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THOMAS PRATSCH, Eunuchs, Patriarchs and Macedonians. Studies on Byzantine Social History (7th–11th c.) (Mainzer Veröffentlichungen zur Byzantinistik 19). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag 2026. XXII, 208 pp. – ISBN 978-3-447-12496-6

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Social history confronts a persistent archival paradox: the people who sustained a society often left fewer traces than those who governed it. THOMAS PRATSCH addresses this disparity through the *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit* (Prosopography of the Middle Byzantine Period Online, PmbZ), whose records cover the years 641–1025. Four thematic investigations examine women and eunuchs, clergy and laity, ethnic affiliations, and age at death. Describing the documented population as "the intersection of the two pyramids turned against each other" (p. 10), one representing social hierarchy and the other the likelihood of appearing in the sources, PRATSCH defines the difficulty with admirable economy. The book's unifying concern, despite its varied subjects, is whether individual attestations can illuminate social structures without obscuring the conditions of their preservation.

Archival asymmetry comes into sharp relief in PRATSCH's opening section. Of approximately 22,000 PmbZ entries, only some 750 record individual women; including roughly 420 women mentioned anonymously as relatives raises their share of the documented population from 3.4 to approximately 5.2 per cent (pp. 13–14). This adjustment demonstrates that the archival categories determine the apparent dimensions of a social group before any historical interpretation begins. PRATSCH's reconstruction of imperial female offices is especially rewarding. Ceremonial prescriptions and seals disclose a hierarchy extending from the *zoste patrikia* to the *parakathistria*, *primikerissa*, *kubikularia*, and attendants of the imperial bedchamber (pp. 46–56). The *kubikularia* Theodote, whose intimacy with Constantine VI culminated in their controversial marriage, exemplifies the political consequences of access to the palace (p. 53). Danelis, a wealthy Peloponnesian widow, offers another route to influence: her patronage of Basil I preceded a lavish imperial reception and significant transfers of property (pp. 35–37). Yet proximity, patronage, and institutional authority remain distinguishable forms of influence. Here, the book

excels at recovering the vocabulary of female office while leaving room for further inquiry into the actual exercise of power.

Eunuchs offer a different configuration of service and advancement. Their careers extended across court administration, military command, and ecclesiastical office. PRATSCH counts seven or eight eunuch patriarchs within his period (pp. 69–81). His subsequent contrast between women's familial and professional networks and the ostensibly individualistic conduct of eunuchs (pp. 82–87), however, invites closer scrutiny.As SHAUN TOUGHER's examination of eunuchs' connections with prominent Byzantine families suggests, institutional service could coexist with enduring relationships of kinship and patronage.[1] The rivalries of Aëtios and Staurakios, and of Basil Lakapenos and Joseph Bringas, certainly disclose intense competition near the throne. Yet those conspicuous conflicts offer a fragile foundation for a general account of eunuch solidarity. Conversely, shared ceremonial participation among women establishes opportunities for interaction more readily than demonstrable networks. PRATSCH acknowledges that less prominent eunuch associations could have escaped documentation (p. 87); applying equal standards of inference to both groups would make the comparison more persuasive.

PRATSCH's inquiry becomes especially revealing when it turns to monastic organisation and the intricate connections between ecclesiastical and secular elites. Nearly 8,000 PmbZ entries refer to clerics, a concentration PRATSCH rightly relates to the ecclesiastical transmission of texts (pp. 88–90). The Studite congregation supplies unusually tangible evidence for connections across distance. Some 560 surviving letters and 400 catecheses reveal a differentiated system of instruction, communal discipline, and correspondence (p. 102). A particularly vivid episode concerns the monks Gaianos and Zosimas, who drowned while carrying Theodoros' letter to the exiled metropolitan of Sardis in 815/16 (p. 104). Their journey makes clear that institutional cohesion depended upon vulnerable human intermediaries and the practical movement of messages. Even during Theodoros' exile, the congregation remained connected through messenger routes adapted to his changing places of confinement (pp. 107–109). Rules, offices, and literary production thus emerge as material mechanisms of authority rather than merely monastic ideals.

1. SHAUN TOUGHER, The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society. London – New York 2008, pp. 65–66.

The analysis becomes more consequential as monastic affiliation intersects with family strategy. PRATSCH follows the Studite kindred, the Macedonian emperors, and the Lakapenoi, tracing appointments, marriages, patronage, and the transfer of property across clerical and lay spheres (pp. 110–134). The conversion of the family estate at Boskytion into the Sakkudion monastery supplies a concrete instance of secular resources acquiring an ecclesiastical form (p. 129). In another direction, Romanos I's determination to secure the patriarchate for his son Theophylaktos reveals how ecclesiastical promotion could extend dynastic influence (pp. 126–128). These examples refine the picture developed by ROSEMARY MORRIS of monasticism embedded within the relationships of lay society.[2] The resulting account of a lay-clerical elite is arguably the volume's most substantial contribution: its influence rested upon the convertibility of wealth, kinship, and religious authority.

A further distinction concerns the evidentiary foundations upon which such relationships are reconstructed. Whereas Theodoros Studites' correspondence preserves direct exchanges among identifiable individuals, the *Vita Nili* presents Neilos of Rossano within an extensive network of monastic superiors, ecclesiastical dignitaries, and secular rulers, whose relationships are mediated through the conventions of hagiographical representation (pp. 132–134). The latter narrative demonstrates the social prestige attributed to sanctity, while its hagiographical purposes invite caution over the precise contours of patronage. Although PRATSCH invokes social network analysis in his introduction (pp. 9–11), his reconstructions remain predominantly narrative. Explicitly separating attested exchanges, institutional connections, and relationships inferred from common status would clarify their varying degrees of certainty. JOHANNES PREISER-KAPELLER's methodological work illustrates the possibilities of such relational differentiation within Byzantine studies.[3] This refinement matters particularly because uneven evidence can otherwise appear as a substantive difference between social groups.

Questions of ethnic affiliation receive a comparably attentive, if some-

2. ROSEMARY MORRIS, Monks and Laymen in Byzantium, 843–1118. Cambridge 1995. doi.org/10.1017

3. JOHANNES PREISER-KAPELLER, Symploke and complexio: Entangling and Dis-Entangling the Networks of the Roman Empire of the East in the Early Medieval World, Fourth–Ninth Century CE. In: EMILIANO FIORI – MICHELE TRIZIO (eds.), Proceedings of the Plenary Sessions of the 24th International Congress of Byzantine Studies. Venice 2022, pp. 393–422.doi.org/10.30687

times tentative, treatment. The discussions of Macedonians, Thracians, Cappadocians, and Lycaonians expose the shifting implications of regional names (pp. 135–162). Basil I's Armenian paternal ancestry, the Grecised Armenian names of his brothers, and the Greek names bestowed upon his children reveal the complex relationship between descent, cultural affiliation, and dynastic identity (pp. 141–143). An especially revealing detail is the seal identifying Marianos as *katepano* of the Macedonians, which PRATSCH considers evidence for a Macedonian palace guard (p. 143). The inscription securely attests a command designation; the composition and enduring identity of the unit remain more conjectural. Command titles and shared ethnic self-identification belong to different orders of evidence. Such distinctions recall the importance of separating categories imposed by institutions from affiliations actively embraced by individuals.

Mortality, finally, permits a salutary test of prosopographical quantification. The mean recorded age at death reaches 47.16 years among the selected emperors and empresses, 65.04 among patriarchs, and 69.63 among saints (pp. 167, 177, 182). PRATSCH supplements these figures with funerary inscriptions, archaeological evidence, and consideration of warfare, epidemic disease, and infant mortality (pp. 183–190). One epitaph even distinguishes the death dates of a father and daughter buried together, exposing the risks of interpreting shared graves as evidence of simultaneous death (p. 187). He reasonably stresses that the documented longevity of prominent adults affords little guidance to the survival chances of the population at large. Following ALICE-MARY TALBOT, he advances a tentative general expectation of 35–40 years (pp. 190–191).[4] Yet the mean age at death of selected individuals and life expectancy at birth represent distinct demographic measures, compounded here by the selective recording of saints and rulers. Similarly, WALTER SCHEIDEL's work on ancient age structures also underscores the hazards of drawing population-wide conclusions from commemorative samples.[5] PRATSCH's own discussion of poorly preserved burials and deaths beyond formal burial grounds supplies grounds for a more restrained conclusion.

PRATSCH has produced an impressive and richly documented study that brings the complexities of middle Byzantine society into remarkably sharp focus. His careful examination of court ceremonial, monastic correspon-

4. ALICE-MARY TALBOT, Old Age in Byzantium. Byzantinische Zeitschrift 77 (1984) pp. 267–278. doi.org/10.1515/bz-1984-2027

5. WALTER SCHEIDEL, Roman Age Structure: Evidence and Models. Journal of Roman Studies 91 (2001) pp. 1–26. doi.org/10.2307/3184767

dence, and family biographies illuminates the intricate relationships through which status, authority, and resources circulated across social and institutional boundaries. However, the study becomes less persuasive when conclusions about broader social patterns are drawn from evidence whose representativeness remains uncertain. Rivalries among prominent eunuchs provide a fragile basis for characterising their wider social affiliations, while regional designations and the recorded ages of exceptionally well-documented individuals offer similarly limited grounds for reconstructing collective identities and population-wide demographic patterns. These limitations qualify the scope of PRATSCH's conclusions, although his command of prosopographical material and his meticulous reconstruction of individual relationships remain considerable achievements. He offers a valuable account of how authority was formed, transmitted, and exercised within the political and ecclesiastical spheres of middle Byzantium.

Keywords

Byzantine social history; prosopography; gender and eunuchs; monastic networks; historical demography