

Interview of the Associate Researcher Dr. Kostis Smyrlis, Institute of Historical Research (IHR/NHRF)

10.12.2019



Mr. Smyrlis, you are employed as an Associate Researcher for IHR/NHRF. We would like you to tell us a bit about the Section of Byzantine Research you belong to. What is your research interest?

The Section of Byzantine Research of IHR/NHRF is one of the major research cores of Byzantine and Byzantine space, at international level. It includes 17 active researchers as well as several retirees who remain present dealing with a wide range of topics, including paleography and diplomacy, institutions and society, everyday life and historical geography. A distinct section of the field specializes in the study of Byzantine relations with the West and the presence of Westerners in former Byzantine territories after 1204.

You have been engaged with universities abroad through the role of Associate and Assistant Professor. How was this experience?

From 2002 to 2006, I taught at the University of the Bosphorus (Boğaziçi Üniversitesi) and from 2006 to 2018 at the University of New York (New York University). The first is the successor to Robert College which, despite its nationalization in 1971, remained English-speaking and maintained the American teaching and administration system. It is one of the leading universities in Turkey both in terms of teaching staff and students. For me, as a byzantinologist, it was wonderful to teach in Turkey and especially in

Constantinople, not only because Byzantium is present in every corner of the city and is self-evident, but also because there was, and there is, enthusiasm and enormous thirst for it from the students' side.

My New York experience was very different to that of Constantinople. NYU is also a world-class institution, and its history section includes many distinguished historians. Research and other scientific activities are supported with abundant resources, while students are of a high standard. For me, it was a challenge to join a department where only 2-3 teachers were dealing with history before 1800 and to teach students who had never heard in many cases the word "Byzantium". Yet, for this reason it has also been a valuable experience, inter alia, because I have been exposed to the methods and theories of modern world history that usually the foreign historians in Europe do not come into contact with. At the same time, I had to ask myself what the value of Byzantine history is for people who have no geographical or ideological connection to Byzantium.

Is there a "research or teaching" dilemma for you?

At both universities where I taught from 2002 to 2018, research activity is considered to be the main mission of teachers, whereas teaching and administrative duties follow. Teaching time is relatively limited and research is encouraged through educational leaves and other means. There is no doubt, however, that teaching duties limit the amount of time that one can devote to research. Yet, I find it extremely important for all researchers to teach. Not only because this is how they convey their knowledge and concerns to students but also because they are particularly beneficial to themselves, as communicating with non-specialists gives them valuable impetus while obliging them to think about whether and why their research concerns wider society.

You are in the process of preparing a Summer School for 2020, which constitutes a recent institution of NHRF. Tell us a bit about this venture.

Together with Zisis Melissakis (IHR/NHRF) and Stratis Papaioannou (University of Crete) we are organizing for June 2020 a Summer School entitled: "*Greek Scripts and Byzantine Book Culture*." This is a development of the *Greek Palaeography and Byzantine Epigraphy* Summer School organized by Zisis in Patmos in 2016 and 2017. What we are planning for 2020, in addition to paleography, will also emphasize on the culture of the book in Byzantium.

In closing, what are your research goals regarding this important period of History?

My research so far falls into three thematic sections: 1) Byzantium, economy, society and habitation, 10th-15th centuries, 2) Byzantium taxation, tax administration, public finances and political economy, 11th-14th centuries, 3) The medieval documents of Mount Athos and the history of the Byzantine monasteries.

In the years to come, I want to keep contributing to the publication of the Athonite Papers in the Archives de l'Athos series (Paris 1945-), of which I am a contributor. These documents constitute the largest and only coherent preserved Byzantine archive that has unique value for the study of economics and housing, society, administration, but also for the study of political history, medieval Greek and material culture. We have just published the third volume of the Vatican Papers (*Actes de Vatopédi III, de 1377 à 1500*, Archives de l'Athos 23, Paris 2019) which along with the two previous volumes increase impressively the available sources and, particularly, those for the latest period of Byzantium from which just a few remain. At this moment, the volume with the documents of the Zographou Monastery which is a significant archive is currently under preparation.

Another major research goal of mine is the completion of the monography which concerns the political economy of Byzantium from the 11th to 14th century that I have been dealing with for years. Based on the study of the financial system, this book proposes a new interpretation of the political organization of the late Byzantium, underlining the importance of the previously undervalued state. Through the tax mechanism, the state largely determined the social status of the nationals as well as the ownership status and secured the administration of the empire as well as the monarch's predominant position.