

“The Roman History” of Nikephoros Gregoras: Historical Analysis of His Work

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The research conducted with the support of the SRA Program of the Tokyo Foundation represents one of the turning points for the work on my doctoral dissertation: *The Roman History* of Nikephoros Gregoras: historical analysis of his work. It enabled me get in touch with one of the main experts in the field of Byzantine historiography, Dr Ruth J. Macrides, and it helped me explore and understand the world of a 14th century Byzantine intellectual, making his voice heard in the 21st century, in a world that has undergone many changes.

Nikephoros Gregoras, the writer of 37 books of *The Roman History* was born around 1295 in Heraclea Pontica, on the shores of the Black Sea and died in Constantinople, around 1361. He belonged to the literary circle of the emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282-1328) and was a student of the emperor’s closest advisor, Theodore Metochites. His historical work encompasses a wide chronological period from 1204 to 1359. It was written in different periods of time and under different political circumstances and is a product of the cultural upswing of the Palaiologan period – the so-called “Renaissance of the Palaiologoi”. The fact that this work, one of the most important sources for the 14th century Byzantine history, lacked an all-inclusive monograph, as well as my personal affinity to this period, encouraged me to deal with it and to discover the life of its author.

By studying Gregoras’ historical work, two separate histories can be distinguished: 1) History which aims to eternalize the events of Gregoras’ time with a very long introduction; 2) History which tends to prove the “heresy” of Gregoras’ worst theological adversary, Gregory Palamas. Without thorough analysis of both of Gregoras’ “histories” no progress can be made in the study of this important 14th century work. My SRA research was, thus, concentrated on the first part of his *History*, mostly on a very long introduction (11 out of 37) books Gregoras chose to write in this way.

Gregoras’ first eleven books were conceived as an introduction, as a sort of a short compendium of knowledge that was to be transmitted to posterity. This was the result of an intellectual and scholarly influence of Theodore Metochites, Gregoras’ teacher, a fact which can be proved by one of Metochites’ poems that is to be regarded as his spiritual will. In it,

Metochites names Gregoras "as heir to his wisdom" and names him the successor of all his books, his library and, thus, his knowledge.¹

Gregoras' portrayal of the past events was very imprecise and not very detailed. He clearly omitted a lot of important information, and the ones he chose to include may seem irrelevant to modern historians. However, one must always keep in mind the contemporary audience of Gregoras before passing judgment on the relevance and irrelevance of things! The histories of the period Gregoras chose as an introduction had already been written and were read in his time (the historical works of George Acropolites and George Pachymeres), but the mere fact that he chose to repeat some of the stories points to the importance and, even more, to certain intentions and messages the author wanted to express. Gregoras did not rely much on the historical works of his predecessors, but he did consult them and read them, for he followed, to certain degree, the order of the events they had set.

The structure of his work was mainly centered around an emperor (him being the main character), but the character of an imperial biography was not followed to the very end – the structure of his work changes already in his 3rd book.

One of the most important conclusions I've made evolves around the historical method Gregoras employed. It is of great significance to stress that it changes with the changes in the character of the work and that it differs in the two mentioned "histories." This variation was the result of the fact that Gregoras' second history was based on an eye-witness account and on the things the historian himself heard from reliable sources (as he says), whereas his first books were written as a result of the historian's heuristic approach, his research and choice of the source material he was going to use.

All of the conclusions I've made would not have been possible without my research stay in Birmingham. The interviews I had with Professor Ruth Macrides, which have been organized on weekly basis, her guidance and advice, her scholarly approach and interest, as well as her readiness to read some of my writings, improved my methodology, helped me pose some new questions or respond to the already posed questions in different way. The participation at her classes, as well as the information and knowledge exchange with her postgraduate students helped me improve my scholarly approach making it innovative and modern. The research work at the Library of the University of Birmingham has made my work on the data and source collection almost complete. The choice of the University was

¹ Two Poems by Theodore Metochites by *I. Ševčenko* and *J. Featherstone*, Hellenic College Press, Brookline, Massachusetts 1981, 29-45.

excellent and the whole academic environment was inspiring and very enjoyable. I was also invited by the student's society, GEM (Gateway to Eastern Mediterranean) of the Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies, to present the topic of my PhD and my research work in Birmingham. The presentation went very well and I got the much wanted feed-back from my future colleagues.

The research work I conducted at the University of Birmingham was an essential part of the work on my PhD. It shed new light on the problems posed long ago, which will lead to new conclusions and new perception of the work in general. It would show how much attention we should pay to the Byzantine narrative sources, not appreciating them merely for the information they provide on political history, but rather regarding them as products of a civilization we should bow to with respect, thus, respecting and guarding the world we live in today.