

Howard-Johnston, James: *Historical Writing in Byzantium*. Heidelberg: Verlag Antike 2014. ISBN: 978-3-938032-72-5; 73 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Dariya Rafiyenko, Institut für Klassische Philologie und Komparatistik, Universität Leipzig

The Greek historiographical tradition, beginning with Herodotus and Thucydides, was continued in the Byzantine period. Though being shaped by new historical circumstances it emancipated itself from the literary tradition of antiquity. Neglected in comparison to the historiography of the Classical period, Byzantine historiography can be seen as field of study, where further research is needed. One of the major problems in the field is the classification of extant historical writings. The criteria applied by the traditional research in order to classify the texts are as follows: the style of language used, the background of the author, the content of the writing, the degree of imitation of the style of the Classical historians, particularly that of Thucydides, and some others.<sup>1</sup> Another major problem, that has to be solved before any large-scale classification can be carried out, lies in the fact that many historical works from the Byzantine period are not edited or edited not properly.<sup>2</sup>

The short book of James Howard-Johnston represents a revised and expanded Kiel Felix Jacoby Lecture of 2012.<sup>3</sup> It can be seen as an attempt to trace the development inside of the Byzantine historiography during the period from the 4th to the 12th century A.D. (not „to the conquest of Constantinople in 1453“ as stated on the back of the book).

The book consists of six chapters (not titled), preceded by a preface which deals with the role of historical accounts in the study of the past. In the first chapter a short description of the fundamental role of Thucydides and Herodotus for the whole historiographical tradition is given. Then an overview of the main historical writings from 4th – 7th century A.D. is presented. The overview is continued in the second chapter, where the period from the time after the Arabs' conquest of the Roman Middle East (middle of the 7th century) up to the 12th century is covered. Howard-Johnston examines the writ-

ings of approximately fifty Byzantine authors, thus taking into account most of the edited historical writings of the period. He gives a short characteristic of content and style of each writing and puts them into the context of the Byzantine historiographical tradition. A proper attention is given to the emergence of new genres inside of the historical writings, such as *universal history* and *ecclesiastical history* in the Early Byzantine period (pp. 17–18) or *historical compendia* and *fuller, contemporary history* in the Middle Byzantine period (pp. 22, 32–33, cf. p. 40, the terms are partly coined by Howard-Johnston). In the third chapter Howard-Johnston takes a closer look at the background of the Byzantine authors and comes to the conclusion that „[h]istorical writing in Byzantium was a freelance activity on the part of what may be termed the mandarin“ (p. 35, cursive in the original), i.e. state and church bureaucracy. The style of the most writings is also characterized as „the mandarin style“ (p. 38, cursive in the original). In the fourth chapter Howard-Johnston categorizes the sources, used by the Byzantine authors in question (documentary ones, writings of the predecessors, own experience of the authors and some others). According to this criterion he distinguished two main categories of writings, one being a description of historical events based on the personal ex-

<sup>1</sup> One of the most widely spread classifications of the Byzantine historical writings into histories and chronicles is presented in Herbert Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, Vol. 1, München 1978, pp. 252–254.

<sup>2</sup> See on open/fluid textual traditions of Byzantine historical texts Stefan Wahlgren, *Original und Archetypus: zu Zustandekommen und Transformation einer byzantinischen Weltchronik (Pseudo-Polydeukes/Symeon Logothetes)*, in: *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 96 (2003), pp. 269–277; Patricia Varona Codeso, *Problemas Textuales de la Historiografía Griega del Periodo Bizantino Medio*, in: Miriam Sanz Morales / Manuel Librán Moreno (eds.), *Verae Lectiones. Estudios de Crítica Textual y Edición de Textos Griegos*, Cáceres-Huelva, 2009, pp. 321–353.

<sup>3</sup> The series of lectures at the Department of Classical Philology in Kiel is intended to commemorate Felix Jacoby, the author of the collection of text fragments of ancient Greek historians (*Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*), who was professor of Classics at the University of Kiel from 1907 to 1935. See on his biography pp. 63–71.

---

perience of the author, the second one being based on the bookish work, on the analysis of the sources. The fifth chapter deals with the content and character of the Byzantine historical tradition. Its characteristic features are as follows: the viewpoint of the governing elite and narrow spatial focus with Constantinople as the main political and military arena; the vision of Byzantium's role as a premier Christian state; realistic and pragmatic nature of the historical writings, i.e. the idea that human causes shape the course of the events, whereas the fundamental, philosophical causes of the events appear to be of less or no interest. In the last chapter Howard-Johnston briefly discusses the manuscript tradition of some of the historical writings expressing the idea, that a greater number of extant manuscripts indicates a higher interest to a certain writing.<sup>4</sup>

The main innovative (and challenging!) idea of the book can be formulated as follows: the tradition of Byzantine historical writings is unique, uniform and diverse at the same time. It is unique because it has a lot of characteristics of its own, being at the same time remote from the classicism, i.e. the imitation of the works of the Classical Greek historiography. It is uniform because „[t]he authors came from the same milieu and were writing for the same readers“ (p. 33), thus neither category should be seen as intellectually inferior. It is diverse because of the variety of writings and individualism of style. Howard-Johnston explains the diversity through the classical rhetorical training, present in Byzantium almost at any time of its development (see pp. 59–61, compare pp. 40–42). Because of its small size and clear style the book is perfectly suited to be used as a guide to the world of the Byzantine historiography. The book contains bibliographical references needed in order to get an overview of the material.

HistLit 2015-2-092 / Dariya Rafiyenko über Howard-Johnston, James: *Historical Writing in Byzantium*. Heidelberg 2014, in: H-Soz-Kult 11.05.2015.

---

<sup>4</sup>To a number of the manuscripts for the Middle Byzantine authors see Codeso, *Problemas Textuales*, pp. 322–324.