

Nesbitt, John W., ed. *Byzantine Authors: Literary Activities and Preoccupations*. Series: The Medieval Mediterranean, vol. 49. Leiden: Brill, 2003. Pp. vii, 283. \$95.00 900412975-8. ISBN: .

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This book represents a pleasing, if sad, series of thoughts: pleasing in that it is always good to have attention paid to Byzantium's literary culture, and all the more so that this attention should be associated with Nikos Oikonomides, one of the most agreeable and knowledgeable practitioners of Byzantine studies in recent years; sad in that these essays have to be in Nikos' memory, rather than a tribute offered in his lifetime.

The material in this volume, it must be admitted, is rather a mixed bag. There is no theme that links the subject matter: the only connecting thread is that these are texts in translation. That in itself is not necessarily a bad thing, given that each text does have an intrinsic interest; but a rather more unified presentation could perhaps have been achieved.

Of the eight texts, four are accompanied by their Greek originals while four are not. It is not entirely clear on what principle this has come about as not all the originals are readily to hand (e.g. Kurtz's 1908 edition of Christopher of Mytilene, from which poem 42 is translated by Paul Magdalino: it would have been good to have had the Greek to accompany this short piece). In some cases, new editions accompany the translation (e.g. Miller's presentation of two texts associated with the school in the Orphanotropheion in Constantinople, or Nesbitt's extract from Alexander the Monk on the Discovery of the Cross). In the case of Sullivan's work on the anonymous, probably tenth-century, *De obsidione toleranda*, van den Berg's 1947 edition is reproduced, with a waspish note (149) to the effect that after the publisher reneged on an agreement to reproduce the edition photographically, the pages had to be type-set and the editor takes no responsibility for their accuracy (though the translator's proof-reading seems to be up to standard). In some cases the Greek text, when given, faces the translation (e.g. Miller), in others it follows (e.g. Nesbitt). The lack of uniformity extends also to the referencing system: most of the contributors are using the Harvard system, but not all, or only intermittently (McGrath is the most obvious case). If there is logic behind this, it escaped this reviewer. There is also considerable unevenness over the extent of accompanying annotation and commentary.

Paul Magdalino's contribution on a cake baked by Christopher of Mytilene's cousin and decorated with signs of the zodiac is succinct, readable and informative on evidence for cake-making in Byzantium and possible feminist implications (1-6). Timothy Miller's translations of a prose and verse schedos are much less nimble in execution (the correlatives, for example, are clumsily done) but his brief discussions of the twelfth-century context are useful (9-20). John Nesbitt, on Alexander the Monk's version of Helena and the Cross, attempts to justify a pre-Heraclian date for Alexander's chronicle, and places this section in relation to other versions, arguing that the whole was a pilgrim text (23-39). He edits a portion on the basis of the 1600 edition and ten eleventh- and twelfth-century manuscripts. There are some interesting variants but many of the entries in the textual apparatus merely offer examples of scribal orthographic carelessness and should be ignored in the projected new edition (a "new *editio princeps*" [24], is a contradiction in terms). George Dennis offers lively versions of Psellos' letters to the rogue monk Elias, with his

taste for comic songs and the bordellos of Constantinople -- another unexpected insight into Byzantine life; the dating might need revision (43-62). John Duffy and Emmanuel Bourbouhakis (66-81) offer material taken from a twelfth-century synaxarion now in the Houghton Library in Harvard: five miracles worked by St Menas in abbreviated versions, cut down from the longer life for liturgical purposes (66-81). The hitherto unedited text is given without apparatus, and with no indication of how much editorial intervention has taken place (the orthography must at least have been tidied up). Stamatina McGrath offers material on another Elias, this time of Heliopolis, an eighth-century neo-martyr in Islamic-occupied Syria: a translation, with brief notes and a helpful discussion of the historical context (85-107). Elias' life and death give insights into some of the social realities at this period (e.g. the hazards of taking one's belt off to dance, and Elias' life as a maker of camel saddles). More on the textual background, and in particular a clear statement of the edition used for the translation, would have been useful. Eric McGeer deals with two military harangues produced by Constantine Porphyrogennetos, and contextualises them historically and in literary terms, arguing that these show that Constantine had serious intentions of setting out personally on campaign (111-35). **Dennis Sullivan's study of the *De obsidione toleranda* is by far the longest piece in the volume (139-266). Complementing as it does his work on other tenth-century manuals on siege-warfare, this translation forms a substantial contribution to the field as well as to the book, especially because of its notes. This section alone would justify the book's acquisition by any library which covers Byzantine studies.**

However, the fact remains that this is a mixed bag whose quality varies as much as the contents. I am not at all sure that this offering would have met with Nikos Oikonomides' unmixed approval, despite his ties of friendship with the contributors.