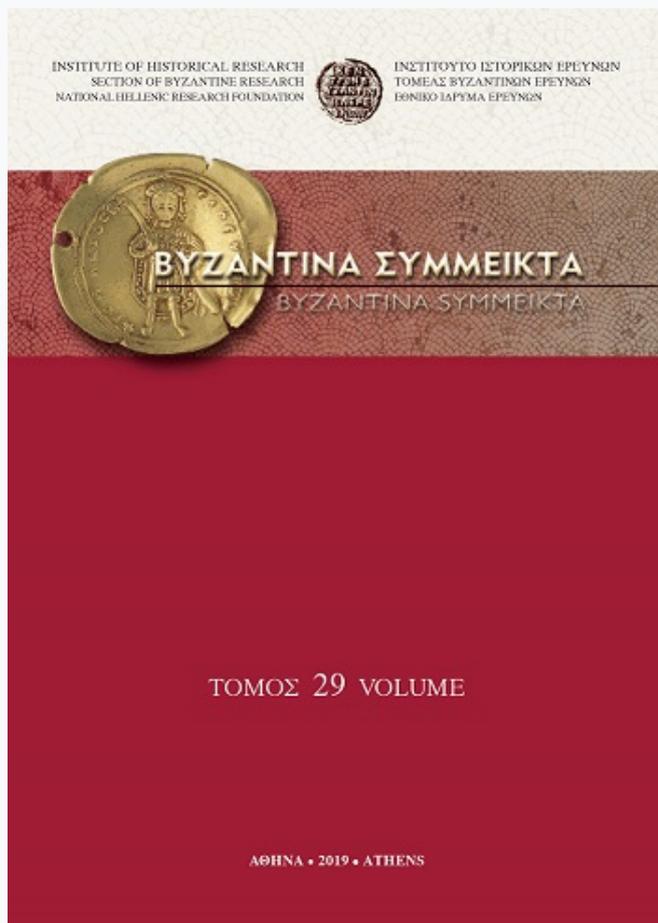


Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 29 (2019)

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 29



Book review: M. JEFFREYS – M. D. LAUXTERMANN (eds.), The Letters of Psellos. Cultural Networks and Historical Realities [Oxford Studies in Byzantium], Oxford 2017

Michael GRUNBART

doi: [10.12681/byzsym.20766](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.20766)

Copyright © 2019, Michael GRUNBART



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:

GRUNBART, M. (2019). Book review: M. JEFFREYS – M. D. LAUXTERMANN (eds.), The Letters of Psellos. Cultural Networks and Historical Realities [Oxford Studies in Byzantium], Oxford 2017. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 29, 374–377. <https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.20766>

M. JEFFREYS – M. D. LAUXTERMANN (eds.), *The Letters of Psellos. Cultural Networks and Historical Realities* [Oxford Studies in Byzantium], Oxford 2017, pp. 468. ISBN 978-0-19-878722-8

The oeuvre of Michael Psellos has undergone systematic treatment in recent years. In addition to the inventory of manuscripts (P. MOORE, *Iter Psellianum*, Toronto 2005) and the translations of letters and orations by an American team (Series: Michael Psellos in Translation), the present volume systematically scrutinizes and indexes the scholar's letter collections on the eve of Stratis Papaioannou's new edition (to be published at Teubner). The different collections of the scholar's *γράμματα* pose a major problem for the interpretation and the understanding of the letters and their rationale of organization: There is no main collection or a master edition of the learned man¹.

The present volume is the outcome of a conference held at Oxford in November 2010: Letters of Psellos were examined and presented under various aspects. The contributions can be divided into two parts: I. Studies in the Correspondence of Michael Psellos (pp. 3-140) and II. Summaries of Letters of Michael Psellos (pp. 151-416).

In his introductory chapter, Marc Lauxtermann deals with the difficulties related to the epistolographic work of Psellos (pp. 3-12). One problem is the historical distance to his texts: The context of many letters, which seem very familiar, can hardly be understood by the modern recipient. Allusions can be identified as such, but their meaning and relevance is difficult to grasp. In addition, Psellos takes his rhetorical finesse to extremes, playing with his correspondents.

1. See S. ΠΑΠΑΙΟΑΝΝΟΥ, A Fragile Literature: Byzantine Letter-Collections and the Case of Michael Psellos, in: P. ODRICO, ed., *La face cachée de la littérature byzantine. Le texte en tant que message immédiat*, Paris 2012, 289-328.

This ironic game, which also seems to distort the truth, leaves not only the modern reader, but also contemporary recipients perplexed (e.g. ep. 229 Kurtz – Drexler; Summaries pp. 275-276).

The introductory essay is followed by five articles that mainly focus on the network and circle of acquaintances of Psellos addressing prosopographical and chronological questions. All of them include translations of several letters.

Floris Bernard deals with the learned network of the scholars and aspects of the teaching-student relationships ('Educational Networks in the Letters of Michael Psellos'; pp. 13-41). The Psellian letters, like those of Libanios² or the anonymous professor³, reflect the interdependence of education and career. The relationship between the teacher and his students are not terminated by the end of training. Some letters addressed to a certain Pothos are preserved reflecting such an ongoing process of interaction (pp. 30-31): Through his relations with the imperial court and his activity as a speaker there, Psellos also wanted to draw attention to his pupils and make it easier for them to start a career at court. The relationship was also characterized by reciprocity: The former teacher was able to profit in several ways from the successful career entry of a pupil: He could be recommended to other students or take over commissioned works. Psellos also benefit from the relationships with his pupils keeping information channels open. Forms of address add to the understanding of their relations: They show a variety of notions including intimacy, hierarchy and playfulness. In Psellos' case they also reflect the sublime intellectuality of relationship. A fellow student can be addressed as ἀδελφός in a rather neutral manner, while ἀνεψιός represents an endearing salutation.

Michael Jeffreys, the spiritus rector of the undertaking, investigates the relationship of Psellos to monastic communities at Olympus ('Michael Psellos and the Monastery'; pp. 42-58). He arrived at the Bithynian holy mountain fleeing from persecution and offense by clerical circles at Constantinople and stayed there less than a year (1054). Psellos found contemplation and ἡσυχία there, but also possibilities to invest, since he already had a fortune that grew. Psellos put money into monasteries, some of them belonged to him (see a list of localities, pp. 53-56).

2. See R. CRIBIÖRE, *The School of Libanius in Late Antique Antioch*, Princeton, N.J. 2007.

3. See A. ΜΑΡΚΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ, Teachers and Textbooks in Byzantium Ninth to Eleventh Centuries, in: S. STECKEL – N. GAUL – M. GRÜNBAIT, eds., *Networks of Learning. Perspectives on Scholars in Byzantine East and Latin West, c. 1000-1200*, Münster, Berlin 2014, 3-15.

His letters reflect the continuous preoccupation with monastic and fiscal issues. To give an example, he could not afford a monastery, because the budgeted amount of money had been stolen (ep. 13 Gautier; Summaries pp. 160-162).

After discussing Psellos' role as investor Michael Jeffreys presents a detailed study on Psellos' friendship with Constantine Keroularios echoed in a series of letters ('Constantine, Nephew of the patriarch Keroularios, and His Good Friend Michael Psellos'; pp. 59-88).

The relation between Psellos and his former teacher John Mauropous forms the centre of Marc Lauxtermann's contribution ('The Intertwined Lives of Michael Psellos and John Mauropous'; pp. 89-127). Mauropous left a dossier, whose mastercopy has been preserved (Vaticanus gr. 676). The collected texts including his letter collection can be understood as self-representation and self-fashioning, some letters have been deliberately selected (p. 99). The letters can be dated to three periods (epp. 1-42: 1043-1049, epp. 43-50: 1049/1050 and epp. 51-77: to the first years of his stay at Euchaita). Lauxtermann tries to classify letters of Psellos in the chronological frame of Mauropous' collection (p. 105); he discusses corresponding letters of Mauropous and Psellos (Mauropous nr. 23, Psellos 34 Kurtz – Drexl and 12 Maltese = Garzya 33, dated to 1047); Michael Psellos had read the praise of Mauropous and felt happy, because his rhetorical abilities had been reassured; the letter probably formed a recommendation for the chair of philosophy in Constantinople.

In the final contribution Diether Roderich Reinsch analyses nine and translates two letters of the scholar to a high ranking official emphasizing their ironic level ('Venomous Praise'. Some Remarks on Michael Psellos' Letters to Leon Paraspondylos'; pp. 128-140; translation of epp. 7 and 9 Sathas).

The second part of the book forms a set of more than 500 summaries of the letters of the *ὑπατος τῶν φιλοσόφων*. Jeffreys paraphrases the letters adding the date and the most important literature (including the manuscript tradition of a letter using the Sigla introduced by Papaioannou for his edition⁴. Some of the addressees' letters are put together forming clusters of correspondence. A special section is devoted to chronological and prosopographical adjustments (pp. 417-445: 'Excursuses 1-17. Dating the Letters').

The volume offers a comprehensive and systematic insight into the epistolographic work of Psellos. The main focus and intention of the volume is

4. S. PAPAIOANNOU, Das Briefcorpus des Michael Psellos. Vorarbeiten zu einer kritischen Neuedition. Mit einem Anhang: Edition eines unbekanntes Briefes, *JÖB* 48 (1998), 67-117.

dedicated to both the historicity and the realities of the letters. Further directions of investigation of Psellian (and Byzantine) letters can be: An analysis of the text genre 'letter' and the question why the letters appealed to contemporaries. A deeper analysis of the motifs and topoi may contribute to the reconstruction of friendly conventions. However, forms of address that can be seen as elements, carriers and reflexes of relationships have been carefully included in the analysis. The aural and stylistic qualities of the letters have not been scrutinized.

The multi-layered tradition of manuscripts shows that Psellos like Libanios or the Church Fathers managed to become a trendsetter of epistolary culture in the middle and late Byzantine period. Some Psellian letters remain enigmatic tokens, but their literary quality and rhetorical refinement still entertain the modern reader. The new volume forms another piece of a mosaic that will support the understanding of Byzantine letter-writing. Such basic research is more in demand than ever in Byzantine studies. The editors offer a tasty cocktail: The combination of case-studies and the careful composed summaries of a single letter-writer produces a model that should be imitated.

MICHAEL GRÜNBART
Universität Münster