

REVIEWS

Alexander Riehle (ed.), *A Companion to Byzantine Epistolography* (Brill's Companions to the Byzantine World 7). Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2020. Pp. xii, 531.
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Surrounded by his books, lifelong companions, Michael Psellos has the feeling of being transported into ‘a meadow full of flowers’; but, as he writes in a letter to a friend, what is this meadow without his friend’s presence? It is ‘soulless’. One of the highlights of the book under review, the *Companion to Byzantine Epistolography*, is Bourbouhakis’ essay on the concept of friendship (φιλία) in Byzantine letters – a genre which, as he rightly states, is eminently ‘friendly’ (φιλικός) because it establishes a literary relation on paper, thus lending the letter a sense of both proximity and distance. Ps.–Demetrios famously called the letter an ‘image of the soul’ in the treatise *On Style*, not unlike a selfie that one shares with others; but the letter is more than the soul’s imprint. It is a discursive space where two or more people may have a polite yet friendly conversation on anything or, as so often in the case of Byzantine epistolography, even nothing at all. It is where souls meet. And that is why Psellos compares the letter from his friend to a ‘living, breathing, flourishing, sustainable meadow’, so very unlike the ‘soulless meadow’ of solitary readership.

The title of this volume is therefore most appropriate: it is indeed a *companion* in the literal sense of the word. Gone are the days that this most friendly of genres was frowned upon. Mullett’s study of the letters and literary network of Theophylaktos of Ohrid paved the way for further sociological analysis, and Grünbart’s *Initia* and *Formen der Anrede* made the genre of letter-writing easily accessible to literary critics. There is a steady stream of new editions, a continuous flow of all sorts of scholarship, a swell of interest. The publication of this *Companion* is therefore most timely, and its editor, Alexander Riehle, deserves full praise for bringing together a team of established scholars.

As it would be impossible to discuss the *Companion* in detail, let me first summarize the individual contributions and then assess the volume as a whole. It begins with an insightful and informative introduction by the editor and is then followed by four sections of unequal length. The first comprises overviews of Greek and Latin epistolography up to the fifth century (Bauer), Syriac epistolography (Tannous), and

medieval Latin epistolography (Wahlgren-Smith). The second section contains studies of the letters of Michael Psellos and Demetrios Kydones (Bernard and Leonte). The third is by far the longest: there we find discussions of rhetoric and letter-writing (Kotzabassi), diplomatic letters (Beihammer), didactic and philosophical letters (Leonte and Manolova), letters embedded in narrative literature (Cupane), the topos of friendship (Bourbouhakis), epistolary self-writing (Papaioannou), forms of epistolary communication (Bernard), performance of letters (Gaul), and representations of letter exchanges in illuminated manuscripts (Hilsdale). The fourth section is of a technical nature: it deals with letters and network analysis (Preiser-Kapeller) and editorial practices (Riehle).

Reading these chapters is like walking through ‘a meadow full of flowers’, full of Psellian delights, though some are more delightful than others. With all these rich pickings, it is perhaps somewhat churlish to complain about what the volume does not offer. But if there were ever to be a sequel, a *Companion* no. 2, would it be too much to ask for a separate chapter on the manuscript tradition? The way in which letters initially circulated, were then put together in small sylloges (by the authors themselves or the recipients), and then ended up in letter collections, often combined with letters written by others? A second topic to be included would be the reception of Late Antique letter-writers, such as Gregory of Nazianzos, Libanios, Synesios of Cyrene in later times, and their use as epistolary models. It is also a pity that the *Companion*, though it clearly focuses on later writers, does not offer general overviews of the middle and the late Byzantine periods and restricts its discussion of individual authors to Psellos and Kydones: why not Michael Choniates or John Tzetzes or Nicholas Mystikos or Theodore of Stoudios? Or, given their immense popularity, earlier authors such as Isidore of Pelousion? I would also welcome a discussion of female letter-writers: there is not much apart from Eirene Choumnaina, but one could redress the imbalance in our sources by looking at correspondence with women.

Female voices are not the only voices to be silenced in Byzantium; in fact, all those unable or unwilling to write in the kind of Greek favoured by the literary mandarins are generally muzzled. Late antique papyri are a unique source for the kind of informal letters that are otherwise seriously underrepresented, and it is only from the fourteenth century that we again start to find evidence for the suppressed voices of ordinary people expressing themselves in their mother tongue. It is therefore regrettable that the letters of Nikon of the Black Mountain, some of which make use of an idiom close to spoken Romaic, are strangely overlooked in the *Companion*: there is not a single mention of this remarkable letter-writer, and the question is why. In order to stay relevant, we need to diversify. However lovely the flowery meadows of Psellos and Co, it is good, once in a while, to leave them behind and listen to those on the outside. There are flowers there too.

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