

BOOK REVIEW

A Cabinet of Byzantine Curiosities. By ANTHONY KALDELLIS. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xii + 236. Hardcover, \$18.95. ISBN 978-0-19-062594-8.

The earliest cabinets of curiosities or “wonder rooms” from Renaissance Europe were small collections of eclectic items that were used to tell a story, often about the weird and the wonderful in the natural world. Such a description of these proto-museums sums up nicely the content of Kaldellis’ latest (at the time of writing) sole-authored book, which purports to present just this sort of collection of curiosities for another extraordinary and mysterious thing: the world of Byzantium. Like J. C. McKeown’s *Greek* (2013) and *Roman* (2010) forbearers, both also published by OUP, this book includes a wide range of chapters on topics as diverse as unorthodox sex, war, insults, punishments and disasters. There are eighteen in total, loosely organized, which contain a multitude of quotations and details. Each of the chapters stands alone with the principal common thread being the general context, namely, the Byzantine world.

The book is full of arresting and engaging anecdotes—and Kaldellis certainly aims to titillate. Demonic possession was not grounds for divorce, though one bishop, a Apokoukos of Nau-paktos (13th century), gave up on the marriage of a Konstantinos and Eirene on the grounds that it was easier for fire and water to come together (2). Kaldellis summarizes a story in the *Life of Saint Philaretos the Merciful*, which is, for all intents and purposes, a Byzantine version of the story of Cinderella (5). We read of a Byzantine philosopher, Ioannes Philoponos, who made some important observations about falling bodies a millennium

before Galileo (79). The section on unorthodox sex includes quotations pertaining to bestiality (23) and wet dreams (24), not to mention masturbation; it includes Ammianus Marcellinus' digression on the "sexes" of palm trees, which, in his eyes, was visible in how some palm trees lean towards each other (29). Kaldellis also provides Paul of Aegina's description of the process of castration (59). There are anecdotes on unicorns and dragons (41), and the story of a saint (Symeon the Fool) who used to walk down the street on Sundays wearing a necklace of sausages (45). We even find Byzantine wizards, as we do in the *Life of Saint Leon of Catania* (139).

There is a gruesome ninth-century tale about the Bulgar khan Krum, who made a cup out of Emperor Nikephoros I's skull (106), and another eleventh-century tale about how human flesh was said to taste like pork by those who had suffered famine and were forced to resort to cannibalism (47). Later, Kaldellis reports some legislation of Leo VI's, which has all the hallmarks of Hammurabi's famed code: men who castrated other men would themselves be castrated, while men who blinded other men would also be blinded (145). The 3rd century dog-headed military saint named Christopher features in the chapter on saints (113), and Kaldellis also includes a helpful, succinct, guide to major theological controversies in Byzantium (119-120). One of the most entertaining chapters, though also the shortest, is the one on insults. Therein we find such decorous slurs as *koukkouroboukinatores phouktoletrypatoi*, used for men in high places with shriveled "cocks and gaping assholes" (142).

On the one hand, it is fair to ask whether the book's title and some of its subject matter might serve to play into some of the widely held misconceptions of the Byzantines and their world. At the same time, those for whom this book will act as their first introduction to the Byzantines will not get much in the way of context, though this is in keeping with aforementioned volumes on the Greeks and Romans. The chapters reflect Kaldellis' interests to no small degree, with three chapters on the various peoples of the Byzantine world, intellectual matters, and the family. This is reasonable, though other topics might

have deserved some attention. The other two volumes, for instance, include, between them, chapters that hint at a more noticeable exploitation of non-textual sources (books and papyri, buildings, toilets). If anything, this book seems to privilege the curiosities of the elites at the expense of the rest, though this might speak more to evidential issues than Kaldellis' choices.

On the other hand, Kaldellis' greatest hopes for this book is for it to get a prominent place in a bathroom, where, presumably, it might be read with profit by anyone with a few minutes to spare. Indeed, the lack of a clear narrative thread means that one can jump in and out with ease, and its subject does seem to have a broad appeal. Though the evidence is anecdotal, I "tested" the material—shared anecdotes and passages on Facebook—with friends and family with little knowledge or interest in Byzantium, and more than a few intimated that they would consider reading more. On this basis the book would seem to be a success: it might reach a cadre of readers that books on Byzantium usually do not. If the book gets them interested at all, it will have served its purpose: it is not aiming to be all things to all people, but, at the very least, some things to some people. Plus, the quibbles with context might speak more to my obsession with narrative than shortcomings in the book. In the end, I am all in favor of getting the word out on Byzantium, however that may be, and if readers chuckle along the way all the better.

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