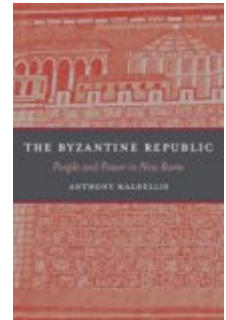


Anthony Kaldellis. *The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome.*
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In his fascinating new book, *The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome*, Anthony Kaldellis issues a provocative challenge to contemporary Byzantine historiography. The first of two planned volumes, the work is both bold and largely convincing. Kaldellis argues that the Byzantine Empire, from its beginning in the fourth century until its collapse in the fifteenth, was not a theocratic state but a republican monarchy. This is not a distinction without a difference.

The field of Byzantine studies, Kaldellis argues, has been mesmerized by the power of its own rhetoric. The “imperial idea,” the belief that the will of a God-ordained emperor alone constituted Byzantine politics, is a remnant of 1930s scholarship that has fossilized into a historiographical trope, “recycled endlessly as a self-evident truth” (p. 166). Few historians have challenged this claim, and many have twisted themselves into knots trying to protect it when the evidence has pointed in other directions. The imperial idea remains attractive for its simplicity and ex-

planatory power. The empire-wide conversion to Christianity in the fourth century resulted in the merging of church and state as elites adopted a new belief system to mirror the change at the top. As a result, Eusebius of Caesarea’s *Life of Constantine* became the model of divine kingship and a new Christian identity infused with *Romanitas*. Since the emperor was closest to God and held power by his will alone, the people as a social category became unimportant to any political analysis in the Byzantine Empire. They were spectators and passive subjects who held no power.

Kaldellis offers a cogent alternative to this reigning interpretative paradigm. In chapter 1, he defines the Byzantine *politeia* as a “translation of *res publica*” (p. 19). The republican political ideology of Rome continued to live and thrive through the Byzantine *politeia*. Including rulers and ruled, the Byzantine polity was a “unified community founded on shared values and the legitimacy of the regime based on its solicitude for the values and welfare of its citizens in the Roman ‘republican’ tradition” (p. 13). In other words, the *politeia*

established republican norms that were more important than any emperor who happened to be in office, and the emperor legitimately held power in so far as he upheld those values. Chapter 2 further explores the conscious prioritization of republican values in Byzantium by showing that emperors were constrained by a political ideology that emphasized the expectations of office; the emperor had to rule for the benefit of all his subjects.

An immediate objection comes to mind. If the emperor was limited by republican political ideology, why did he retain extralegal authority? The emperor possessed the right to ratify and nullify law and, as both executive and legislator, the emperor was beyond the law. Kaldellis dances around this objection very carefully and responds with precision in chapters 3-5. Emperors, despite their extralegal authority, adhered to the “republican consensus” by voluntarily following the laws (p. 85). This consensus held that no emperor could act with impunity since he had to act in the interests of his subjects. Acting with impunity was politically unwise since imperial legitimacy derived from an emperor’s *popularity*. Citing Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, Kaldellis develops the idea that both the emperor and the people could act as “states of exception” by assuming extralegal authority (p. 86). The emperor acted as a state of exception when life was stable and peaceful. However, the emperor was not the true sovereign. The people, who alone possessed the authority to reconstitute the political sphere after it broke down, were truly sovereign. The people transferred their *imperium* (military command) and *potestas* (power) to the emperor during rituals of acclamation, and if the emperor did not live up to their expectations the people could violently depose and replace him (as demonstrated by the fall of Michael V in 1042). In such cases, the giver is greater than the gift.

The Byzantine Republic promises a lot and delivers as much. By weaving theory and evidence,

Kaldellis provides an account that challenges the premises of past scholarship. In many ways this is the strength of the book. The restoration of the people’s historical agency is key to producing new paradigms of historical research since much of the historiography of the twentieth century, especially postmodernism, denied its importance. Although Kaldellis is keen on the word “ideology,” he does not employ it to distinguish rhetoric from reality, rationalized false belief from the truth. Ideology reflects reality and is not a mere reflection of itself (p. 3). Hopefully this is one more crack in the wall built by Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.

However, there are a few problems with the book. Stylistically, the use of bullet points as a way of citing evidence is grating when further contextual analysis is appropriate, and sometimes entire passages of Greek or Latin remain untranslated (see, for example, page 42), which will be unappealing to the lay and professional reader alike. More important, Kaldellis’s strong sense of continuity between the classical Roman world and the Byzantine East along with his emphasis on the secular effectively downplays religious transformation. The religious political spirit of late antiquity becomes a mere aberration from republican values in order for Kaldellis to connect the classical Roman past to its successor in the East. The need for continuity feels forced and the strong emphasis on the secular unnecessary. Politics were not limited to religion, but religion was far from absent. Orthodoxy still mattered. Also, Kaldellis wanders chronologically, making the overall argument seem displaced. Although the majority of examples are drawn from the eleventh century, he argues that his interpretation holds for earlier periods as well. This might be the case. But the final product overemphasizes theory rather than a time and place.

The Byzantine Republic is essential reading for anyone in the field of Byzantine studies since it successfully disputes the dominant interpretive

paradigm. It offers a wealth of insights and suggests a new direction for future work on Byzantium.

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