

Not all of these continuities or discontinuities have found sufficient students yet, nor could this *Handbook* dwell on them as much as would have been ideal.<sup>6</sup> They should, nevertheless, be kept in mind.

## Greek?

Byzantium encompassed a diversity of populations throughout its long history, partly as a result of constantly and, in some periods, radically changing geographical boundaries of political (i.e., economic and military) control by the Byzantine state. Though the eastern Mediterranean and, especially, its urban centers formed the physical landscape for most of the authors, texts, and discursive phenomena discussed in the present volume, this territory (even the City itself, i.e., Constantinople, from 1204 to 1261, during the Latin occupation) was not always *politically* “Byzantine.” Borders shifted from (a) the large expanses of the Eastern Roman Empire, including Asia Minor, Syro-Palestine, eastern North Africa, Italy, and the Balkans, from the fourth through the sixth centuries CE (a period that is consistently termed “early Byzantine” in the *Handbook*), to (b) primarily Asia Minor and the southern Balkans, and, partly, southern Italy and northern Syria from the seventh through the twelfth centuries (the “middle Byzantine” period—within it, the seventh and eighth centuries formed a crucial, transitional period), to (c) small chunks of territory in the Thracian hinterland of Constantinople, in northern Asia Minor, and in parts of mainland Greece in the last two and a half centuries (the “late Byzantine” period).<sup>7</sup>

Thus, while during the Byzantine millennium Greek (in its own several varieties) eventually became the native language for most of the Byzantine citizens in the

<sup>6</sup> In a series of recent articles, Panagiotis Agapitos (2012, 2015, 2017, 2020, and 2021) offers illuminating remarks on the problems of the traditional periodizations of the Byzantine literary history, including discussions of its “bookends.”

<sup>7</sup> The *Handbook* does not contain any maps, but the interested reader shall find much useful related material at the website of the *Map Project: Byzantium and Its Neighbours*: [https://teamweb.uni-mainz.de/fb07/maps\\_project/SitePages/Home.aspx](https://teamweb.uni-mainz.de/fb07/maps_project/SitePages/Home.aspx).



ever-shifting and usually contracting boundaries of the Byzantine state, for several of the populations under or in direct contact with Byzantine rule, Greek was neither the native nor, even, a known language. Greek, that is, usually coexisted (at least temporally) and often interacted, in one way or another, with other (from many perspectives) *Byzantine* languages. Some of these languages survived, because of developed writing systems and bodies of literature; these literatures date either before the fourth century CE—such is the case of Latin, Syriac, and partly Coptic—or after the foundation of Constantinople and the gradual Christianization of the Roman Empire—such is the case of the *Christian* Armenian, Georgian, Slavonic, and Arabic literary traditions which were created under the direct influence of Byzantine Greek literature.<sup>8</sup> Other languages, which were spoken in Byzantine territory at some point during the empire’s millennium (especially its early part), did not acquire writing traditions and are irrecoverable for us (such as Thracian in the southeastern Balkans, or Isaurian and Phrygian in Anatolia, all of which died out during the early Byzantine period, or the language of the late Byzantine Gypsies).<sup>9</sup>

In any case, there were vibrant non-Greek literary traditions within Byzantine sociopolitical territory and/or cultural domain, and there existed several “Byzantines” who spoke or wrote in languages other than Greek. To cite just two very important examples: Priscian or, better, *Priscianus*, a North African who lived and taught in Constantinople at the early decades of the sixth century, wrote his influential *Institutiones Grammaticae* in Latin (Baratin, Colombat, and Holtz 2009); and the Georgian-born but Constantinopolitan-raised Euthymios, called “the Iberian” in Greek and “the Hagiorites” in Georgian (Mt’ac’ mindeli = “of the Holy Mountain”; PmbZ 21960), another very influential and bilingual writer, who lived most of his life

<sup>8</sup> In the case of Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, and Slavonic, the relevant writing systems themselves evolved under the direct influence of the Byzantine Greek alphabet (cf. Codoñer 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Byzantine multilingualism is a phenomenon that has not been studied sufficiently; for seminal contributions, see Dagron (2012a [first published in 1969] and 2012b [first published in 1993 and 1994]), Maltezou (1993), Rochette (1997), and Oikonomidès (1999); for recent work, see Høgel (2012) or Markopoulos (2014); for a comparative perspective, Grévin (2012).

A comprehensive study of the related phenomenon of multilingual (mostly bilingual) mss. where languages, in which Greek features prominently, coexist either horizontally (on the same page: in parallel columns, or as added scholia/glosses), or vertically (namely in palimpsests with two layers written in different languages), remains also a *desideratum*.

Representative Byzantine examples (available online) of the former category:

- Sinai, gr. 36 and NE gr. MT 9 (cf. Figure 1.1 and n. 5);
- Paris, BNF, suppl. gr. 1232, ff. 15v–164r, an autograph by Nikolaos/Nektarios of Otranto (c. 1150–1235), with Greek text and facing Latin translation.

Examples of palimpsests:

- London, BL, Add MS 17210 (available online), ninth-century CE copy of a work by Severos of Antioch (c. 465–538) in Syriac translation, written over a sixth-century CE copy of Homer’s *Iliad*;
- Athens, EBE, 637, a fourteenth-century CE copy of the liturgical book called *Paraklêtikê*, written over an earlier Armenian copy of the Old Testament.



on Mount Athos between the late 960s to 1028, the year of his death, wrote in Greek, but primarily in Georgian, his mother tongue. Conversely, there were writers who chose to compose their works in Greek, even if they never set foot on Byzantine territory, politically defined—this is the case of the also bilingual John of Damascus, Yūḥannā ibn Maṣūir ibn Ṣarjūn, or Ioannes Damaskenos as the Byzantines usually referred to him (and as he will be called in this *Handbook*; PmbZ 2969), active as writer in Palestine during the first half of the eighth century, when Palestine was already firmly under Arab rule.

This volume reviews the literature of some of the other *Byzantine* languages, but only from the perspective of Greek. We shall look, that is, either (a) at how much these literatures were, for Byzantine Greek, the source of imported storytelling material or literary forms or (b) what these literatures can tell us—to the extent that they preserve Greek texts in translation—about the reception of Byzantine Greek literature, its literary canons, and its popular or appealing texts. For we cannot understand or appreciate the Byzantine Greek literary tradition without either the multilingually mediated stock of storytelling and literary forms which enriched it, or without exploring its many refractions through translation; translators and the audiences they addressed were part of the wider nexus of late antique and medieval readers and listeners of Byzantine Greek literature.

## LITERATURE

Thus far I have been referring to “literature,” “discourse,” “texts,” “literary tradition,” etc. Is it possible to give some flesh and blood to these abstractions? Partly yes, and partly no. Statistics—which we may glean from the available literary evidence, as this is mediated through editions, databases, surveys, and encyclopedias—may help quantify what has been preserved.

In its current form, for instance, the electronic database *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (the TLG<sup>10</sup>) lists as dated or possibly dated between the fourth and the fifteenth century c. 6,245 Greek “works,” available in printed editions, regardless of content, form, or size. Some works are lengthy narratives, others short poems; other works (indeed the largest percentage of the TLG) are in fact collections of types of texts, such as letters, epigrams, speeches, etc.; thus, if we were counting single textual units, the preceding number must be multiplied several times.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The most important database for anyone working on Greek literature, a project directed by Maria Pantelia (UC Irvine) and available at <http://www.tlg.uci.edu/>.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, a recent survey of texts attributed (authentically or pseudepigraphically) to a single (though prolific) author, Michael Psellos (Constantinople, 1018–1078), where a stricter definition for each textual unit is applied, contains 1,263 entries (Moore 2005).

We may supplement the count by a variety of other databases of Greek texts from the Byzantine period—though we should keep in mind that much material overlaps, and different databases use different criteria as to what constitutes a single, unique text:

- Modern inventories of hagiographical texts (*Passions, Lives, Encomia, Beneficial Tales*, etc.), patristic texts (*Homilies, treatises, commentaries*, etc.), letters, non-liturgical poems, and liturgical hymns contain:
  - c. 5,500 hagiographies (many of these are variations and rewritings; BHG),
  - over 6,200 patristic works (CPG, covering the period from the fourth through the eighth centuries)
  - 15,480 letters (Grünbart 2001),
  - nearly 20,000 poems (Vassis 2005 and 2011),
  - and over 60,000 hymns (IHEG);
  - we might note that many of the poems and the letters and the majority of the hagiographies and the hymns are not yet of the current TLG.
- Recent editions and databases (in progress) of literary inscriptions, also not included in the TLG, add more numbers—treating each inscription, which is usually a short poem, as an individual text. These literary inscriptions or “epigrams,” it should be added, are epigraphic texts in metrical form and date mostly from the middle and the late Byzantine period:
  - c. 1,400 verse inscriptions, preserved *in situ*, from c. 600 to 1500 CE (Rhoby 2009, 2010, 2014, and 2018; the last volume is dedicated to “book epigrams”),
  - 2,968 epigrams on seals, dated from c. 800 to the fourteenth century (Wassiliou-Seibt 2011–2016; arranged alphabetically, and completed up to letter Σ),
  - and over 4,700 “book epigrams”<sup>12</sup> (DBBE), without considering their many variations.
- And, to give another perspective, the nineteenth-century series *Patrologia Graeca*, which includes primarily Byzantine texts, but by no means represents all Byzantine texts available in print, numbers 161 volumes, of an average 800 pages each.<sup>13</sup>

These statistics (whatever their many shortcomings) give perhaps some sense of the massive corpus of texts preserved from the eleven hundred years of Byzantine history.<sup>14</sup>

But as soon as we begin to form some picture of the immensity of the material at hand, we realize that such numbers tell only part of the story. For just as we do not have a precise tally for the amount of Greek texts preserved from Byzantium, so also we cannot give even a rough estimate of how many such texts have *not* been preserved. Here, another set of figures may throw some light on our predicament.

<sup>12</sup> Defined as “poems in and on books: they have as subject the very manuscript in which they are found, elaborating on its production, contents and use” (from the project’s website: <https://www.dbbe.ugent.be>).

<sup>13</sup> For a list of editions (through 2016) of middle and late Byzantine texts, see the LBG site, hosted by the TLG at: [http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lbg/lbg\\_abbreviations.html](http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lbg/lbg_abbreviations.html). For all Byzantine authors (writing in Greek) and anonymous Greek texts and books, mentioned in this *Handbook*, see the Index at the end of the volume.

<sup>14</sup> For modern translations of Byzantine texts, cf. the relevant Princeton project run by David Jenkins, at <https://library.princeton.edu/byzantine/>.

More than 70,000(?) manuscript books containing Greek texts have been preserved, a large number of which (about a half?) dating before the sixteenth century. The number may seem large, but it acquires its true proportions, which are defined more by the *loss* of manuscripts, rather than by their preservation, if compared with the surviving manuscripts of comparable in production and consumption medieval literary cultures, namely the over 300,000 surviving manuscripts written in Latin, or the medieval Arabic books that may number to a million.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Greek manuscript books (scrolls or codices) that date between the 330s and the 750s are preserved mostly in papyrus and parchment fragments and in palimpsests; the number of Greek codices, whose pages have not suffered significant loss, and date to this period is very small: perhaps less than 50 books.<sup>16</sup> This means that the Greek book culture of the early Byzantine period—a time during which Byzantium was at its highest, in terms of demography and economy—is the most difficult to reconstruct in material terms.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, the loss of paper codices and many parchment books from the middle Byzantine period must also be quite large, not to mention texts written down only on loose papers, but never making it to a book, or discourses, stories, and songs, which were never written down at all. Last but not least, whatever manuscripts have been preserved tend to favor liturgical and, to a lesser extent, school texts, both filtered primarily (since the libraries of Byzantine churches or schools have by and large *not* been preserved) through the choices and preferences that underlie the surviving Byzantine library collections, namely those of monasteries and, to a lesser extent, aristocratic households (themselves usually preserved *in* monastic collections).

The bottom line: (a) lost books (and, we might add, lost inscriptions), and at that lost texts and discourses, are overwhelmingly more than those which have been preserved; and (b) whatever has been preserved represents (if not chance and accident) the choices of later readers and trends in later phases in the history of Greek books (and Greek inscriptions), often separated by centuries from the original creation of a text. If we add to all this the fact that many (again, precise estimates are unavailable) Byzantine texts have never been edited in a printed form,<sup>18</sup> or have been edited in a poor fashion, without consultation of all the available witnesses, or have been printed with problematic interventions by modern editorial habits, we are staggered by the bewildering obstacles that face a student of Byzantine Greek literature.

<sup>15</sup> For a survey of the Latin book culture, see Bischoff (1990); for medieval Arabic books, see Sagaria Rossi (2015).

<sup>16</sup> The Leuven Database of Ancient Books (LDAB: at <http://www.trismegistos.org/ldab/search.php>) lists *c.* 1,700 items (mostly fragments of books), which date from *c.* 300 to *c.* 800 as containing “literary” texts.

<sup>17</sup> The Italian *Codices Graeci Antiquiores* project aims to provide a census of Greek books, dating before the year 800: <https://sites.google.com/site/codicesgraeciantiquiores/home>. For books written in Latin during the same period, see <https://elmss.nuigalway.ie/> (ELMSS).

<sup>18</sup> Here belong not only obscure works, but even some “best-sellers” in Byzantium, such e.g. texts from the *Ménologion* of Symeon Metaphrastes. *À propos* (to mention here another such fundamental work), for the text of the New Testament, as was read by most Byzantines, i.e. in the so-called common or Byzantine version (cf. Aland and Aland 1989: 128–142 and 229–230; also Wachtel 1995 and further Pappulov 2012), see e.g. Robinson and Pierpont (2005) or Mullen et al. (2007).



Let us take the challenge, however—and in a sense the present *Handbook* is just that, the acceptance of a challenge—and try to cope with what we have, and throw at the material quantitatively and superficially traced in the preceding paragraphs the crucial question, which we have not yet raised: how many of the preserved Byzantine Greek texts may count as “literature”?

Another set of problems turn to face us. Students of any premodern society (and Byzantium is no exception) quickly realize the absence of a clearly defined field that coincides with what we commonly understand as “literature” today, namely those types of discourse (primarily fiction and poetry) which are marked by aesthetic autonomy and originality, are the product of creativity and imagination (and, in earlier thought, “national character”), and whose primary aim is entertainment or the inculcation of cultural values. It is of course true that one will find in Byzantium such types of discourse or *λόγος/λόγοι* (to use the most important Greek terms in this regard); and one could also find in Byzantine theory of *logoi* attempts to assign some forms (such as the earlier, Homeric poetry, for instance) to a distinct domain that looks quite similar to the modern field of literature. Nevertheless, these types and notions of *logos* are only a relatively small part of the larger discursive, textual, and book culture during the Byzantine period (see further Papaioannou 2021: 24–28 and 42–55).

Interested in this larger culture, this *Handbook* adopts a flexible and open definition of Byzantine “literature,” without insisting on any of the usual binary distinctions that might be (or have been) imposed upon it: such as “written (i.e., depending on *literacy*)” and “oral,” “high” and “low,” “secular” and “religious,” “pagan” and “Christian,” “original” and (somehow) “derivative”—namely “imitative” or “*mimetic*” (operating under *μίμησις*, another key Greek term)—, “entertaining” and “didactic,” etc. Rather, we propose to treat “literature” as an anthropological constant with specific instantiations throughout human history. The desire (a) to restructure reality and make sense of human experience through storytelling, (b) to perform oneself and one another through language, and (c) to indulge in discursive play and form, often in combination with music or the visual arts, is (I would like to argue and offer a working definition of literature here) *universal*. What one society, group, or individual—in our case, the human agents that lie behind the Greek texts that have been preserved—may regard as proper, potent, or appealing storytelling, linguistic performance, and discursive play, and (in textual cultures) what textual forms might convey these narratives, performances, and plays *vary*.<sup>19</sup> Concisely put, the Byzantine varieties of literature, as mediated through the surviving texts, is what concern us here.

<sup>19</sup> The bibliography on the question of “literature” is immense; for two brief introductions (restricting ourselves in works first published in English), see Eagleton (2008) and Culler (2011).

## THE HANDBOOK

The chapters that follow offer cross sections on Byzantine discursive, textual, and writing culture, bringing to light different parts of the puzzle of Byzantine literature. At that, this *Handbook* is not meant to be comprehensive as, comparably, only a small fraction of the Byzantine texts mentioned earlier (or, for that matter, studies devoted to these texts) will be cited or examined. Instead, this *Handbook* assembles a series of perspectives, surveys of key problems, and basic research tools, which can accompany as well as invite readers of Byzantine Greek texts as literature.<sup>20</sup>

The volume is structured in four parts. Part I, “Materials, Norms, Codes,” presents a series of matrices or, as it were, prerequisites for literary creation in Byzantium, material and (mainly) conceptual conditions that circumscribed literary production and consumption:

- the main “matter” of literature, namely language, and the main means of its material preservation and circulation, namely books (for inscriptions, see below);
- normative perspectives on *logos* and *logoi*, namely emic or “native” understandings of literature, as evident in Byzantine theoretical approaches, with a separate chapter devoted on one main type of such approaches, Byzantine commentaries on the Bible, Byzantium’s most important corpus of texts (also, we might note, as *literature*, in the understanding presented above);
- and, finally, systems of textual memory, whether from within the history of Byzantine Greek, or from without—such as classical Greek literature and ancient myth, as well as storytelling and literary forms translated into Greek during the Byzantine period—systems that offered the Byzantine producers and recipients of literature a means of releasing, coding, and decoding literary meaning.

The second, more extensive part, titled “Forms,” deals with different aspects of the *how* of literary discourse, a series of partly overlapping masks that literature took on in Byzantium:

- as oral discourse and as “text”;
- as storytelling;
- as rhetoric (i.e., as learned style)—the main essay is accompanied by two additional chapters on (respectively) rhetorical figures and an example of a rhetorical “genre,” the *invective*; the former examines an understudied “technical” area of Byzantine rhetorical practice, while the latter showcases rhetoric in action by looking at the refractions of a school exercise in a series of texts;

<sup>20</sup> For comparable works, cf. Cavallo (2004) on Byzantine literature, and Hexter and Townsend (2012) on medieval Latin literature.

- as rewriting in the various forms of stylistic revision, abridgement, or expansion of texts, a common practice in Byzantium;
- as verse—in three chapters which probe the notion of “poetry,” explore the so-called *epigraphic habit*, and review metrics (including, however, the related practice of *prose rhythm*);
- and as song—including a related chapter on types of musical notation developed in Byzantium for the recitation of biblical readings and the chanting of hymns.

Part III, “Agents,” a couplet of essays, focuses on the “who” of Byzantine literature, its “creators,” namely *both* the producers *and* the recipients of discourse. The perspective is not so much that of social history (though this is introduced as well), as what we might call the “phenomenology” of literature, namely the understanding of the literary function of speakers/writers and listeners/readers as this emerges from the Byzantine literary culture itself.

Part IV, titled “Translation, Transmission, Edition,” surveys the three main ways by which we can access Byzantine Greek literature today: through its translations into other languages during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, through Byzantine and post-Byzantine manuscripts, and through modern, printed editions. And a final, concluding essay offers a view of the recent past and the likely future of Byzantine literary studies by a scholar who has championed Byzantine literature at various fronts for decades.

There are overlaps and, of course, some dissonance among the various chapters, which were conceived both as independent studies and as parts of a whole. Byzantine theoretical approaches to literature emerge, for instance, not only in Part I, but also in the parts of “Forms” and “Agents.” Similarly, the various sections on translations from and into Greek may be read, in their majority, as couplets for each specific language, rather than divided in two separate chapters as they are in this *Handbook*.<sup>21</sup> Also, not all chapters sustain the full Byzantine millennium in chronological perspective—specific subjects can be vast or largely unexplored, and could be treated more productively if limited chronologically.

There are absences, too. For instance, not all medieval languages in which translations of Byzantine Greek texts exist have been included, but only those with major such traditions of translation.<sup>22</sup> There are also no chapters devoted to the reception of Byzantine literature *after* Byzantium, namely its transmission and dissemination in manuscripts and printed books after the mid-fifteenth century, its presence in later conceptualizations of literary history, and its instrumentalization in modern ideologies, cultures, and literatures—this reception of Byzantine literature is a vast field which remains greatly understudied, making an overview impossible for the present volume.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> For translations into Greek, one may consult also A. Kaldellis, *Catalogue of Translations into Byzantine Greek*, published on [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu); cf. also the recent Athanasopoulos 2021.

<sup>22</sup> There are thus no chapters on Ethiopic (Bausi 2014 and 2018), Caucasian Albanian (Gippert 2015), and Christian Palestinian Aramaic (Desreumaux 2015 and Brock 2018).

<sup>23</sup> For relevant bibliography, see Papaioannou (2015).



Along the same lines, a chapter on Byzantine literature as transmitted and mediated through the visual arts in Byzantium (another broad field) would have added much to Part IV of the volume.

Similarly—and these choices were more intended, than necessitated—there are no separate chapters devoted either to matters of social and cultural history as they pertain to Byzantine literature (e.g., the issue of patronage; the tensions between the center and the periphery of the Byzantine world; questions of gender, identity, subjectivity, etc.) or to modern hermeneutical models (from psychoanalysis to ecocriticism) and their likely application on Byzantine texts.<sup>24</sup> Not only could such topics be extended *ad infinitum*, but also the concern of this *Handbook* has been to circumscribe primarily a series of questions that Byzantine texts themselves raise if we attempt to read them as literature, rather than to trace the limitless dynamics of Byzantine literature either as a source for Byzantine society and culture or as ground for activating modern interpretative methods.

Absences in the literary perspective remain. Conspicuous is the lack of any historical overview of the eleven hundred years of Byzantine Greek literature; the task is too demanding and complex to fit in this volume, and I hope to return to it in the future. Equally conspicuous is the downplay of the use of “genre” as an overarching structuring principle for organizing Byzantine literature, a principle that has dominated the field of Byzantine literary studies, especially after the works of Hans Georg Beck (1959 and 1971 = 1988) and Herbert Hunger (1978 = 1991–1992–1994). “Genre” is admittedly a major meaning-producing structure within the Byzantine textual tradition (as is evident, at the very least, in Byzantine rhetorical manuals and in the titles of Byzantine texts; see further Mullett 1992), but has been treated in this volume as a category that can be incorporated within other, larger framing questions. After all, the earlier handbooks of Beck and Hunger, as well as many recent and forthcoming volumes focused on various genres, have exhausted the approach and it would be neither reasonable nor possible to rehearse their work here (for an overview and references, see Mullett, “Postscript” in this volume, which, with its survey of literary studies on Byzantium, should be also read as Suggestions for Further Reading for this introduction)<sup>25</sup>. More importantly, when raised to *the* dominant principle, “genre” can become an obscuring notion, especially when fluctuating Byzantine categorizations and types of text are jumbled together with modern generic criteria—for instance, all the Byzantine texts covered often by the modern signifier “hagiography” hardly belong to a unifying “genre”<sup>26</sup> (a reworking of the monumental and still indispensable work by Albert Ehrhardt [1937, 1938, 1939,

<sup>24</sup> There exist a series of general introductions into modern hermeneutics, addressed or applied to classical, Greco-Roman texts, that may be of interest to Byzantinists as well: e.g., Rabinowitz and Richlin (1993); de Jong and Sullivan (1994); Heath (2002); Whitmarsh (2004); Schmitz (2007); see also Konstan (2006).

<sup>25</sup> For recent work on late antique (including early Byzantine Greek) literature, with an emphasis on various “genres,” see the relevant chapters in McGill and Watts (2018); cf. also Greatrex and Elton (2015).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Hinterberger (2014).

and 1952] would, in this respect, greatly facilitate an emic understanding of Byzantine “hagiography”), and similarly problematic inclusions or exclusions can be spotted throughout modern identifiers of Byzantine genres. However this might be, this volume has opted for the emergence of a multiplicity of Byzantine concepts and practices of genre from the studies that follow.

But *what is Byzantine literature?* The question returns, but in proper Byzantine aporetic fashion will here be left hanging. For, if anything else, the purpose of the volume at hand is to provide readers with means to further ponder over the question mark of this initial inquiry.

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