

Mesarites as a source: then and now

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I

I am guessing, but I suspect that Bryer's first introduction to Nicholas Mesarites was like mine through a very short article by A. A. Vasiliev, entitled 'Mesarites as a source',¹ which was a footnote to his much more substantial 'The foundation of the Empire of Trebizond',² which dominated the field for years. Vasiliev was responding to a criticism by Franz Dölger, who suggested that Vasiliev might have benefited from a perusal of the works of Nicholas Mesarites, which had been edited by his old master August Heisenberg.³ Vasiliev was adamant Nicholas Mesarites had little to contribute to the early history of the Empire of Trebizond. In his opinion, the Seljuq inscription from the walls of Sinope, which Heisenberg included in his commentary, was far more valuable than anything that could be gleaned from Mesarites' writings. This rather explains why they remained a neglected source.

A seal belonging to David Komnenos, which came on the market in 1987, allowed Bryer to re-examine the foundation of the Empire of Trebizond.⁴ The resulting study demonstrates the historical value of Byzantine seals. The seal shows on the obverse a nimbed figure identified as St Eleutherios, while the reverse carries an inscription to the effect that the scion of the purple David Komnenos has adopted him as his patron saint. It is not difficult to recognise in this David Komnenos, the original Grand Komnenos,⁵ who was a grandson of the emperor Andronikos I Komnenos and co-founder with his brother Alexios of the Empire of Trebizond. Far more difficult is the identification of St Eleutherios. Bryer's expert knowledge of Byzantine Anatolia suggested the patron saint

1 A.A. Vasiliev, 'Mesarites as a source', *Speculum* 13(1938) 180-82.

2 A.A. Vasiliev, 'The foundation of the Empire of Trebizond (1204-1222)', *Speculum* 11(1936) 3-37.

3 F. Dölger, 'August Heisenberg', in *Chalikes: Festgabe für die Teilnehmer am XI. Internationalen Byzantinistenkongress*, ed. H.-G. Beck (Freising, 1958) 137-59.

4 A.A.M. Bryer, 'David Komnenos and Saint Eleutherios', *Ἀρχαῖον Πόντου* 42 (1988-1989) 163-87.

5 R. Macrides, 'What's in the name "Megas Komnenos"?', *Ἀρχαῖον Πόντου* 35 (1978) 238-41.

of the district of Tarsia on the eastern bank of the river Sangarios. It was an area of vital importance to David Komnenos, if he was to break out westwards from the coastal strip around Pontic Herakleia, which he had held from late 1204 or early 1205. It brought him into direct conflict with another imperial claimant Theodore I Laskaris, who had established himself at Nicaea. The latter needed to secure Tarsia to protect the north easterly approaches to Nicaea. He seems to have had relatively little difficulty in holding off David Komnenos' forces. In 1208 he was able to advance as far as Pontic Herakleia. David Komnenos was saved by his alliance with the Latin emperor Henry of Hainault, who sent troops to the rescue, but three years later David disappears from the scene and Theodore Laskaris was able to annexe Pontic Herakleia and the Paphlagonian territories, which David had ruled. A note in an eleventh-century psalter – since the eighteenth century in the possession of the Athonite monastery of Vatopedi⁶ – records David's death on 13 December 1212 as the monk Daniel. He had not yet reached his thirtieth birthday.⁷ His entry into the monastic life can only have been the result of a serious political setback. Bryer's solution is to accept at face value the information contained in George Akropolites' *History* that soon after his victory over the Seljuqs in June 1211 at Antioch-on-the-Maeander Theodore Laskaris turned against David Komnenos and prevailed over him, conquering Pontic Herakleia and Amastris.⁸

Bryer's solution is the only one that makes any sense, but he advances it with considerable diffidence, because he is well aware that the information provided by George Akropolites on this occasion has been dismissed as erroneous. Even Ruth Macrides,⁹ who makes a strong case for George Akropolites' general reliability, is reluctant to accept it, while Rustam Shukurov,¹⁰ Ian Booth¹¹ and Dimitri Korobeinikov¹² are even more sceptical. The reason is that in July 1211 – a few weeks after his victory over the Seljuqs – Theodore Laskaris was engaged in a battle with the Franks near Pegai, which the latter claimed as a victory. They followed up this apparent success with a crushing defeat of the Nicaean forces on 15 October on the Rhyndakos River.¹³ This seems to have taken place to the south of Lake Apollonias, which means that the Latin forces had penetrated the main Nicaean line of defence running West to East from Lopadion to Nicaea, without meeting any challenge. This was unusual, because Theodore Laskaris was a general who liked to take the fight to the enemy.

6 D. Korobeinikov, *Byzantium and the Turks in the Thirteenth Century* (Oxford 2014) 150 note 249.

7 K. Varzos, *Ἡ Γενεαλογία τῶν Κομνηνῶν* [Βυζαντινὰ κείμενα καὶ μελέται, 20α] (Thessalonike 1984) II, 526.

8 *Georgii Acropolitae Opera*, ed. A. Heisenberg and P. Wirth (Stuttgart 1978) I, §11, 18; trans. R. Macrides, *George Akropolites the History* (Oxford 2007) 132.

9 Macrides, *Akropolites*, 39–41, 134.

10 R. Shukurov, 'The enigma of David Grand Komnenos', *Mésogeios*, 12 (2001) 125–36.

11 I. L. Booth, 'Theodore Laskaris and Paphlagonia, 1204–1214: towards a chronological description', *Ἀρχαῖον Πόντου* 50 (2003–2004) 201–207, esp. 205.

12 Korobeinikov, *Byzantium and the Turks*, 150–51.

13 G. Prinzing, 'Der Brief Kaiser Heinrichs von Konstantinopel vom 13. Januar 1212', *Byzantion* 43 (1973) 414–16.

This suggests that he was not in either of his main Bithynian bases of Prousa and Nicaea. It also suggests that the Latin invasion took him by surprise. This is not something one would expect, if the engagement near Pegai was the serious defeat for the Nicaean emperor that it is always assumed to be. Nicholas Mesarites provides evidence to the contrary. He records that in the late summer of 1214 Theodore Laskaris still held prisoner a large body of Frankish soldiers.¹⁴ They had been captured at Mamas, the suburb of Pegai, where the engagement with the Frankish forces had taken place in July 1211.¹⁵ In fact, we only have the word of the Latin emperor Henry of Hainault that the Franks had been victorious on this occasion. It is far more likely, particularly in view of how long it took the Latin emperor to follow up a supposed victory, that Theodore Laskaris had achieved two objectives: to neutralise the one remaining Latin base in Asia Minor, which allowed him a free hand elsewhere, and to recruit Frankish troops to make good his losses against the Seljuqs at the battle of Antioch-on-the Maeander. It looks as though George Akropolites' information about the overthrow of David Komnenos in the summer of 1211 has every chance, as Bryer suggested, of being correct. But rather than ending his days as a monk on Mount Athos was it not more likely that David's fate was to be confined within the Hyakinthos monastery at Nicaea? This after all is what Theodore Laskaris had done with his father-in-law Alexios III Angelos a few months previously after his victory over the Seljuqs.¹⁶

II

But this is using the writings of Nicholas Mesarites as they have always been as a quarry for fact, whereas the main advance made since 1975 has been an appreciation of the insights they provide into the Byzantine thought world at the turn of the twelfth century. One of the burning issues, both now and then, was the question of Byzantine identity, which was called into question by the fall of Constantinople in 1204. It was the starting point for the article which I contributed to the first volume of *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*.¹⁷ I am ashamed to say I made absolutely no use of Nicholas Mesarites. That is a deficiency which has been made good by Anthony Kaldellis.¹⁸ In his *Hellenism*

14 A. Heisenberg, 'Neue Quellen zur Geschichte des lateinischen Kaisertums und der Kirchenunion: III. Der Bericht des Nikolaos Mesarites über die politischen und kirchlichen Ereignisse des Jahres 1214', *Sitzungsberichte der bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, philol.-philol und hist. Kl., 1923 Abh. 3 (Munich 1923) [repr. in A. Heisenberg, *Quellen und Studien zur spätbyzantinischen Geschichte* (London 1973) II, 9.5-8 (hereafter, Heisenberg, 'Mesarites II').

15 Akropolites, ed. Heisenberg/Wirth, 292 = Additamenta.

16 Akropolites, ed. Heisenberg, I, §10, 16-17, at 17; trans. Macrides, 131.

17 M. J. Angold, 'Byzantine 'Nationalism' and the Nicaean empire', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 1 (1975) 49-70.

18 A. Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformation of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge 2007) 354-58.

in *Byzantium* he makes excellent use of the record left by Nicholas Mesarites of the debates over the union of churches, which took place in the aftermath of 1204. He is able to show how the fall of Constantinople undermined the Byzantine sense of identity. Most telling is Nicholas Mesarites' use of Roman or *Rhomaïkos*. He applies it more often than not to representatives or inhabitants of the Old Rome. He does, however, refer to the Roman land (γῆν Ῥωμαίδα), by which he means the lands that had once formed the Byzantine Empire. He will also entitle Theodore Laskaris *basileus* of the Romans. For the time being a limbo existed between the Roman empire that was and the Roman Empire that might be, which encouraged all sorts of usages. Kaldellis is most taken by *graiikos*, which Nicholas Mesarites uses under protest and insists that it only means Greek-speaker. It was a usage current in southern Italy, which offered an example of Greek-speakers of the Orthodox rite submitting to papal authority. He also makes play with Hellene and its derivatives as a way of emphasising cultural continuity and superiority. This was a usage that made particular headway in intellectual circles at Constantinople in the late twelfth century. Mesarites must be given credit as one of those responsible for handing it on to the next generation. But, most of all, though this is not something that Kaldellis would wish to emphasise, Mesarites conveys the way that the fall of Constantinople had the effect of emphasising the centrality of Orthodoxy to the Byzantine identity.¹⁹

Mesarites' sense of what had been lost with the crusader conquest pervades the funeral speech that he made over his brother John's grave in March 1207. He rehearses the old certainties, as they existed in the time of the emperor Manuel I Komnenos. He records an exchange between the emperor and the brother he was lamenting. The emperor was upbraiding the latter for an escapade, in which still in his teens he tried to run away to Palestine. He could not understand what had got into him that he would 'choose to stay among Barbarian peoples, whose way of life is entirely incompatible with our own. Their gaze is scarcely human, while their speech is harsh and garbled. They are all armed and ready to set out along any route; they are bloodthirsty as just a look will tell'.²⁰ It was an unexceptional statement of Byzantine superiority over the Barbarian, by whom the Latins are certainly intended. More telling was the approach adopted by the young man's father, who knew that behind his son's escapade was a passionate desire to become a hesychast in the Palestinian desert. He assured him that because of relics of the Passion, which were housed in the precincts of the imperial palace, Constantinople was just as much a holy place as Palestine, for 'this land of ours.... is Jerusalem, Tiberias, Nazareth, Mount Thabor, Bethany and Bethlehem'.²¹

19 A. Heisenberg, 'Neue Quellen zur Geschichte des lateinischen Kaisertums und der Kirchenunion I. Der Epitaphios des Nikolaos Mesarites auf seinen Bruder Johannes', *Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, philos.–philol. and hist. Kl. 1922 (Munich 1923) 3–75. here at 62. 23–32 (hereafter, Heisenberg, 'Mesarites I').

20 Heisenberg, 'Mesarites I', 25.24–29.

21 Heisenberg, 'Mesarites I', 27.30–31.

Coincidentally, Nicholas Mesarites became sacristan (*skeuophylax*) of the imperial palace, which gave him responsibility for the relics of the Passion. These were kept in the Church of the Pharos. When on 31 July 1200 the usurper John Komnenos Axoukh broke into the imperial palace, Nicholas saw it as his duty to protect the treasures for which he was responsible. He arrived at the doors of the Church of the Pharos just as the usurper's supporters were breaking in with the intention of plundering the shrine. He claims to have prevented them from doing so and to have won them over to his side by improvising a sermon on the relics of the passion. His theme was along the lines of the advice that his father had given to his brother. The presence of these relics turned Constantinople into a holy place, which it was their duty to protect.²² Nicholas Mesarites' listing of the relics of the passion has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years.²³ The interest stems in part from the impact, which the transfer of relics from Constantinople had on the West in the aftermath of 1204; the acquisition of the crown of thorns by the French King Louis IX being a case in point. The latter's construction of the Sainte-Chapelle to house so precious a relic has been explained as a conscious imitation of the Church of the Pharos in the imperial palace at Constantinople, which served the same purpose, though for a collection of the relics of the passion rather than just one.²⁴ Possession of the relics of the passion contributed significantly to the prestige of the Byzantine emperor, but Nicholas Mesarites ignores this and prefers to emphasise that their primary function was to turn Constantinople into a New Jerusalem.

Although he has an anecdote about the relics of the passion in the funeral speech, which he delivered over his brother's grave in March 1207, Nicholas Mesarites never once talks about their fate after the Latin conquest. He must have known what happened, because his immediate reaction to the Latin occupation of the imperial palace, as it had been on the occasion of the attempted usurpation of John the Fat, was to hurry there to find out what was happening.²⁵ He also later informed the interpreter Nicholas of Otranto that he had seen the bishop of Halberstadt and the bishop-elect of Bethlehem plundering relics in the imperial palace.²⁶ The chances are that to put a stop to this

22 A. Heisenberg, *Nikolaos Mesarites: die Palastrevolution des Johannes Komnenos* (Würzburg 1907) §12-14, 29-32.

23 P. Magdalino, 'L'église du Phare et les reliques de la Passion à Constantinople (viii/viiiie-xiiiie siècles)', in J. Durand and B. Flusin (eds), *Byzance et les reliques de Christ* (Paris 2004) 15-30; A. Lidov, 'The imperial Pharos chapel as the Holy Sepulchre', in A. Hoffmann and G. Wolf (eds), *Jerusalem as Narrative Space* (Leiden and Boston 2012) 63-103. Cf. E. Patlagean, 'La double terre sainte de Byzance. Autour du XIIIe siècle', *Annales ESC* 49/2 (1994) 459-69.

24 Most recently, M. Cohen, *The Sainte-Chapelle and the Construction of Sacral Monarchy: Royal Architecture in thirteenth-century Paris* (Cambridge 2014) 115-117.

25 Heisenberg, 'Mesarites I', 46.1-2.

26 J. M. Hoeck and R. J. Loenertz, *Nikolaos-Nektarios von Otranto, Abt von Casole: Beiträge zur Geschichte der ost-westlichen Beziehungen unter Innozenz III. und Friedrich II.* [Studia Patristica et Byzantina, 11] (Ettal 1965) 39 and notes 50-51.

Nicholas Mesarites did his duty and handed over the relics to Bishop Garnier of Troyes, who is named as *procurator sacrarum reliquiarum*.²⁷

III

The loss of the relics of the passion was symptomatic of the fall from grace of the Constantinopolitan elite, to which Nicholas Mesarites belonged. No longer could its members maintain their pose that the world outside Constantinople was too horrid to contemplate. Catia Galatariotou singles out contempt for provincials as a commonplace of accounts left by twelfth-century *literati* of their travels outside the capital and she includes Nicholas Mesarites in their number.²⁸ He has left accounts of two journeys, one made in 1207 and the other in 1208, from Constantinople to Nicaea.²⁹ That undertaken in March 1208 is full of comical detail at his own expense as much as that of those he met on his way. He included it in the dossier of documents he collected relating to the creation of the patriarchate in exile in Nicaea.³⁰ The account of the earlier journey was a discard that did not form any part of his official works.³¹ Both accounts are relatively short and embedded in letters. The second was to the abbot and community of the Theotokos Evergetis monastery;³² the first is likely to have been as well. The circumstances, in which the first journey was undertaken, were more dramatic than those of the second. He was engaged in clandestine negotiations with the court of Theodore Laskaris at Nicaea over the creation of a patriarchate in exile. These were betrayed by an inconsiderate relative to the Latin authorities.³³ Mesarites was forced to beat a hasty retreat to Nicaea. He did not take the usual and most direct route from Pylai, which was what he did on the second occasion. Instead, he followed a roundabout itinerary, which involved ports along the Gulf of Nikomedeia. He eventually fell in with traders collecting salted fish for transport to Nicaea. He hitched a ride with them without uttering one word of complaint.³⁴ He was fleeing for his life. On the second occasion, he had much to be pleased about. He had witnessed the installation of a new patriarch at Nicaea and had subsequently received high office in the patriarchal administration.³⁵ His account

27 See D. M. Perry, *Sacred Plunder: Venice and the Aftermath of the Fourth Crusade* (University Park PA 2015) 34-37, 88-90. Perry challenges the long-held view that this was an official title accorded to Bishop Garnier on the grounds that there was no systematic collection of relics in the aftermath of the conquest of Constantinople, which is as may be. The title does not indicate general responsibility for relics, but specific responsibility for the relics of the passion, which will have been of great concern to the crusader leadership.

28 C. Galatariotou, 'Travel and perception in Byzantium', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 47 (1993) 225-30.

29 Heisenberg, 'Mesarites II', 35-46.

30 This is contained in Cod. Ambros. Gr. F 96 sup. f.182r-f.193v.

31 Heisenberg, 'Mesarites II', 43-46. This is contained in Cod. Ambros. Gr. F96 sup. f.139r-f.139v. On the manuscript tradition see Heisenberg, 'Mesarites II', 9-10.

32 Heisenberg, 'Mesarites II', 35.13-16, though it comes first in the printed edition.

33 Heisenberg, 'Mesarites II', 43.23-31.

34 Heisenberg, 'Mesarites II', 45.4-25.

35 Heisenberg, 'Mesarites II', 35.17-25.

of his journey to Nicaea on that occasion was intended as entertainment for the monks of the Theotokos Evergetis, to whom he was indebted.

Margaret Mullett³⁶ was struck by the vividness with which Nicholas Mesarites described the experience of travel. She concludes that he is able to exploit ‘the literary potential of maritime disaster in a way that other twelfth-century texts do not.’³⁷ But she explains this in entirely literary terms. She sees the fourth-century writer and bishop Synesios lurking behind Nicholas Mesarites’ exploration of the experience of travel. There is no direct borrowing that she can detect, but, as she puts it, ‘Synesios is a writer available to the intertextuality of eleventh- and twelfth-century authorship.’³⁸ Rather than ‘using narratives of travel to psychoanalyse the dead’,³⁹ she urges that a more fruitful approach to such texts lies in an examination of ‘generic discourse and the horizon of expectations of the textual community.’⁴⁰ In other words, here we have somebody suggesting – possibly for the first time – that more is to be gained from analysing Nicholas Mesarites as a writer rather than using him as a quarry of fact and opinions.

Quite independently Ilias Giarenis has also suggested that Nicholas Mesarites’ narratives of travel owe much to Synesios, though he too is unable to detect direct borrowing. This comes from a study of the reception of antiquity as reflected in the works of Nicholas Mesarites.⁴¹ This might be helpful for establishing his relationship to ‘the textual community’ of his time, were it not for the fact that his knowledge of classical literature is entirely unexceptional. It cannot be used as an explanation for the vividness of his style. He used his knowledge of classical literature sparingly and deftly. At all times, he much preferred Biblical references. Only his description of the Church of the Holy Apostles, his narrative of the failed coup of John the Fat, and parts of his funeral speech for his brother John gave him proper scope to show off his classical expertise, but even then it is done with restraint. As is well known, Nicholas Mesarites patterned his description of the idyllic surroundings of the Church of the Holy Apostles on Libanios’ *Oration in praise of Antioch* (Oration XI), but it is only a matter of a few lines here and there.⁴² It never approaches pastiche. His description of the teaching methods employed in the school near the Holy Apostles owes something to the fourth-century rhetorician Themistios.⁴³ Mesarites knew how to use an apposite phrase culled from his reading to

36 M. E. Mullett, ‘In peril on the sea: travel genres and the unexpected’, in *Travel in the Byzantine World*, ed. R. Macrides (Aldershot and Burlington VT 2002) 259-84.

37 Mullett, ‘Travel genres’, 278.

38 Mullett, ‘Travel genres’, 281.

39 Mullett ‘Travel genres’, 283.

40 Mullett, ‘Travel genres’, 284.

41 I. Giarenis, ‘Προσλήψεις της αρχαιότητας στο έργο του Νικολάου Μεσαρίτη’, in G. Xanthaki-Karamanou (ed.), *The Reception of Antiquity with emphasis on the Palaeologan Era* [Research Institute of Byzantine Culture, 1] (Athens 2014) 79-106.

42 G. Downey, ‘Nikolaos Mesarites: Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles at Constantinople’, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s. 47(1957) 862-3; Giarenis, art. cit., 83-85.

43 Giarenis, art. cit., 85.

enliven his prose. This is equally true of his narrative of the fall of John the Fat. There are homericisms tastefully inserted to suggest the heroic role he had played in saving the Church of the Pharos.⁴⁴ Since part of his purpose is to make a laughing stock of John the Fat he has recourse to reminiscences of Aristophanes' comedies, such as the *Clouds*.⁴⁵

Familiarity with the classics was part of a Byzantine education. We learn a great deal about education from Nicholas Mesarites, but for some reason modern scholarship has paid little attention to his evidence. He describes the primary and secondary schools established in the vicinity of the Church of the Holy Apostles. They provided a traditional education focusing on the three Rs. Mesarites seems thoroughly ambivalent about the quality of the education offered. On the one hand, he suggests that anybody educated there would wish to send their children there to enjoy the benefits. On the other, he describes the sadism of the schoolteachers with a distaste which suggests direct experience.⁴⁶ He closes his description of the Holy Apostles with an account of the intellectual activities that formed part of the celebrations that accompanied the feast of the Holy Apostles. These attracted the participation of the patriarch. The biggest surprise is the prominence of debates on medical theory. Other topics debated were arithmetic, geometry, and music, which formed traditional subjects of the quadrivium. Presiding over these debates was the patriarch, who was called upon to adjudicate.⁴⁷ The absence of a single word about any teachers or any organisation vitiates the usual assumption that Nicholas Mesarites is describing a patriarchal institute of higher education. More plausible is the possibility that he is describing the extra-curricular activities of students, who have gathered together as part of the celebration of a festival; in which case they will have been studying at schools scattered around the city. As we learn from another of Nicholas Mesarites' writings it was the Church of St Sophia,⁴⁸ not the Holy Apostles, which was the focus of the patriarchal school.

Nicholas Mesarites provides a detailed account of his brother John's schooling, which he indicates was much like his own. To the age of sixteen John had private tutors for *grammatike* – the study of language and literature – and for maths. But this arrangement is likely to have been combined with attendance at a school. Once John Mesarites had a reasonable grounding in Greek language and literature the chief teaching method was schedography. *Schede* were originally exercises in the parsing and comprehension of set texts, but by the early twelfth century they had turned into free compositions on more or less any topic, such as – in anticipation of Robbie Burns – 'To a Mouse', but

44 Giarenis, art. cit., 87-89.

45 Giarenis, art. cit., 90.

46 Downey, 'Holy Apostles', 865-67, 899-900.

47 Downey, 'Holy Apostles', 894-96, 916-17.

48 A. Heisenberg, 'Neue Quellen zur Geschichte des lateinischen Kaisertums und der Kirchenunion III Der Bericht des Nikolaos Mesarites über die politischen und kirchlichen Ereignisse des Jahres 1214', *Sitzungsberichte der bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, philos. – philol. und hist. Kl. 1923 (Munich 1923) 3-96, here at 21.9–12 (hereafter Heisenberg, 'Mesarites III').

Christian and classical themes were preferred.⁴⁹ One that has tickled the modern imagination was the theme chosen by Nikephoros Basilakes – a twelfth-century litterateur – on the subject of ‘What Pasiphaë said to the Bull’.⁵⁰ It was an exercise requiring the imaginative deployment of literary skills and classical knowledge with a premium placed on the use of paradox and the solving of riddles. Scholars seem to have missed the emphasis that Nicholas Mesarites places on schedography. So important was it that John Mesarites – paragon that he was – would hit those of his fellow-pupils who did better than him in schedography. This revelation comes as part of an extended comparison to John’s advantage with Oedipus; the point being that while the former had no difficulty in solving the riddles of schedography, the latter was brought to grief by the riddle of the Sphinx. John Mesarites completed his education by immersing himself in advanced schedography.⁵¹ Rather than explaining the vividness of Nicholas Mesarites’ writing by the literary models he followed, it would be well worth exploring the impact, which the use of the new schedography had in the development of a style exemplified by Nicholas Mesarites, in which characterisation and vividness of detail played a leading role.

IV

If Mesarites eschewed pastiche, the feature of his writings which has in recent years attracted most scholarly attention is plagiarism – acknowledged and unacknowledged. It comes à propos his debates with the Latins in the aftermath of 1204 over the union of churches. As late as the mid-twentieth century these were taken as a faithful record of the proceedings.⁵² But already there were doubts in some quarters. By 1965 Johannes Hoeck and Raimund Loenertz were already counselling caution over Nicholas Mesarites’ record of the debates. Their suspicions had been aroused because of the discrepancies between his record and that of the interpreter Nicholas of Otranto. They recognised that over the question of papal primacy Nicholas Mesarites was simply reproducing without any acknowledgement a text attributed to Photios entitled ‘To those claiming that Rome is the first throne’.⁵³ In 1977 Giovanni Spiteris demonstrated that Mesarites had lifted the Photian text from a late twelfth-century compilation by Andronikos

49 R. Browning, ‘Il codice marciano gr. XI.31 e la schedografia bizantina’, *Medioevo e Umanesimo* 24 (1976) 21-34; P. A. Agapitos, ‘Grammar, genre and patronage in the twelfth century: a scientific paradigm and its implications’, *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 64 (2014) 1-22; P. Agapitos, ‘Anna Komnene and the politics of schedographic training and colloquial discourse’, *Νέα Ρώμη* 10 (2013 [2014]) 89-107; P. Agapitos, ‘New genres in the twelfth century: the *schedourgia* of Theodore Prodromos’, *Medioevo Greco* 15 (2015) 1-41.

50 A. Garzya, ‘Une rédaction byzantine du mythe de Pasiphaë’, *Le parole e le idee* 9 (1967) 222-26.

51 Heisenberg, ‘Mesarites I’, 24.1-16; 28.30-31.

52 E.g. P. L’Huillier, ‘La nature des relations ecclésiastiques greco-latines après la prise de Constantinople par les croisés’, *Akten des XI. Internationalen Byzantinisten-Kongresses München* (Munich 1960) 312-20.

53 Hoeck and Loenertz, *Nikolaos-Nektarios von Otranto*, 43.

Kamateros known as the *Sacred Arsenal*.⁵⁴ This took time to follow up. Annaclara Cataldi Palau realised that Nicholas Mesarites had plundered not only the Photian text from the *Sacred Arsenal*, but also large portions of the dialogue between Manuel I Komnenos and the cardinals, which formed its first part.⁵⁵ At other times, Nicholas Mesarites was happy to acknowledge his debts. He closed one debate with the Latins by reciting the greater part of Gregory of Nazianzen's Easter homily⁵⁶ and in a debate on the verse: 'My Father is greater than I' (Joh. 14. 28) he was content to quote John of Damascus.⁵⁷ This is entirely unexceptional. Direct borrowing from the Fathers of the Church was a guarantee that your views were Orthodox. Why, then, did he fail to mention his indebtedness to Andronikos Kamateros? He was under less of an obligation to do so because Andronikos was not a Church Father, but had compiled his *Sacred Arsenal* at the behest of the emperor Manuel I Komnenos. The dialogue with the cardinals was intended as a vindication of the emperor's orthodoxy, which had come under attack from certain elements within the patriarchal church, because of his espousal of a particular interpretation of the verse: 'My Father is greater than I'. The problem facing Nicholas Mesarites was that the question of Manuel Komnenos' orthodoxy again came under scrutiny, when one of his opponents, Michael Autoreianos, became the first patriarch in exile. Mesarites was one of the leaders of a party within the Church determined to defend the emperor's orthodoxy. Only the death of Michael Autoreianos in August 1214 brought what had been a very bitter dispute to an end. In the debates that Nicholas Mesarites had with the Latins in December 1214 he is more confident in his use of the *Sacred Arsenal*. But he may have been reluctant to reveal his source, because there would still have been partisans around of the recently deceased patriarch. The likelihood is that in the debates with the Latins Mesarites followed the *Sacred Arsenal* very closely, though not word for word. When he wrote up the debates, he reproduced the appropriate sections of the *Sacred Arsenal*. This had two distinct advantages. They were in the fashionable literary form of a dialogue and they proclaimed Mesarites' stance in a religious controversy within the Orthodox Church in exile. Its success had the effect of rehabilitating the *Sacred Arsenal*, which continued to be used by Byzantine spokesmen in their debates with the Latins.⁵⁸

V

Charges of plagiarism and indebtedness to the *Sacred Arsenal* do not concern Alexander Kazhdan, who was possibly the first scholar to do justice to Nicholas Mesarites'

54 G. Spiteris, 'I dialoghi di Nicolas Mesarites coi Latini: opera storica o finzione letteraria?', in *Collectanea Byzantina* [Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 204] (Rome 1977) 181-86.

55 A. Cataldi Palau, 'L' *Arsenale Sacro* di Andronico Camatero. Il proemio ed il dialogo dell'imperatore con I cardinali latin: original, imitazioni, arrangiamenti', *Revue des Études Byzantines* 51(1993) 33-36.

56 Heisenberg, 'Mesarites III', 29-32.

57 Heisenberg, 'Mesarites III', 13, 28, 17, 20.

58 Cataldi Palau, *L'Arseale Sacro*', 36-49.

distinctiveness as a writer. He did so in an article of 1969,⁵⁹ but it had to wait until the appearance of an English version in 1984⁶⁰ before it made any impact. It signalled that Nicholas Mesarites exemplified an innovative trend among twelfth-century Byzantine authors, reflecting in Kazhdan's opinion a new sensibility, which gained ground over the course of the twelfth century. Kazhdan contrasts him with some of his contemporaries, who followed a more traditional pattern. They dealt in abstract notions, which were held to contain eternal verities. They sought 'as far as possible to "deconcretize" reality, to substitute the abstract and the universal for the particular and the local';⁶¹ not so Mesarites, who was concerned with the immediate; with the here and now. His pen portraits of contemporaries do not consist of general traits suggestive of moral qualities, but reveal 'specific, visible, human features.'⁶² To accommodate this approach Mesarites developed a style of narrative that was 'improvised and dynamic'.⁶³ On closer inspection, it becomes clear that it was also thoroughly contrived, for Nicholas Mesarites was a consummate rhetorician, but his purpose was different. It was to use literature as a way of reflecting human experience and emotion as directly as possible. Over Nicholas Mesarites' description of the Church of the Holy Apostles Kazhdan leaves it to art historians 'to establish whether Constantine Rhodius and Nicholas Mesarites describe the same set of mosaics or whether the decorations in the church of the Holy Apostles were altered or replaced art some time between the middle of the tenth century and the end of the twelfth.'⁶⁴ He is content to note that Nicholas Mesarites uses his descriptions of mosaics in order to show 'a world in motion' with inhabitants, who 'may feel joy or fear, may weep or stand in silence, may be intense or casual, dedicated or flippant.'⁶⁵ This was an aspect of Nicholas Mesarites' description that art historians had tended to ignore, though much less so now.

While the majority of Mesarites' writings slumbered in benign neglect, this was far from true of his Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles. Ever since August Heisenberg's original edition and study, which appeared in 1908,⁶⁶ it has been regarded as a key text by art historians. Its prominence only increased when in 1957 Glanville Downey produced a new edition with a very accurate English translation.⁶⁷ Not only did Nicholas Mesarites appear to offer a comprehensive description of the mosaic cycle

59 A. P. Kazhdan, 'Nikifor Hrisoverg i Nikolaj Mesarit: Opyt sravnitel'noj harakteristiki', *Vizantiiskii Vremennik* 30 (1969) 94-112.

60 A. Kazhdan (with S. Franklin), *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Cambridge 1984) 224-55.

61 Kazhdan, *Studies*, 242.

62 Kazhdan, *Studies*, 251.

63 Kazhdan, *Studies*, 253.

64 Kazhdan, *Studies*, 254.

65 Kazhdan, *Studies*, 254.

66 A. Heisenberg, *Grabeskirche und Apostelkirche* (Leipzig 1908) 2 vols.

67 G. Downey, 'Nikolaos Mesarites: Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles at Constantinople', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s. 47. 6 (1957) 853-924.

of a great Byzantine church; there was also comparative material in shape of earlier descriptions of the church by Prokopios in the sixth century and by Constantine of Rhodes in the tenth century.⁶⁸ The result was a stream of studies, which aimed at reconstructing the architecture and the decoration of the church. Perceived discrepancies between the narratives of Nicholas Mesarites and Constantine the Rhodian allowed Richard Krautheimer – among the most influential of Byzantine architectural historians – to postulate a rebuilding of the church in the second half of the tenth century,⁶⁹ while Ernst Kitzinger – among the most influential of Byzantine art historians – postulated the addition of new scenes to the mosaic decoration at some time in the twelfth century.⁷⁰ In this he was following an earlier art historian Nicolas Malickij,⁷¹ who attributed this phase of the decoration to the painter Eulalios, now known from a variety of sources to have been working in the twelfth century.⁷² A marginal note glosses the information that the artist of the scene of the Women at the Tomb included in it his self-portrait as the ‘Sleepless Watcher’ by identifying him as Eulalios.⁷³ This prompted Otto Demus to point out that in Byzantine painting the ‘Sleepless Watcher’ was always King David.⁷⁴ He is certainly correct, but it would be unwise to ignore the information of the marginal note, because the likelihood is that it goes back to Mesarites himself. It makes sense that at a time when self-portraits were a rarity an artist would choose to portray himself in disguise.⁷⁵

Anne Wharton Epstein brought this phase of the study of Mesarites’ Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles to an abrupt close in 1982⁷⁶ by pointing out that Nicholas Mesarites did not provide solid support for speculations about the remodelling of the church’s structure and about additions to its decoration. As far as she was concerned, until there was new evidence, it was safer to assume that the Church of the Holy Apostles, in the same way as St Sophia, remained much as it was, when built under the emperor Justinian.⁷⁷ What is striking about Nicholas Mesarites’ Description is the

68 L. James, *Constantine of Rhodes, On Constantinople and the Church of the Holy Apostles* (Farnham and Burlington VT 2012)

69 R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian, Medieval and Renaissance Art* (London and New York 1969) 197-201.

70 E. Kitzinger, ‘Byzantine and medieval mosaics after Justinian’, in *Encyclopaedia of World Art*, 10 (London and New York 1965) 344.

71 N. Malickij, ‘Remarques sur la date des mosaïques de l’église des Saints-Apôtres à Constantinople décrites par Mesaritès’, *Byzantion* 3 (1926) 125-51.

72 *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* sub Eulalios; C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453* (Toronto 1986) 229-33.

73 Downey, ‘Holy Apostles’, 910 note 17.

74 O. Demus, ‘“The Sleepless Watcher”: ein Erklärungsversuch’, *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 28 (1979) 241-45.

75 S. Kalopissi-Verti, ‘Painters’ portraits in Byzantine art’, *Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας* 17 (1993-1994) 129-42, at 142.

76 A. W. Epstein, ‘The rebuilding and redecoration of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople: a reconsideration’, *Greek Roman and Byzantine Studies* 23 (1982) 79-92.

77 Epstein, ‘The rebuilding and redecoration of the Holy Apostles’, 89.

attention paid to scenes showing the activities of the apostles leading up to Pentecost. These are often neglected in Byzantine art, but are appropriate to a church dedicated to the Holy Apostles. The earlier description of the decoration of the church by Constantine of Rhodes has not a word about them. This is odd, because they represented something distinctive. That and the role of the painter Eulalios suggest that a cycle of scenes devoted to the apostles was added at some point in the twelfth century.⁷⁸

Anne Wharton's article was a watershed, because it brought home that texts, such as Nicholas Mesarites' Description, were unsuited to the reconstruction of the architecture and decoration of vanished buildings. Credit for pioneering a new approach must go to Liz James and Ruth Webb.⁷⁹ They realised that Mesarites was no Pevsner; that he was bound by the rules of *ekphrasis*, the purpose of which was not to provide an objective description of a building or a work of art, but to mould perceptions. It aimed at offering 'a living response to works of art'.⁸⁰ So, both Constantine of Rhodes and Nicholas Mesarites narrate scenes in such a way that the viewer will understand 'the emotions and spiritual realities contained' within them.⁸¹ It was a strategy that corresponded to the spiritual function of Byzantine art. James and Webb contend that these texts allow us to recover how art was perceived at the time rather than to reconstruct a scene that has vanished. James notes that, unlike Nicholas Mesarites, Constantine of Rhodes did not tarry over his descriptions of individual scenes in the Church of the Holy Apostles and was content to emphasise for the benefit of his audience the spiritual truths that they contain.⁸² Mesarites, by way of contrast, used description to bring the scene alive because only in this way will his audience be able to grasp its deeper meaning. As Kazhdan put it, in a brilliant piece of phrasemaking, what Constantine of Rhodes 'saw as flat emblems of truth Nicholas described as emotionally charged fragments of time.'⁸³

More than any other scholar Alexander Kazhdan rescued Byzantine rhetoric from the contempt in which it languished.⁸⁴ It was dismissed out of hand as worthless flattery or base calumny. Kazhdan pointed out that like all literature the products of Byzantine rhetoric reflected their times and provided a very accurate guide to the issues, attitudes and fashions of the day. Being singled out as an exemplar of the new 'naturalism', which was transforming Byzantine culture in the twelfth century, directed attention to

78 For a very different interpretation, see B. Daskas, 'A literary self-portrait of Nikolaos Mesarites', in this issue.

79 L. James and R. Webb, '“To understand ultimate things and enter secret places”: ekphrasis and art in Byzantium', *Art History* 14 (1991) 1-17; R. Webb, 'The aesthetics of sacred space: narrative, metaphor and motion in *Ekphrasis* of church buildings', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 53 (1999) 59-74.

80 James and Webb, 'Ekphrasis and art', 1-2.

81 James and Webb, 'Ekphrasis and art', 11-12.

82 L. James, *Constantine of Rhodes*, 216.

83 A. P. Kazhdan and A.W. Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1985) 224.

84 R. Jenkins, 'The Hellenistic origins of Byzantine literature', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 17 (1963) 46.

Nicholas Mesarites. It means that there has been a radical reassessment of Nicholas Mesarites since 1975. Then scholars paid most attention to his record of debates after 1204 between representatives of the Latin and Orthodox churches, which were held to be trustworthy, and to his description of the Church of the Holy Apostles, which art historians considered a solid basis on which to recreate its architecture and decoration. Today it has become clear that his record of debates is far from trustworthy and his description of the Holy Apostles is anything but a solid basis for the recovery of its architecture and decoration. His rhetorical works, particularly his narrative of the coup of John 'the Fat' and his Funeral Oration for his brother John, are held in much higher esteem not only for the way that they bring events to life, but also for the insights they provide into the Byzantine state of mind.