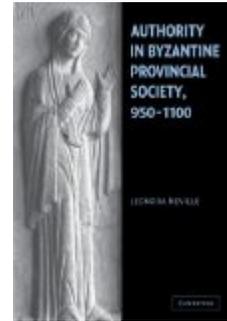


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Leonora Neville. *Authority in Byzantine Provincial Society, 950-1100*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xi + 210 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-83865-8.

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A Model Study of Byzantine Social History

In 1977, shortly before Dumbarton Oaks dismantled its Center for Byzantine Studies, an American Byzantinist lamented that Byzantine social history was still at “the pre-Marc Bloch stage”—behind medieval Western social history when Bloch finished his *Feudal Society* in 1940. The lamenter meant not just that Byzantine social history was less studied, but that nobody had proposed a systematic model for Byzantine society comparable to Bloch’s model for Western feudalism. Though Soviet and East European Byzantinists had developed a Marxist model, it fit the evidence so badly that it found little favor beyond the Iron Curtain; I had the impression from talking to several of its exponents that they themselves thought it was rubbish and had developed it only to satisfy their political masters.

Alexander Kazhdan, a former Marxist who had recently left Soviet Russia for America, tackled the problem in his *People and Power in Byzantium* (1982). He concluded that Byzantine society had no structure comparable to a Marxist class system, Western feudalism, or the ancient city-state, though he thought the Byzantines felt the lack of such a structure. Over the last twenty years, the main attempts to defend “models” for Byzantine society have been those of two British scholars, both now at Princeton, the postmodernist Peter Brown, whose Foucauldian theory of a society obsessed by power applies mainly to early Byzantine society, and the Marxist John Haldon, whose enthusiasm seems to have been somewhat deflated by the fall of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, for several reasons, among them a general decline of American Byzantine studies since 1977, Byzantine so-

cial history has failed to thrive.

Now we have this short book by Leonora Neville on Byzantine provincial society between 950 and 1100, largely based on a Princeton dissertation that seems to have been written less under Brown than under Haldon’s predecessor Judith Herrin. Neville’s introduction is a bit misleading, because it promises to develop a “model of [Byzantine] provincial society” (p. 3), though what she calls a model is so flexible and empirical that it is quite unlike its more systematic and ideological forebears.

The first two chapters deal with the central administration, with good reason. Neville indicates that the government was tiny, with “1000 to 2000” courtiers (p. 15), with “about 160” of them “actually doing paperwork” (p. 35). My own estimate, the main source for the study she quotes (p. 15 n. 180), is about 600 paper-pushers; but she is surely right that the bureaucracy was very small in comparison with the empire’s size. She is also right that “The chief government interest in the core provinces was the collection of revenue” (p. 39), as shown by Michael Henny in his *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy* (1985).

Neville also seems right to make the largely new observation that the empire’s system of taxation, developed in an earlier period when land was abundant and people were not, was poorly suited to the tenth and eleventh centuries “after the demographic recovery” (p. 51). She convincingly sweeps aside problems that have baffled generations of scholars when she observes, “Given the concern of the administration to get as much revenue as

they could without driving off the cultivators, it would make sense to key the amount of material extracted to what was available, regardless of” the tax records and laws (p. 63). She sums up, “Provincial people were simply able to ignore formal authority and laws, because they knew the imperial administration did not care what happened so long as they paid their taxes and did not stir up rebellion” (p. 65).

Chapter 3, “Provincial Households,” presents Neville’s “model,” which is simply that the essential units of Byzantine society were households, not the social classes or “village communes” on which most previous scholars have insisted. She observes, “Information about Byzantine society can be made to fit into the categories of *dynatoi* [‘the powerful’] and village communities, but they are not explanatorily helpful, because Byzantine society vigorously resists classification and they are effectively substitutes for the class vocabulary of aristocracy and peasants derived from historiography of Western Europe” (p. 69).

This insight clarifies a number of problems in the evidence. For instance, the women listed on the roster of the group known as “the Confraternity of Thebes” were not “a few feminist pioneers in an all-male club,” but merely widows who “acted as the heads of their households” (p. 72). Since “Social status other than slavery was not juridically defined in Byzantium” (p. 78), legislation defined “the powerful” not as a social class but “entirely by their ability to intimidate others” (p. 79). Though “The interest of nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians in historical precedents for communism made the Byzantine village community a subject of considerable study” (p. 93), “Individual exploitation was the primary mode of operation among peasant cultivators and all endeavors were individual when they could be” (p. 94).

In the next three chapters, Neville shows that in this period judges largely ignored the law even if they knew what it was, and people often ignored the courts and worked out their own arrangements with each other and the tax collector. She notes that the central government took almost no interest in such matters as law enforcement, public works, or religious beliefs. The conclusion is short and mostly recapitulates what has gone before, but the appendix on the sources is detailed and helpful.

While all Neville’s main points seem important and correct, and some of them are new, her book’s brevity and tight focus are at once its strength and its weakness. The book avoids distorting the evidence to fit a model, or pressing the evidence further than it will go. Yet by refusing to stray far from social history during this century and a half the book often neglects the historical context and wider implications of its subject. Neville never explains why she chose the limiting dates of 950 and 1100, neither of which marked an obvious turning point, and she has very little to say about the fiscal and military breakdown that occurred between them, except to ascribe it “in part to the malfunction of the taxation systems” (p. 64).

Her grasp of earlier history and military matters appears weak. To say that “The Byzantine civil administration was formed in the seventh century” (p. 7) is at best a great exaggeration. The original “themata” (military districts) of the seventh century were certainly five rather than four (p. 7). Her idea that thematic commanders paid subordinates out of their own salaries (p. 23) is surely wrong. She seems not to see that the laws’ frequent references to periods of thirty years represent two earlier “indictions” of fifteen years (pp. 50, 58). She also seems unaware that the neglect of public works in her period reflects not increased indifference on the part of the central government but the decay of municipal governments, which had responsibility for most public works in the earlier period.

The book is not well edited. Its references and Greek transliteration show much of the irregularity Neville attributes to Byzantine society. For example, readers who look for the article by Nesbitt and “Witta” (an error for “Wiita”) cited in n. 17 on p. 173 will find it in the bibliography not under the authors or title given in the note but under “Confraternity of Thebes” (p. 181). “Palaea kai Nea Logariki” (p. 48) manages to mix three different systems of transliteration in four words.

On the whole, however, this is an excellent and significant book. Neville’s rejection of ideological systems could be applied with profit to earlier and later periods of Byzantine social history and to Byzantine history in general, though at the risk of annoying Marxists, post-modernists, feminists, and others who like models.

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