

Fotini Kondyli. *Rural Communities in Late Byzantium. Resilience and Vulnerability in the Northern Aegean* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2022, 290 pp., 80 illustr., 66 in colour, 20 maps, hbk, ISBN 978-1-108-84549-6)

We have come a long way from the days when Byzantine studies, especially archaeology, focused almost exclusively on the great architectural monuments and works of art of the millennia-old state. Peasant life, agricultural experience, and rural realities have become more visible and the focus of a—still limited, but significant—scholarly discussion. Nevertheless, if we ask the question: what do we really know about the rural communities of late Byzantium, the answer will surely be ‘very little’. The rural communities of one of the longest-lived Late Antique and medieval state formations in the Mediterranean, Byzantium, despite being the economic backbone and hard core of Byzantine society, still struggle to attract much attention. This is not only because of a presumption that these communities are less glamorous or colorful when compared to the city dwellers, especially those of the capital city of Constantinople, and thus do not make good material for our histories, but it is also largely because we still have few and relatively undeveloped tools to approach these communities in a meaningful way.

Against this background, Fotini Kondyli’s book attempts to offer a new approach to rural communities in late Byzantium. In it, the author attempts to examine Byzantine provincial society and its agency in local and wider historical development in the setting of two medium-sized north Aegean islands, Lemnos and Thasos, during the period from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. To achieve this, the author employs a wide range of methodological tools from documentary history, landscape archaeology, fieldwork and anthropology, and by the end of the book proposes a pioneering and

holistic approach to understanding rural communities. In the words of the author (p. 233), the book asks ‘What can we learn about Late Byzantium by exploring it through the actions and experiences of ordinary people, in this case rural communities on Late Byzantine Lemnos and Thasos?’ As simple as this may sound, the approach proposed in the book is a much more complex and interesting process.

The book originates from earlier work by Fotini Kondyli conducted during her doctoral dissertation at the University of Birmingham predating other interesting avenues that her research has taken lately like the study of cities and neighbourhoods (Kondyli & Anderson, 2022) or the forthcoming publication of the material from the Byzantine houses excavated at the Agora of Athens (Kondyli, 2023).

The first chapter introduces the reader to the main themes of the book through two stories of everyday medieval people, both commoners and elites, claiming the rural land and space around them that highlight the agency and resilience of rural communities in the Late Byzantine period (1261–1453). These stories, one from the island of Thasos and the other from Lemnos, illustrate how ordinary people actively participated in the events of the time, challenging the traditional narrative of the Late Byzantine period as one of decline and fall. These are more than examples but rather tropes that will be constantly encountered throughout the entire book, and introduce the three main themes of the author’s subject: the time-frame of Late Byzantium, a period with unique characteristics that for long has been regarded as a time of decline; the quality of rural as a designator and

identifier for these communities; and finally the factor of insularity defining much of the life experience of the Thasos and Lemnos populations under study. Kondyli emphasizes the importance of an island perspective in understanding this period, as most existing scholarship focuses on mainland examples. She argues that while islands are often seen as vulnerable, they can also be incredibly resilient due to their unique geography and connectivity.

In Chapter 2 we read about the diverse makeup of Late Byzantine rural communities. The author argues against the idea of a uniform peasant class by highlighting the socioeconomic diversity within the dependent peasants (the *paroikoi*). Using monastic archives, she demonstrates the variations in their household size, land ownership, and economic activities beyond agriculture, such as fishing, crafts, and milling, that created social stratification within rural communities, challenging the notion of a homogenous peasant class. Kondyli also discusses free peasants, landholders, soldiers with land grants (*pronoia*), and monks, emphasizing their distinct roles and contributions to rural life. She concludes by highlighting the dynamic and complex nature of these communities and the relationships between their members.

It is in the third chapter that the focus shifts to the concepts of resilience and adaptability. Here Kondyli examines the strategies employed by rural communities to cope with the economic and demographic crises. The author argues that these communities actively responded to challenges rather than passively succumbing, especially in the fluid setting of the Late Byzantine period. She begins by analyzing settlement patterns on the islands of Lemnos and Thasos, arguing that the location and organization of settlements reflect risk-management strategies aimed at safety, self-sufficiency, and access to

resources. Rural communities also apply mid-scale socioeconomic strategies of survival, by diversifying economic and productive activities, adapting in the face of changing conditions, or even relocating in response to economic hardship, environmental pressures, and political instability. Kondyli concludes by challenging the notion of a deserted rural landscape, arguing that while some areas experienced depopulation, the islands were not abandoned.

Moving from landscape archaeology to more conventional ways of survey, in Chapter 4, Kondyli examines the defense systems of Lemnos and Thasos. To this she offers a novel approach emphasizing the collaboration between divine and human protection, arguing that fortifications and churches complemented each other to offer safety. The buildings themselves were not only physical structures but also symbols of collective action and resilience. She further explores the concept of defense networks, demonstrating how fortifications worked together to protect larger areas and facilitate communication. This is well portrayed in the book using viewshed analysis illustrating the visual connections between different fortifications and their strategic importance in controlling key routes and resources. The reconstructed 'defense of the Realm' would not be complete without the active role of local communities. She argues that their participation in building and maintaining fortifications, as well as their decisions to relocate in response to threats, demonstrates their agency.

In the next chapter titled 'Community-Building in the Face of Crisis' Kondyli argues that the Late Byzantine rural landscape was not merely a physical space, but a cultural entity shaped by social interactions, memories, and shared experiences. In many ways this chapter can be regarded as an innovative contribution. Kondyli

examines how the naming of places reflects local knowledge and collective memory, highlighting the importance of toponyms in understanding the social and spatial relationships within communities. She also discusses the significance of movement in the landscape and shared pathways in creating a sense of belonging and a shared understanding of the common environment. The diversity of Kondyli's methodology is exhibited here as she employs social network analysis to visualize the connections between individuals and communities, arguing that in these networks, both strong and weak nodes and ties played a crucial role in the exchange of information, resources, and support during times of crisis. Finally, Kondyli examines the concept of mnemonic landscapes, highlighting how the reuse of spolia and the restoration of older churches connected communities to their past and fostered a sense of continuity and identity.

In her final chapter Kondyli returns to some of her key notions in the book. She argues that the concept of 'decline' is an ineffective analytical tool, as it oversimplifies the complex realities of Late Byzantium. By focusing on the adaptability and agency of rural communities throughout the book, Kondyli demonstrates that this period was not merely one of decline but of change, opportunity, and transformation. Kondyli concludes by offering us an overarching argument about the importance of recognizing the agency of ordinary people in historical narratives and the valuable lessons their resilience offers for understanding and addressing contemporary crises.

The overarching concept of this project is *community*. The entire monograph is a book about rural communities, who are often the unsung heroes of medieval societies. They may be difficult to describe, invisible to traditional textual sources, and characterized by an unimpressive material

culture, yet they constitute the vast majority of the population and the driving force of entire societies and complex states, the Eastern Roman state being no exception. Foteini Kondyli makes a conscious effort to close this great gap, not only by focusing on the untold stories of people on the margins of Byzantine society, but also by developing and proposing to us tools that can be used in such an effort.

Of course, many of these tools have been used extensively, especially in the last two decades, to understand Byzantine societies away from the major cities. Landscape archaeology and the study of settlements have been one of the dominant sectors in advancing this study (Vionis, 2017). Equally, systematic surveys have turned their interest to material reflecting the rural realities of medieval communities (Athanasopoulos, 2016). The study of artefacts can still shed light on agricultural practices and rural life (Murdzhev, 2021), and even major excavation projects are pursuing questions of ruralization and shifting their interest to the agricultural hinterland of the cities (Tsvikis et al., 2023). In this book, Kondyli attempts a synthesis at a larger level grounding it on the agents of the rural societies. Moreover, this is done for late Byzantine societies, which are still little studied by archaeology. Large scale optics and a focus on late Byzantium both constitute a daring and innovative effort, situating the book in discussion with both archaeologists and, above all, Byzantine historians, in the reconstruction of rural Byzantine society. When compared with some of the recent historical works on late Byzantine society (Malatras, 2023; Matschke & Tinnefeld, 2001), it becomes clear that the Thasian and Limneote societies described here are painted in a colour and detail that is difficult to find elsewhere for such marginal communities.

Marginality comes in many guises in Kondyli's rural communities: they are

poor, they live in small settlements far from the capital Constantinople or even the larger regional cities, they are islanders, and above all they live in a period of Byzantine history that has been steadily associated with decline. Kondyli thus develops her argument with two levels of marginality in mind: the objective condition of poor rural communities living on the margins of their state, and the marginalization that modern scholarship has imposed on such social groups.

This would have actually been an impossible task for a historian, as we lack the level of detail often desired, but Kondyli, using her archaeological background, is able to overcome this obstacle and move to the other side of the synthesis. To do so, she uses tools that are both pioneering and experimental, although one cannot always be absolutely sure that the realities described correspond to the fourteenth century of these Byzantine lands, but certainly much closer to anything we have had until now. This is the main merit of this book, its methodological approach and its boldness in providing a vivid picture of the rural communities of the time, offering us a perspective that is not a short and static one, but one that is daring and tries to bridge space and people, landscape, and communities in a way that could take us a step further.

Of course, by venturing into different methodological approaches and historical questions, the book opens up many discussions for which the scholarly reader would have wished for more details or an even longer book. This is the achievement of an admittedly good book. Among many, I would choose the emerging discussion on the materiality of Byzantine fields and field systems. In her chapter entitled 'Community Building: the Landscape Approach,' which is probably the most fascinating chapter in the book, we read about the creation and also the perception of this

system by both authorities and locals. We are presented with a two-tiered system, one of surveyors (speaking the imperial generic and official terminology) for whom the landscape is an object of observation, and one of local knowledge of the landscape that belongs to and is shaped by local communities (p. 199). We can only wait to see how these realities can be reflected in the few specialized works on landscape archaeology that seek to understand the agricultural historic landscape (Tsivikis et al., 2023; Turner & Crow, 2010).

The great effort that the author and her publisher, Cambridge University Press, have put into producing a pleasing, attractive, and above all enjoyable monograph cannot be overshadowed by occasional printing errors. Some of them have to do with the always difficult handling of the Greek language, like on p. 199 *perioirismoi* instead of *periorismoi*, or with authors' names (e.g. *Zeppos*, which should be referred to in the nominative instead of its genitive *Zeppou*; p. 31 and in the bibliography); the rest are minor details, like typos on p. 49 *is* instead of *in*, or the inversion of the colors (blue and red) in the caption of figure 5.3 on p. 215. Perhaps more significant are instances, such as on p. 47, where it would have been preferable to cite the work of anthropologist Stanley Aschenberner directly. Indeed, these are minor *corrigenda* found in a solid and influential volume.

I would like to conclude with a short passage from the book, as the author argues on p. 42 'Without proper excavation of rural sites, we cannot have a clear idea of the date of such features and therefore of the precise archaeological signature of such activities, even when architectural remains are still preserved'. With Kondyli's book we have a much clearer idea than before about the rural communities of northern Aegean and the wider rural society of late Byzantium, one that can shift our

understanding of how local societies can have a huge impact in shaping their present and future.

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