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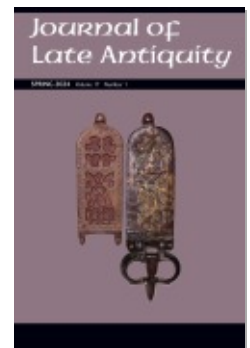
*A Cabinet of Byzantine Curiosities: Strange Tales and
Surprising Facts from History's Most Orthodox Empire* by
Anthony Kaldellis (review)

Giulia Freni

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community. Further exploration in this particular area would have enriched and bolstered Motia's scholarly gestures beyond patristics, to the fields of religious studies and late antique religious history. Readers should be aware that the book wavers between lucidity and inscrutability with respect to compositional style and that its structure feels choppy by an overdetermination of sections, sub-sections, and sub-sections of sub-sections. Those are small and admittedly personal nitpicks, and they in no way detract from the success of this book. Doubtless, Motia's monograph will make a lasting imprint on the study of Gregory of Nyssa, the history and reception of philosophical thought, and the study of religious identity in antiquity and Late Antiquity.

A Cabinet of Byzantine Curiosities: Strange Tales and Surprising Facts from History's Most Orthodox Empire

ANTHONY KALDELLIS

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Pp. 248. ISBN: 97801906259480

Reviewed by Giulia Freni
(Università della Basilicata)

“Byzantium is enigmatic enough by itself, but its popular reputation these days is also a mystery” are the words with which Anthony Kaldellis opens *A Cabinet of Byzantine Curiosities: Strange Tales and Surprising Facts from History's Most Orthodox Empire*. This permits us to recognize the contrast between the mystery and the attraction that Byzantium causes, especially in undergraduate students. As explained in the preface, the book has a flexible approach: on the one hand, it includes material that makes the Byzantine world seem weird and alien, and on the other there is material which instead

highlights the down-to-earth, pragmatic, inventive, and rational aspects of this culture. The primary aim of the book is to produce a work of entertainment, whose eighteen chapters could also be read in snatches. Taking into account several contexts and situations, the volume wants to provide “a handy reservoir of tales and anecdotes” (xi), with an explicit tribute to the Byzantine scholars who have intellectually stimulated Kaldellis throughout his life. Due to the autonomous and variegated nature of the chapters, it can be difficult to retrace the contents of the book. For this reason, it is more useful to focus on some of the aspects discussed, even some that are obscure.

Of particular interest the section devoted to animals, where we find curious anecdotes. For example, while Saint Lazaros was climbing Mount Argeas in Cappadocia, he and a bear bumped into each other, froze, and then continued their own way (*Life of Saint Lazaros of Gelesion*, 25); another remarkable case is that of a certain Andreas, whose dog could sniff out pregnant women, adulterers, or misers (Joh. Mal. *Chron.* 18.51; Theoph., ed. De Boor, 224). These are only two of the various curious tales involving animals here, but there are so many others about saints or emperors, as well as fables and stories. For these last ones, the *Katomyomachia* (*The Battle of Cats and Mice*) and the *Synaxarion of the Honored Donkey* are probably the best known.

Among the topics discussed, attractive are the science and technology of Byzantium, including also the medical practice. This aspect is debated in two separate chapters, the one devoted to medicine and the other to science, but we have to recognize the strict link between these two fields. Moreover, when talking

about these disciplines, we should be aware of the difference between ancient or Byzantine science and the modern perception of the term. The passages quoted in these two chapters, even indirectly, highlight this distinction: concerning Byzantine medicine, there are several anecdotes on the use of natural substances for therapeutic purposes and, sometimes, even the reliance on saints like Cosmas and Damian. At the same time, for other fields of science and technology the author refers to such inventions as portable sundials, Greek fire, military contrivances, pneumatic devices, water sources, and mathematical and astronomical techniques. The section on science and technology is enriched by some illustrations: for example, the Basilica Cistern in Constantinople or the signature of Andronikos II Palaiologos, this last one made with a special purple ink.

Another remarkable aspect is religion, covered again in several chapters. These focus on saints, heresy, and scandal, which are central elements for an understanding of the importance of religion and the supernatural in the Byzantine world. Concerning the saints, Kaldellis retraces several typologies: the Stylites, who lived on the top of columns (for example, Saint Symeon or Saint Daniel); the extremists, like the Grazers or those who practiced iron-wearing; the Holy Fools, who were mad or played at being mad, rejecting conventions and social prestige; the Dream Healers, known for their thaumaturgic and therapeutic powers, as it appears from the corpus of miracles of Cosmas and Damian; the Cross-Dressers, when married couples decided to abstain from sex, dress themselves up and join monasteries. Also, heresy was a fundamental component of the religious universe in Byzantium, as it emerged from

the theological questions and controversies that arose in the Church councils: starting from these considerations, there are here many anecdotes on persecution, heresies like Arianism or Bogomilism, the decisions made by the councils, and the period of Iconoclasm.

These are some of the most interesting topics discussed, but the anecdotes refer also to other aspects like marriage, eunuchs, war, rogues, insults, punishments, foreign lands and foreigners, disasters, and there are even some about emperors. In this way, the volume gives an overview of different facets which characterized Byzantine culture and society, useful for the experts on this subject matter but also attractive for those approaching it for the first time. A deep familiarity and firm grasp of the source material emerges, thanks to which the Byzantine world is debated in a light but non-trivial way, and in many cases it results in an enjoyable read. The hope is that a contribution like this might draw more attention to Byzantium and the eastern side of the Middle Ages, shedding fresh light on this area of research and opening up new discoveries and considerations.

Tales of Dionysus: The Dionysiaca of Nonnus of Panopolis. A Group Translation

EDITED BY WILLIAM LEVITAN AND STANLEY LOMBARDO

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022. Pp. xviii + 798. ISBN 978-0-472-03896-1

Reviewed by Domenico Accorinti
(IIS Galilei-Pacinotti)

More than eighty years after the English prose translation by W. H. D. Rouse for the Loeb Classical Library (1940), here is an interesting experiment in translating