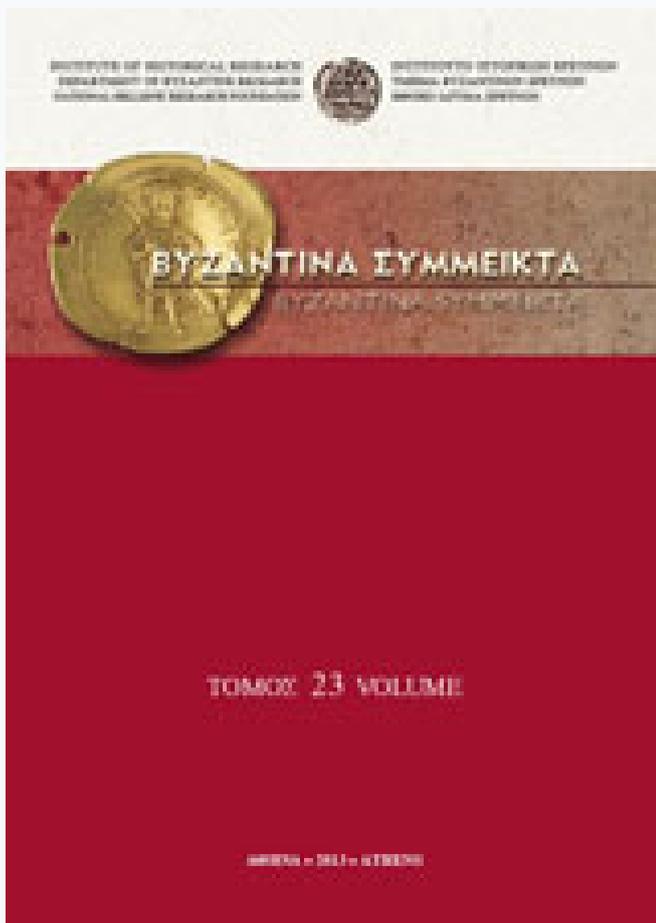


Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 23 (2013)

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 23



Book Review: K. P. CHRISTOU, Έκκλησιαστικοί συγγραφείς του 7ου αιώνα ως μάρτυρες της εποχής τους. Μάξιμος Όμολογητής, Άναστάσιος Σιναΐτης, Ψευδο-Μεθόδιος, Thessaloniki 2010.

Maria LEONTSINI

doi: [10.12681/byzsym.1127](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.1127)

Copyright © 2014, Maria LEONTSINI



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:

LEONTSINI, M. (2014). Book Review: K. P. CHRISTOU, Έκκλησιαστικοί συγγραφείς του 7ου αιώνα ως μάρτυρες της εποχής τους. Μάξιμος Όμολογητής, Άναστάσιος Σιναΐτης, Ψευδο-Μεθόδιος, Thessaloniki 2010. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 23, 297–304. <https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.1127>

K. P. CHRISTOU, *Ἐκκλησιαστικοὶ συγγραφεῖς τοῦ 7ου αἰώνα ὡς μάρτυρες τῆς ἐποχῆς τους. Μάξιμος Ὁμολογητής, Ἀναστάσιος Σιναΐτης, Ψευδο-Μεθόδιος*, Thessaloniki: Kyromanos Publ. 2010, pp. 480. ISBN: 960-7812-61-1

The book focuses on known theologians of the 7th century, analysing their writings and discussing their personal reactions and responses to the newly developed circumstances of that era. Despite the theological orientation of their works, all three writers, that is Maximos the Confessor (580-662), Anastasios of Sinai (died after 700) and the author of the Apocalypse, conventionally known as Pseudo-Methodios of Patara (fl. last decades of 7th c.), raised questions regarding the geopolitical restriction of the Byzantine state; changes in economic and social life of Byzantium and the policies of Constantinople. Their work, examined under the light of testimonies such as the epistle of Antiochos Sabaites (6th c.), dealt with similar issues and attempted to give answers on the basis of the Christian view of the world. The first two writers were worshiped as saints by both the Roman Church and the Patriarchate of Constantinople and their works acquired a universal character throughout the Middle Ages and subsequent years. The author of this book examines in detail the particular features and data of the texts dating them accurately, thus discussing the question of the identity of the 7th century writers known under the name Anastasios. Bearing the same name with Anastasios of Sinai, were Anastasios II, Patriarch of Antioch, Anastasios the monk and Anastasios apokrisiarios; in many parts of the book, the author comments on the problem of the paternity of their works by evaluating data and chronological signs in the texts.

The literary production of the 7th century, examined in the book by means of approaching the religious and intellectual pursuits of the era, proved to be a valuable source of information on historical events. Moreover, many writings (treatises, anthologies and correspondence) offer unique evidence and advance the understanding of people and events of the 7th century. The book emphasizes that these works must also be viewed as intellectual attempts to demonstrate that Christian teachings could provide solutions for the new, dramatic predicaments,

at a time when secular literary production was substantially deficient or entirely absent in certain fields. The identity of the Byzantine Empire was shaped during this period of transition from the Early to the Middle Byzantine era by controversies between central authorities seeking to regain military power at any cost, sometimes disregarding religious and doctrinal deviations expressed by various religious communities, especially in the East, or even intending to fully control them. The critical approach of events of the time by these prominent personalities, who represented an elite with particular literary skills and theological formation, aimed at creating and promoting ideal patterns for the ruler and clergy of the Empire also pointing, in a wider sense, to Orthodox beliefs and exemplary behaviors in everyday life.

Maximos the Confessor and Anastasios of Sinai were active at a time of transformation; their teachings were relevant to issues associated with their times but remain, for the most part, vital and timeless, as far as the ideals on spiritual and secular life are concerned. The historical and intellectual environment in which their works were produced, called for attention to questions that continued to trouble later intellectuals and theologians, both during the Byzantine era and afterwards. Both writers claimed a key role for the ideal of monastic life and tried to justify their influence on imperial decisions and social orientations. The third, unknown writer of the apocalyptic text, conventionally called Pseudo-Methodios, manifests the supervision of Divine Providence and the predestined fate of the Byzantine Empire among nations, both in the past and in the future, by using texts and knowledge associated mainly with the Graeco-Roman political background of Byzantium (pp. 347-354). An eschatological element is common among all the writers under examination and was mainly associated with the appearance of the Arabs in the Mediterranean (see, for example, the term Antichrist in the index). The solid education and ample theological knowledge of these 7th century writers is also discussed in the book; from its very beginning it becomes obvious that their writings have much to offer in terms of both information and a better understanding of conditions that mark the transition from Late Antiquity to the Middle Byzantine period. This significant theological production could, to a large extent, fill in some of the gaps in historical documentation, considering that classic-style historiographical works do not extend beyond the first decades of the 7th century, as noted in the introduction of the book.

The activities of 7th century ecclesiastical writers and the contribution of their works to the comprehension of their time are examined in the light of the historical developments in the course of the three main chapters. The brief introductory part of the book presents Byzantine state institutions and the social ongoing from the time of

the Empire's foundation, for the purpose of highlighting institutions in comparative decline and denoting the new ones that emerged in Byzantine society. The evolution of state institutions, which by the time of Constantine I focused on the restructuring of provincial and military commands and the establishment of military regions (*magisteria militum*), was based on the division of troops permanently stationed as border guards (*limitanei*), as well as on mobile military units (*comitatenses*), and is analyzed in the first chapter (pp. 17-165). Many illustrative digressions demonstrate the transformation of imperial institutions and the shifting role of emperors, who ceased to be military leaders and exercised their power from the royal palace (*principes clausi*). The author observes that cities, despite suffering structural changes as a result of the new economic conditions and social transformations, continued to function as the basic centers of administration and supported a number of key functions (taxation; postage; market control; military recruitment; education; fine arts; leisure). On the other hand, administrative dysfunctions and the loss of power by the provincial aristocracy resulted in bishops and members of the clergy gradually assuming new responsibilities. Thus, the Church became a vital part of the new Byzantine local administrative reality and its contribution to the spiritual life of the Empire gradually acquired important dimensions becoming more influential.

The next section of the first part discusses infrastructures inherited from Justinian I and his successors. It is emphasized that the gradual loss of Byzantine possessions in the Western Mediterranean during the reign of the successors of Justinian I and the reconstitution of the Monophysite Church in Syria and Egypt, where Chalcedonian communities were governed independently, weakened the political and military responses to the new challenges that soon emerged in the East. This chapter concludes with a brief narrative on the efforts to improve administrative and military infrastructures in response to very critical economic and social conditions, and thereupon to adjust to unprecedented circumstances created by the confrontation and symbiosis with the Arabs.

The ecclesiastical writers examined in the book offer the first direct and contemporaneous testimonies on Arab attacks. The new conditions that arose after the Persian invasions, as described in the letter of Antiochos Sabaites, are compared to the earliest information on Arab raids provided by Sophronios, Patriarch of Jerusalem. Population movements forced by attacks and captivity disrupted normal living conditions, bringing about the decline of spiritual life and literary production. According to the author, intellectuals of the time composed patristic commentaries or philosophical florilegia and treatises in a condensed form destined for preaching and answering questions raised by monks and laymen at a time when the Arab

presence introduced new customs and models of behaviour. The last section of the first chapter expands on themes relating to the reaction of the ecclesiastical writers on the new circumstances, which had worsened the daily life of Christians and brought their communities in contact with different morals, dictated by the religion of Islam, particularly in areas where the Arabs were establishing their first formal states. Christian writings also focused on moral advising, with a sequence of narratives commenting on incidents relating to adaptation to the dramatic changes. This shift towards didactic discourse contributed to the self-awareness and self-determination which is emphasized in the book and was imposed by prevailing circumstances. The trend of anachoreticism was also associated with these harsh conditions but, nonetheless, Anastasios of Sinai was sceptical, should in turn this movement evoke religious and social problems. Social pressures accentuated the deterioration of the quality of life and pointed sharply to issues related to social welfare, such as family relations and personal sanitation, brought forth as a result of symbiosis with the Arabs, particularly in the eastern provinces; all these subjects are examined in the book through the study of 7th century works.

Relations between Church and society; the implications of disputes between Orthodoxy and heresies; and the conflicts caused by the enforcement of Monothelism are the main topics of the second chapter of the book (pp. 167-272). The author observes that the social status of prominent members of the clergy was consolidated more strongly in the West, because of the more acute decline of social infrastructures and the failure to re-establish stable secular administrative authorities, while, on the other hand, Rome was at that time only marginally controlled by the Empire. The association of the clergy with various state apparatus was analysed in Justinian I's Novella VI (dated in 535), which states that true faith is a prerequisite for the welfare of society, also decreeing that the administrative structure of the clergy is obliged to submit to imperial power, which, on its part, acknowledges the independence of its spiritual leadership. This chapter also emphasizes that the popes of Rome maintained their supremacy demands, which has already been expressed in the past; it is furthermore noted that some trends of papal administration, such as the administration of justice for the clergy and the independent formulation of the doctrine were applied by the patriarchs of the East always taking into account the tendencies expressed by the central power. Furthermore, the author refers to the legislation of emperor Herakleios on clergy; to aversions in the writings of Maximos the Confessor and to arguments put forward by Anastasios of Sinai in *Questions and Answers* on the exalted position of the clergy during this period. The failure of Justinian I's efforts to confront Monophysism is attributed to the emperor's hesitation, whose support of Chalcedonian orthodoxy did not convince populations

in the East, while, according to the author, at the same time motivating feelings of distrust for the Orthodox in Syria. The establishment of a Monophysite hierarchy in the eastern provinces is a theme with a significant bibliographical background, and the author takes a critical view of it. Herakleios' efforts to approach the Eastern Churches did not have the expected impact and results, while, as noted by the author, the Persian wars strengthened divisions, despite the fact that reactions of the senior clergy in the eastern provinces to imperial policies and the initiatives of patriarch Sergios were initially received well; however, later they were strongly opposed by patriarch Sophronios in 633.

In the year that Jerusalem was taken by the Arabs, Herakleios issued the decree of *Ἐκθεσις* (638), which generated serious problems, this time provoking the ardent reaction of the Roman Church. Apart from prompting a response in the western part of the Empire, the decree also reinvigorated disputes between Monophysites and Orthodox in the East, especially in Syria and Egypt, a subject studied alongside a critical presentation of the relevant current literature. Reactions were strong because monastic orders were influential, had acquired distinctive features and were granted special privileges especially in the western part of the Empire; the rise of monasticism at that time was also intense in the East. Seventh century authors devoted much of their work on heresies, spreading not only among the laity but also among monastic communities, as referred to in the letters of Maximos, which are commented extensively in the book. The monothelite and monoenergetic formulas, introduced in Constantinople and the imperial edict of 638, triggered a series of conflicts between Constantinople and Rome. Imperial involvement in dogmatic matters provoked new debates during the reign of Constans II, particularly after the publication of the decree of Typos (648). Eventually, research focuses on a comprehensive overview of the activities of Maximos the Confessor on the basis of his biography and extant correspondence. People and circumstances, more or less explored in the bibliography, are evaluated with a view to both a better understanding of the religious positions of the writers under investigation (being the main subject of the book) and a sensing of the attitude of broader social groups towards essential religious and civil matters identified in their texts.

The subsequent section offers a comprehensive picture of the impact of the Lateran Council (649) on the eastern provinces. The process by which Rome's Orthodoxy was proclaimed in the East and the historical steps that Constantinople took to cover the dissensions with the Monophysites; also a series of theological arguments against heresy, are topics commented upon following the statements of *Ὁδηγός*, the theological treatise of Anastasios of Sinai. Meaningful remarks on the dating of this treatise, certain parts of which, according to the author, may have

been compiled probably before the Arab conquest of Palestine, reassess reflections on the authorship of some of the works attributed to Anastasios; an issue that becomes an object of annotation also elsewhere in the book (pp. 123 and n. 194, 140 and n. 226, 184 and n. 304, 202 and n. 339, 208-209 and n. 349, 304 and n. 544). An analysis of certain letters of Maximos the Confessor outlines some aspects of these relations, determined by conflict and the reluctance between the old and the new capital city; it seems that, in fact, Saint Maximos denounced not only religious policies pursued by Constans II but also the neutral stance of intellectuals and wider social groups during these conflicts.

The third chapter of the book examines three key subjects relating to Man and Divine Providence; the role of Kingship in the State; and History and the End of Time (pp. 273-388). The virtues and human defects, according to Anastasios of Sinai, originate from divine surveillance; however, not directly but by the Physiology, an Aristotelian principle which affects natural conditions and human behavior. The problems of the immortality of the soul and Anastasis, raised by both Anastasios and Maximos, are questions related to pursuits of the era, due to particular circumstances of the 7th century, as observed by the author. The redefinition of the content of the imperial authority and ideology, at a time when the historical correlation between the main civic factors was undergoing continuous changes, is a theme also dealt with by both Anastasios and Maximos. The author follows the development of Eusebios of Caesarea formulation on the position of the emperor as an intermediate link between the terrestrial and heavenly worlds and presents the changing trends of the symbolic hierarchy, as argued by Maximos, and as regards divine destination of the empire, professed by Anastasios of Sinai. The exaltation of the emperor as a sacred person and his promotion not only as guardian of the peace and harmony of the world (as in earlier times), but also, as an active guide to the last and most important historical age, with a view to the End of Times, as emphasized in the book, is a pattern widely developed during the 7th century.

Questions raised in the Thalassios epistle of Maximos, written in 633, after the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem (630), suggest, according to the author, the restoration of salvation for Christians, also indicating the main concerns of the time on coexistence with heterodox communities as a necessary condition for survival. The distant past has become particularly important, especially in the way in which Christians viewed the progression and End of Time. It is also to be noted that in the works of Anastasios the term Hellenes does not refer to Greek pagans but has readjusted to the historical context of the ancient Greek tradition. Anastasios rather emphasized the link with the past, indeed using the example of Plato's personality that bore a symbolic meaning, owing to the feeling of propinquity to

the ancient philosopher's theories on spiritual world. Attitudes and beliefs, such as the interface of war and religion supported by Jews and Arabs, following the worsening of relations also with the former as a result of 7th century conflicts brought about by the latter, were matters raised by Maximos and also addressed in the commentaries of Anastasios.

The eschatological trend of the times is not only reflected in the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius but is also inherent in the works of Maximos and Anastasios. A passage in the *Sermones* of Anastasios resembling an excerpt from the *Chronography* of Theophanes the Confessor on the year 628-9, the authorship of which was formerly attributed to patriarch Anastasios II, leads the author to the conclusion that this text originally belonged to Anastasios of Sinai, and was then incorporated in Theophanes' *Chronography*, due to its eschatological interpretation of events of the 7th century. On the whole, this section of the last chapter discusses the eschatological views in every known text of this century, concluding, rather fairly, in a separation of views on the messianic mission of the Byzantine state from those on imperial victorious mission as a distinctive feature of the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, which does not appear in other texts. The author reconsiders the writers studied in the book calling them Byzantines (Conclusions pp. 429-453). Maximos, a leading theological personality, exceeded the time limits of his age, unlike the other two writers who were restrained by their contemporary limits. According to the author, Anastasios, who represented Orthodoxy in Muslim occupied territories, attempted to adjust the ancient heritage to prevailing conditions, while Pseudo-Methodios raised the issue of the ecumenical prevalence of medieval states, being one of the principal demands of the Middle Ages. The book concludes with a bibliography (pp. 453-470) and index (pp. 471-479).

The clear treatment of issues, people, and terminology in the texts examined in the book has revealed the historical value of theological production in a transitional era and enabled the reconstitution of certain original aspects of the intellectual climate, social norms and behavioral patterns of the 7th century.

MARIA LEONTSINI

Institute of Historical Research

Department of Byzantine Research/NHRF

