The history of Nicetas Choniates records events in Byzantium from the death of Alexius I Comnenus in 1118 to the aftermath of the capture of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in 1204. Born around 1156, Nicetas held a series of increasingly important offices until he became the highest-ranking minister in the Byzantine bureaucracy. After 1204 he eventually took refuge with the Byzantine government in exile at Nicaea, where he revised and continued the history he had already produced in an earlier version. Though usually and rightly considered one of the half-dozen greatest Byzantine histories, it received relatively little scholarly attention until the Dutch scholar Jan-Louis van Dieten published several major studies on it, including the first modern edition in 1975. The American scholar Harry Magoulias published an English translation in 1984, and a comprehensive monograph by Alicia Simpson appeared in 2013. Now, just five years later, we have a second monograph by Theresa Urbainczyk, author of two useful monographs on the early Byzantine histories of Socrates of Constantinople and Theodoret of Cyrrhus.

Acknowledging that Simpson’s book is ‘excellent’ and ‘pioneering,’ Urbainczyk explains, ‘This work in no way supersedes hers, but instead builds on the huge learning displayed in her book, to suggest a way of understanding Niketas that helps the reader approach this complex text. As will become apparent, there are many difficulties with this history’ (p. 4). That statement of purpose, like the book’s title, is rather vague, and the rest of this short book fails to make a convincing case that Nicetas’ history presents serious problems, or that Urbainczyk has much of consequence to add to what Simpson has already written.

Among the ‘difficulties’ that Urbainczyk finds in Nicetas’ history are that he claims to be writing as clearly as possible though his style is quite obscure, that he imitates the prose of classical historians but often cites the poems of Homer and the Bible, and that he says both favourable and unfavourable things about many of the people he describes. Yet all these supposed anomalies can be found in other middle Byzantine historians, if not necessarily in earlier ecclesiastical historians like Socrates. Many Byzantine authors declare that their stylistic ideal is clarity, and to my knowledge none admits to writing in an obscure style to impress his readers with his erudition, even when that is evidently what he did. Most Byzantine authors also thought that citations of Homer and the Bible could appropriately be inserted into Atticizing prose, even though they were written in dialects different from Attic Greek. If these features seem paradoxical to us, the paradoxes apply to middle Byzantine literature in general, not to Nicetas in particular.

Not just Nicetas but also Michael Psellus and Anna Comnena mix praise with blame in describing historical personalities, and most of us consider such complexity an improvement on earlier Byzantine historians, who too often describe emperors and officials as almost entirely virtuous or vicious. Nicetas was influenced by Psellus and Anna, but perhaps more important was the fact that all three historians were personally acquainted with many of the people they described, recognized these people’s merits and faults, and were fair-minded enough to describe both the good and the bad in them. That some modern scholars have trouble understanding this seems to be a sign of their postmodern preconception that history is necessarily subjective, a proposition that all Byzantine historians would have rejected, since they professed to aim at objective truth.

The book’s longest chapter is on Nicetas’ views of women (Chapter 3, ‘The World of Byzantine Women, pp. 31-58), which Urbainczyk finds, seemingly to her surprise, do ‘not indicate any type of proto-feminism’ (p. 115). She however appears to attach too much importance to Nicetas’ dislike of Alexius III’s wife Euphrosyne, whom he depicts, probably accurately, as quite irresponsible, if not much worse than her husband. Here as often, today’s feminism seems to be more of an obstacle than an aid to understanding the past.

Urbainczyk emphasizes Nicetas' use of Biblical reminiscences to compare the fall of Constantinople to the Crusaders and the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians, depicting both catastrophes as divine punishments for the inhabitants' sins. She is right that Nicetas said and believed this, but Nicetas' view of the fall of Constantinople is not as simplistically religious as she suggests. Though he considered the empire's ruin to be divine punishment for the sins of its greedy, cowardly, superstitious, and negligent emperors and officials, he thought those sins were also political mistakes, and his charges of maladministration can be taken seriously even by readers who do not believe in divine retribution. Urbainczyk seems not to be much interested in political history or in Nicetas' eventful life, which she treats in less than a page, but in order fully to understand Nicetas we must realize that he was a thoroughly political man, much concerned with such subjects as state finance, naval power, military strategy, and diplomacy.

Despite expressing admiration for Simpson's book, Urbainczyk mostly disregards Simpson's careful disentangling of the four editions of Nicetas' history. After 1204 Nicetas revised a first version that he had finished around 1202 by adding comments that show hindsight and a freedom to speak much more candidly than he could while still involved in politics. In a revealing lapse, Urbainczyk says of a passage describing the emperor Manuel I, 'Nicetas would seem to be looking forward to 1204 here' (p. 109), when a glance at van Dieten's apparatus shows that Nicetas wrote this passage before 1204. She seems unaware that most of Nicetas' praise of emperors and officials comes from his first edition and most of his criticism from his later editions.

Urbainczyk notes that Magoulias' translation has been criticized for inaccuracy but defends it on the reasonable ground that Nicetas' Greek is so difficult (p. 5). She quotes Magoulias' renderings throughout, inserting corrections that she usually attributes to her 'anonymous reader for Routledge' (pp. 26, 27, 53, 55 [three times], etc.). Of one passage she observes that both the correct translation and Magoulias' mistranslation 'convey Anna's [Comnena's] anger' (p. 54), as if the mistranslation could be valid evidence.

Her factual errors are fairly minor. She says that Béla III of Hungary was married to the daughter of Manuel I (p. 44), though they were only betrothed and never married. She incorrectly states that Nicetas died in '1215 or 1216' (p. 4) rather than 1217, that Anna Comnena's husband Nicephorus Bryennius died in 1137 rather than 1138, and that Anna's mother Irene Ducaeana died 'perhaps in the 1120s or 1130s,' though she certainly died in 1138 (p. 21). These mistakes could have been avoided by consulting my book on The Middle Byzantine Historians,4 which Urbainczyk never mentions, perhaps because she has little interest in Nicetas' biography, political analysis, or Greek style, which were main concerns of mine. She also fails to mention the first major book on Nicetas by van Dieten,5 which deals with similar aspects of the history.

Urbainczyk has been poorly served by the editors of the Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Studies series, in which her book appears. Each of her first six chapters has its own notes and

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bibliography printed after its text, though many of the notes are so closely related to the text that they belong at the bottom of the page (if not in the text itself), and the six bibliographies are needlessly repetitious and should have been combined in a single bibliography at the end. More than half the book consists of quotations, many of which could better have been summarized or paraphrased. Quotations are sometimes repeated (e.g., cf. pp. 69-70 and 96-97), and once the same quotation and Urbainczyk’s comment on it are repeated verbatim (pp. 56-57 and 76). The book could have been reduced to the size of a long article without any significant loss, except that then it could not have been sold at such an exorbitant price.

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