

Kaldellis, Anthony, *Streams of Gold, Rivers of Blood: The Rise and Fall of Byzantium, 955 A.D. to the First Crusade*. Onassis Series in Hellenic Culture. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xxxvi, ca. 440. \$39.95. ISBN 978-0-19-025322-6.

Here Anthony Kaldellis sets out to explain how the Byzantine Empire expanded dramatically from about 955 to 1025, held most of its gains until 1071, collapsed between 1071 and 1081, then recovered somewhat by 1099. Despite its colorful title, the book is not a popularization, though it may interest history buffs who can tolerate its many names and dates. Nor is the book a definitive narrative history of the period to replace the long-winded and long-outdated volumes of Gustave Schlumberger. Although Kaldellis has read the sources and makes many significant comments on them, the book is too short to be a detailed account of this eventful century and a half. Kaldellis designs his narrative primarily to provide the background he needs to offer solutions to historical problems, both large and small.

In a preliminary note, Kaldellis declares Latinizing or Anglicizing Byzantine names “a mildly offensive practice” (p. xxxv). As a follower of that practice, I would respond that his own system of transliterating Greek and Arabic by “spelling, not phonology” distorts both spelling and pronunciation by not distinguishing long and short vowels and by Anglicizing supposedly “well known” names (thus “Basil II” but “Basileios I”). No system of transliteration is fully satisfactory.

In an introduction Kaldellis argues persuasively against older theories that this was a time of struggles between emperors and a landed aristocracy. While a loosely defined aristocracy did exist, it showed no class solidarity and was never an historical force as such. The book is laudably free from such quasi-Marxist theorizing.

In Part I of the book, Kaldellis emphasizes how poor our sources are for the reigns of the great conquerors Nicephorus II Phocas (963–69) and John I Tzimisces (969–76), then contrasts the “unpopular” Nicephorus with the “popular” John. Yet both emperors were apparently liked by their soldiers, little known at Constantinople, and killed by palace plots (though Kaldellis doubts the testimony of our two best sources that John was poisoned). Our evidence remains fairly poor for the third great conqueror, Basil II (976–1025), who seems not to have been very “popular” either and barely survived several military revolts. Following recent historical fashion, Kaldellis (p. 122) doubts our sources’ report that Basil blinded some 15,000 Bulgarian prisoners of war in 1014, arguing that such an “atrocious” “would have decimated Bulgarian military manpower”; but the Byzantines always considered blinding much less atrocious than killing, and this proved to be the turning point in the war, which ended with the complete conquest of Bulgaria four years later. Kaldellis must however be right that Basil’s conquest did not include most of Croatia or Bosnia, as some have believed without evidence, and that none of these emperors made his conquests according to any clear overall plan.

In Part II, Kaldellis discusses the years from 1025 to 1059, which are usually considered a time of decline under undistinguished and mostly ephemeral rulers. He

argues that the empire's defenses remained strong throughout the period and defends the competence of Michael IV (1034–41) and Constantine IX (1042–55). Kaldellis acknowledges having changed his mind about Constantine, having once accepted Michael Psellus' subtly devastating criticism of him (p. xxx). Again depicting our sources as problematic, Kaldellis questions the impact of Constantine's debasement of the gold coinage and demobilizing a reported 50,000 soldiers on the Armenian frontier in return for a tax. He admits that after Constantine's death the Turks began major raids on the eastern part of the empire, but insists, "There is no evidence that [Constantine's] reforms had downgraded the local defenses of the eastern frontier" (p. 222).

But how problematic are our sources here? Surviving samples show that Constantine IX reduced the gold in his gold coins from about 95% to about 70%, the first serious debasement of the whole Byzantine period. This meant cutting the army's real pay by about a quarter. (Civil servants were seemingly compensated by promoting them, a practice repeatedly attested by our sources.) The Turks promptly concentrated their attacks on the Armenian frontier, exactly where Constantine had demobilized soldiers, with results that three contemporary sources describe as catastrophic. Kaldellis' argument that Constantine must have had good reasons for what he did amounts to little more than an assertion that he was "no fool" (p. 211), although Psellus implies that Constantine was foolish indeed. Kaldellis' conclusion that Constantine IX "must be rehabilitated immediately" (p. 208) appears incompatible with the numismatic evidence.

In Part III Kaldellis describes the intensifying raids of the Turks and their defeat and capture of Romanus IV (1068–71) at Manzikert (1071), after which the Byzantine army rapidly disintegrated and the Turks occupied almost all of Asia Minor by 1081. Kaldellis admits, "Something seems to have gone wrong in the defense of Asia Minor" under Constantine X (1059–67), "though its nature remains opaque. We hear of cutbacks to military spending, though we do not know exactly what form they took, how they were implemented, or why. There is no reason to suppose that the state was generating less revenue than before..." (p. 271). Finally Kaldellis suggests that the real cause of the collapse was that after the empire suffered the grave blow to its prestige of having its emperor captured at Manzikert it faced simultaneous attacks from the Turks, Normans, and Pechenegs, who may all have been very numerous.

Nonetheless, the "cutbacks" in military spending and a great loss of revenue were the inevitable results of further debasement of the gold coinage, which sank by 1081 to about 30% gold. The soldiers, with pay now worth a fraction of its previous value even if they received it, simply deserted as the Turks advanced. The taxes, collected at their old rates but now paid in debased coins, were also worth just a fraction of their previous value, showing the folly of the debasement begun by Constantine IX. The Normans seem to have been relatively few, and the Turks and Pechenegs, though numerous, were quite disorganized and could surely have been defeated by the Byzantine army as it had been in 1025. While having an emperor captured in battle

was humiliating, the empire had recovered better from the deaths of emperors in battles in 378 and 811 (each time losing many more soldiers than were lost at Manzikert).

In an “epilogue,” Kaldellis depicts the First Crusade as a successful effort by the Crusaders to help the Byzantines recover from collapse. On the whole this is right, though he puts his case somewhat provocatively and probably exaggerates the anti-Western bias of Anna Comnena’s history. The illustrations are good, and the maps are excellent. (While I received a preliminary copy without an index, an index will presumably appear in the final publication.)

The book is well grounded in the literary sources, even if the references to them are relegated to endnotes that are awkward to consult. Archeology, seals, and coins receive some attention. The general observations are often thoughtful, especially when they discard earlier theories that are baseless. The defects Kaldellis identifies in the sources may be overstated but are certainly there. Yet his concentration on literary sources has led him to neglect economics, a subject that even our best Byzantine observers ignore, and his analysis of the eleventh century is the worse for it.

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