

**Anthony Kaldellis, *A Cabinet of Byzantine Curiosities: Strange Tales and Surprising Facts from History's most Orthodox Empire*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. xii, 236, illustrations 35. ISBN 978019 0625948. \$18.95.**

“The Balearics have an amazing custom which they observe in connection with their marriages; for during their wedding festivities the relatives and friends lie with the bride in turn, the oldest first and then the next oldest and the rest in order, and the last one to enjoy this privilege is the bridegroom”.

This piece of information provided by a 1<sup>st</sup>-century BC Greek historian, Diodoros the Sicilian, concerning the ancient customs of the inhabitants of the Balearic Islands is commented on by the Byzantine ex-high minister and historian Niketas Choniates (1155–1217) just before Constantinople was sacked by the Crusaders, noting in the margin of the copy:

«If these customs regarding weddings were maintained down to our time, I too would gladly swim over to those islands, though I suffer more at sea than anyone and have white hair due to age. But I would never choose to be the groom in this case”.

A note made by another reader again in the margin of the same copy of Diodoros the Sicilian's book links a practice and the morals of the guild-master of the thieves of the ancient Egyptians, mentioned by Diodoros, to the thieves who lived in 12<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantine Macedonia and were called Egyptians (Gypsies). This piece of information is considered one of the first to give the medieval name of the Roma, as well as being the oldest reference to the presence of Gypsies in Europe.

These two examples of curiosities more or less represent some of Kaldellis' choices of strange tales and surprising facts in the book, especially when they do not refer purely to Byzantine things but mainly to Byzantine perception of ancient customs and events and which can correspondingly be linked to Byzantine ones. On the other hand these examples show Kaldellis' aspiration to underline how misunderstood the Byzantine man was, and that despite his conservatism, a feature of many medieval societies, he was not shackled to the *most Orthodox Empire*, as it has already ironically been referred to in the title. Not only does Niketas Choniates not condemn non-Christian morals, but with a large measure of self-mockery and humour he wonders if these morals still exist so he could try them out, even though he is old. And this self-mockery and irony of events and perceptions is one of the key characteristics of the most brilliant Byzantine scholars who become iconoclasts and reproduce or adopt vulgar expressions despite their annoying commitment to classical models of writing. In like manner another court scholar, Ioannis Tzetzes, had no problem recording everyday discussions and greetings in the language of various peoples in Constantinople and in one case he submits a question using extreme sexual vocabulary that he could have asked in the language of an Alan woman (a Caucasian people) who was having sexual relations with a priest, her boyfriend.

We believe that the predominantly western concept concerning the piety and severity of the otherworldly “spiritual” civilization of Byzantium, but at the same time that of its cruelty, barbarism and effeminate characteristics (some readers will find all these again in the various gobbets of this book) allusively mocks the very eloquent front cover of the book (or openly threatens to ruin it for all those, of course, who recognize the inserted images on the cover). The front cover is almost a synopsis of Kaldellis’ argument, his targets and his choices, and which are summarized in the Preface where the question is raised: What is strange and surprising about Byzantium and by what standard of normalcy, and how do some Byzantine authors or just simple findings give enjoyment and intellectual stimulation. A differentiation between an official orthodox discourse and an extreme vulgar one can be seen in the many facts and findings presented in the book, usually little known to the general public. Many of the here selected popular expressions, which are classed as very common curses or vulgar stereotypes, make, being cited next to learned texts, a significant contribution to the dialogue on Byzantine perception, like, for example, the inscription (not referenced) engraved on the columns in the converted Parthenon in the temple of the Mother of God: *Dear Mother ... take the man fucking my bride and give him a hernia and then make me his doctor ....*

Returning to the front cover of the book we must admit that it is really inventive, ingenious, as regards the topic and the aim of the work. In a gold-plated book of the Gospel encrusted with precious stones and enamels, the kind mainly used on the precious Byzantine Gospels, in the place on the medallions usually reserved for enamels depicting Evangelists and Apostles, some of the most unorthodox and surprising facts have been set out, which reappear (unfortunately in very dark black-and-white photographs) within the text to illustrate sections related to the pictured topic. Each cryptic medallion, in addition to its curious mockery of the pompous, devout Byzantine, represents one of more sections of the strange tales in the book. Let us attempt to decipher the medallions as this will inevitably lead us to a presentation of the chapters and thematic sections of the book. Hence the first medallion on the cover shows a 7<sup>th</sup>-century coin depicting emperors, one with a long beard and a handlebar moustache, features until then unknown amidst the shaven look of Byzantine emperors, as we learn from relevant texts or the annotations on the coins inside the book. The next medallion, where there would normally have been an enamel of an Apostle, bears a later popular depiction of a Dog-headed Man, a subject with exotic, Hellenistic origins, and which in Byzantium becomes Saint Christopher *Kynokephalos*, whose icon adorns the relevant Chapter XI, ironically entitled *A Menagerie of Saints!* It should be pointed out that the book contains a special Chapter (no. III) on animals, which describes the 10<sup>th</sup> c. Patriarch Theophylatos’ love for the 2000 horses he kept in a large stable near the great cathedral of Hagia Sophia (the Patriarch would abandon the service to assist a beloved mare in giving birth) and the special treatment (gold plates, special cooks) that the Empress Zoe (11<sup>th</sup> c.) reserved for her beloved cat. The third medallion shows a couple’s erotic embrace and also a rabbit that most likely symbolises (according to popular beliefs) sexuality and fertility. It is no coincidence that this depiction alludes to and

illustrates Chapter II entitled *Unorthodox Sex!* Lastly, the bottom row of medallions on the cover shows details of images from a manuscript: a) the extraordinary operation to separate conjoined twins (they were regarded as an evil omen), a somewhat pioneering operation although no mention of it can be found in ancient and Byzantine medical literature. The picture refers to Chapter VI *Medical Practice*, in which strange tales about dentists and operations, incisions, bladder stones, etc. can be enjoyed; b) the blinding of Leon Phocas in 971 which refers the reader to Chapter XIII *Punishments* and Chapter XVIII *The Emperors*, from which we remember the murders and extreme punishments (blinding and killing) meted out to their children and families by some Saints / Emperors like Constantine the Great (306–337) and the Athenian empress Irene (780–797), a fact, though, which did not prevent them being worshipped.

It therefore becomes obvious that the book *A Cabinet of Byzantine Curiosities*, and not only due to its cover, is a kind of Unorthodox Gospel of Byzantine Curiosities. If someone strives to find the orthodoxy in the most Orthodox Empire, meaning right opinion or correct and accepted creeds according to the Byzantines during certain periods and also meaning the opposite of heterodoxy and heresy, he will discover (and this is not a very well-known finding) that the majority of emperors up until the 9<sup>th</sup> century were regarded, and not only by their directly successive and hostile dynasties, either as heretics or iconoclasts, constantly in conflict with the official church and the monks whom they fiercely persecuted, or during the final centuries of the empire, as being out of necessity in favour of the Latins, constantly seeking and making union and communication with the heterodox Rome or ready to pledge allegiance to the Pope.

However, apart from the consciously projected unorthodoxy in this book of Byzantine Curiosities from History's most Orthodox Empire, many other facts and tales are perfectly recorded in the logic of the series which aims at promoting the Curiosities of an age. Among the most bizarre curiosities and strange tales presented in the book are those about the so-called Justinian plague (at one point with 10,000 deaths per day); Emperor Heraclius' fear of water while crossing the Bosphorus; the bitter cold of 763–764 when the icebergs floating down from the Black Sea and crossing the Bosphorus collided with the walls of Constantinople causing damage to houses; the Bride Shows when brides were chosen to produce successors to the throne. Other strange tales include the punishment which involves tattooing all the face with condemnatory verses; emperors' severed noses replaced by gold ones; the tales of eunuchs who could have been generals and patriarchs but never emperors; the woman forced by famine to kill her daughter and eat her. Lastly, the runic inscriptions carved by the Scandinavians (Varangians, imperial Guardsmen) in Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and on the Lion statue in Piraeus, the port of Athens (and now in Venice), while there are another thirty, most of them in Sweden, which describe like the Icelandic Sagas the adventures of heroes who went to *Grikkland* to serve under the Greek (Byzantine) emperor.

Finally, apart from the strange, extreme, unusual, bawdy and funny which prevail throughout the book, Chapter VII presents pioneering, positive breakthroughs, Byzantine achievements in the theory and application of Science and Technology (many

of which actually are curiosities). It is not particularly well-known that a thousand years before Galileo, the Christian philosopher Philoponos (6th c.) denied that the speed of motion was proportional to the weight of the bodies and Symeon Seth (11<sup>th</sup> c.) provided proof that the earth is a sphere. A somewhat advanced telecommunications application for sending messages can be attributed to Leon the Philosopher (9<sup>th</sup> c.), while experiments were even conducted to put people into the air over Constantinople. Remarkable progress was made in art, silk textile, architecture, optics and in pneumatic devices (golden trees with mechanical singing birds, the marvelous throne with mechanical lions that rise up and roar), in the construction of organs that were even sent as magnificent musical gifts to the West (8<sup>th</sup> c.). Moreover, in the field of martial arts and defence, the Byzantines produced hand grenades and flamethrowers, the most surprising and mysterious weapon which they tried to keep as a state secret for centuries, something like the atomic bomb in our time, known as the Greek Fire. References to the above in a book on strange tales tone down the prevailing, according to the hackneyed beliefs of a Western-centric reading public, Byzantine exoticism and bring to the fore a little-known aspect of scientific achievements.

It must be pointed out though that most of the curiosities referred to in the book are not historical events, but at best beliefs, gossip circulating at that particular time, legends. Many in actual fact do not even come from the Byzantines, but are stereotypes of the Byzantines held by others, primarily Latins. In cases like these it is not their historicity that should be sought (besides this is not the aim of the book), but the peculiar, the fanciful and the light-hearted in propaganda and rivalry that use a variety of weapons. Something similar concerns the Byzantines' perceptions of other nations. It should be pointed out that although references to what is noted are provided, in some cases is difficult to locate the source. It is ultimately a book of Byzantine gobbets, which like the others in the same series of Curiosities, primarily offers the inquisitive an enjoyable read (entertainment but not as a joke book) with some ribald and unexpected details both of Byzantine daily life as well as of Byzantine perceptions of the old and interpretations of ancient writers, which can all be found amongst the strange tales and surprising facts, some known and some unknown even to those highly specialized in Byzantium. The Book contains useful auxiliary tables on the emperors and coins (coin images) plus a Glossary. Lastly the words of Kaldellis in the Preface which actually do not concern me as I wished to read the book, could also be considered a kind of Byzantine Curiosity: *"The book even has uses for those who do not actually wish to read it: for example, it may be reviewed"*.

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