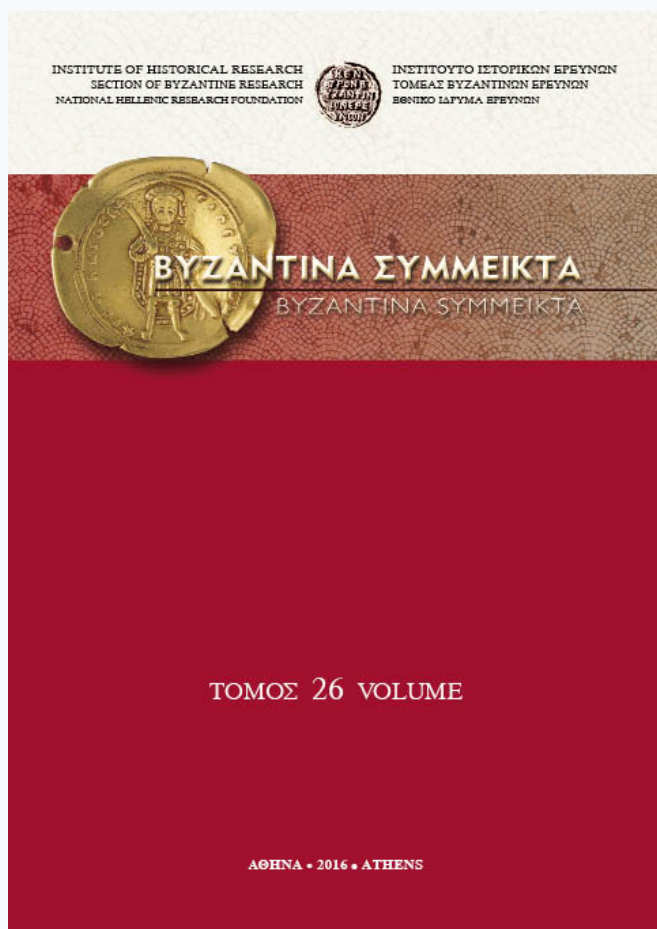


Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 26, No 2 (2016)

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 26



Book Review: D. KOROBEGINIKOV, Byzantium and the Turks in the Thirteenth Century, Oxford 2014, pp. xxi+372. ISBN 978-0-19-870826-1

Δημήτρης ΚΥΡΙΤΣΗΣ

doi: [10.12681/byzsym.10792](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.10792)

Copyright © 2016, Δημήτρης ΚΥΡΙΤΣΗΣ



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

ΚΥΡΙΤΣΗΣ Δ. (2016). Book Review: D. KOROBEGINIKOV, Byzantium and the Turks in the Thirteenth Century, Oxford 2014, pp. xxi+372. ISBN 978-0-19-870826-1. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 26(2), 483–486.
<https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.10792>

D. KOROBEGINIKOV, *Byzantium and the Turks in the Thirteenth Century*, Oxford 2014, pp. xxi+372. ISBN 978-0-19-870826-1

Few would dispute the importance of the thirteenth century as a turning point in the history of the Byzantine Empire and the broader area of the Eastern Mediterranean. Most scholars have emphasized the significance of the fourth crusade and the fall of Constantinople to the Latins, with good reason: although Byzantium managed to survive for another two and a half centuries, it never recovered its status as a global imperial power. This is not, however, to say that it was not a viable political entity, with the possibility of surviving into the early modern era as a European territorial state. The reasons for which it did not eventually do so, should rather be sought in developments after the recovery of Constantinople, under the first Palaiologoi emperors. Whereas these developments entailed internal as well as external factors, a major catalyst was the relentlessly growing military pressure from the East, in the form first of the Turkish tribes that overran Byzantine Asia Minor in the last decades of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century, and then of the newly established Emirates, of which that of Osman would eventually emerge as the new global power in the area. Thus it would not be an exaggeration to say that the shift in the balance of power between Byzantium and the Turks in Asia Minor that occurred in the course of the thirteenth century was of pivotal importance for the history both of Europe and the Middle East. Yet, this important development had long remained insufficiently analyzed in historiography. Byzantinists (the work of H. Ahrweiler, Deno Geanakoplos and A.E. Laiou come to mind) tended to explain it mainly as the result of internal social and political change under Michael VIII (1259-1282) and Andronikos II (1282-1328). Sp. Vryonis jr. added to the picture several non-Byzantine, mainly Turkish sources, but the focus of his study was ethnic and religious change, and his explanation for the collapse of Byzantine Asia Minor moved mainly along the line described

above. Turkologists, on the other hand, from P. Wittek, through H. Inalcik, to C. Kafadar and H. Lowry, were mostly preoccupied with the origins and character of the early Ottoman polity. Both groups have tended to downplay the importance of Mongol overlordship over Turkish Anatolia after the battle of Köse Dağ in 1243 (with some notable exceptions, such as R. Lindner). A synthetic in-depth study of the thirteenth-century shift in Asia Minor that would take equally into account Byzantium, the Seljuks, Turcoman tribes and the Mongols was a big desideratum.

Dimitri Korobeinikov's book fills this gap in a most satisfactory way. Originating as a dissertation that was begun in Moscow and completed in Oxford, Dr. Korobeinikov's study profits, first and foremost, from the author's rare linguistic mastery, that allows him to take into account Byzantine, Persian, Arabic and Turkish sources, rarely available in translation and sometimes still not satisfactorily edited. One should add the author's use of extensive modern bibliography in several languages, from his native Russian to Modern Greek.

After a presentation of Byzantine and Oriental sources, the first chapters of the book are dedicated to the Nicene Empire, the Seljuk sultanate and their relations until the middle of the thirteenth century. The presentation of the Nicene state is thorough and well documented, although the author tends to downplay, in this reviewer's opinion, the discontinuity with the twelfth-century institutions and the dramatic simplification of the administrative apparatus as well as the hierarchy system. The presentation profits from its extensive use of P. Zhavoronkov's work, usually ignored by non-Russian speaking researchers (on the other hand, there is no mention of Ilias Giarenis' 2008 Modern Greek monograph on Theodore I). The main points that come forth from these chapters are original and interesting: according to the author, Byzantium and the sultanate of Rum coexisted for most of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the frame of a peaceful *entente*. The extensive analysis of Seljuk sources shows the pains at which the sultans were to reconcile the image of victorious rulership required by traditional Islamic political ideology, to the role of junior partner of the Byzantine emperors, sometimes framed as a father/son relationship, in the tradition of Byzantine "commonwealth" diplomacy. In the aftermath of 1204, Seljuk recognition and support were crucial to the survival of the Empire of Nicaea, notwithstanding the crisis that culminated in the battle of Antioch on the Maeander, in 1211, that could be explained by the special relationship between Kay-Khusraw I and Alexios III. According to Korobeinikov, a major factor behind the Seljuk Sultans' desire to integrate themselves in the Byzantine political sphere, was the need to gain legitimacy towards their numerous Orthodox Christian

subjects, which included several high officials and even relatives of the sultans.

The following chapter deals with the arrival of the Mongols in Anatolia. It includes a detailed account of the period of Mongol overlordship over the Sultanate of Rum. The development of Mongol-Byzantine relations, which led to a marriage alliance between Michael VIII and the Ilkhanids, is also thoroughly discussed. This chapter, mostly deriving from Oriental sources, is among the most interesting, especially regarding the internal conflicts between various members of the Seljuk dynasty. A particularly fascinating detail is the identification of the unnamed *kundistabl* who in 1258 led a “Roman” regiment against the Mongols with the future emperor Michael Palaiologos, then in exile in the Seljuk court.

Chapter 6 deals with the “liquefaction” of the frontier zone between Byzantium and the Sultanate of Rum during the last decades of the thirteenth century (the “age of revolts” as D.Korobeinikov calls it) and the process by which Turkish warlords infiltrated Byzantine Asia Minor. Although these events have been several times presented from the Byzantine side, this study includes the most analytical presentation so far of the internal dynamics developing in the Turkish side, mainly dynastic antagonisms and Mongol suppression, that led to the creation of the Turcoman bands and their aggressive turn to the West. Developments in Byzantium are also discussed in detail. Korobeinikov interestingly breaks with the historiographical tradition that has mainly tended to follow Pachymeres’ indictment of Michael VIII’s policies. Some of his assertions can be criticized: his understanding of the *pronoia* system appears rather legalistic (it is interesting that he makes use of K. Khvostova’s work, practically unknown in the West) and the mention of *θέματα* and *τάγματα* is completely outdated in the thirteenth century. But his overall assertion that Michael VIII’s fiscal interventions in Asia Minor were not motivated by political vindictiveness, and should rather be seen as a rational restructuring of the fiscal-military organization, is quite convincing. On the other hand, the author prefers to lay the blame for the collapse of Byzantine defense in Asia Minor with Andronikos II, citing that emperor’s inability to mount a consistent military counteroffensive. Although his criticism sometimes appears too harsh (defense of Asia Minor seems to have been a top policy priority during the first years of Andronikos’ reign), one may accept that the emperor and his entourage displayed an impressive lack of understanding for local concerns, manifested in a characteristic way before and during the revolt of Alexios Philanthropenos.

The study concludes that Byzantium was fairly successful in dealing diplomatically with the powers on its Eastern frontier, first the Seljuks of Rum,

and then the Mongols. Indeed, in the aftermath of the Crusades, the acceptance of Byzantium by the Muslim world as a friendly power was unprecedented. The Empire, however, was unable to follow up its diplomatic success with the necessary application of military might, both because of bad policy choices, and because of the sharp increase of military pressure on the Eastern frontier following the collapse of Seljuk power; eventually it lost Asia Minor, opening the way for the emergence of the militarily more effective Ottomans.

Although the use of Greek sources is in general correct, there are some errors or misinterpretations that do not affect the main argumentation. Thus, the honorific epithet is *σεβαστός* and not *σέβαστος*, as continuously written (e.g. p. 60-63). *Mesadzon* (p.71 ff.) is an odd transcription of *μεσάζων*, that does not correspond either to spelling or pronunciation. *εὐγαίνοντας ἀπὸ τὸ Ἰκόνιον* (p. 221) means “coming out of Iconium”, not “one of the sultan’s nobles”. In Pachymeres’ passage (I, p. 291-293) cited on p. 240-241, instead of “he trusted nobody”, the text rather means “he confided [the registry] to insignificant people”; in the same passage, regarding the Paphlagonians, Pachymeres says in essence that they were taxed to exhaustion, since they were used to self-sufficiency and lacked monetary liquidity. On p.247, the affair from the Lembiotissa chartulary is misunderstood: *πρὸ καιροῦ* can only mean “sometime ago”, not “prematurely”, and the *στρατεία* in question does not have to be a campaign in the area. It was rather a military levy (probably a forced recruitment of sailors) that could have been related to any military undertaking, on any front; it cannot therefore be used as evidence for a Turkish raid in the area of Smyrna in the 1270s.

In conclusion, *Byzantium and the Turks in the Thirteenth Century* is a major new contribution to a question of great historical importance. As the most thorough and in-depth discussion of the triangle of Byzantine-Seljuk-Mongol relations in the thirteenth century, it is indispensable reading for any historian interested in the collapse of Byzantium and the emergence of Turkish power.

DEMETRIOS KYRITSES
University of Crete