

BOOK REVIEW

Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium. By ANTHONY KALDELLIS. Cambridge and London, UK: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019. Pp. xv + 373. Hardback, \$46.50. ISBN 978-0-674-98651-0.

Once upon a time, ca. AD 500-1500, there was a nation called Romanía. Nearly all of its residents called themselves Romaioi and spoke Romaika. When historians now speak of a Byzantine Empire, its inhabitants Byzantines, and their language Greek, we employ exonyms. If we describe the state as multi-ethnic, we obscure the dominance of a single ethnicity. If we call the dominant ethnicity Greek rather than Roman, then we follow Franks obsessed with imperial claims. If we ignore ethnicity's centrality to social cohesion, then we cannot explain the resilience of Rome.

Such is the argument of *Romanland*, laid out already in its opening chapter. Chapter 2 rejects the "modernist fallacy" (286 fn. 25) according to which nations require mass literacy and mass media. Chapter 3 supplies vocabulary for an alternative account, locating Romanogenesis in the 3rd and 4th centuries and "the Greek east" (114). To reproduce, an ethnicity must assimilate erstwhile others, the topic of Chapter 4. Many Byzantinists believe that Armenians (in particular) never assimilated; Kaldellis argues (Chapter 5) that they did. The sixth chapter asks if Romanía was an empire in the 10th century; "the short answer" (229) is no, it was a nation. Military expansion produced an empire in the 11th century (Chapter 7), but minorities were geographically peripheral and incidental to the "core national state" (267).

Kaldellis effectively debunks received wisdom on many specifics, for example the emperor Herakleios's origins (183-84). His argument for Roman ethnicity as the key to state cohesion is by comparison weaker. It relies exclusively on texts, since "Roman denialism has blocked the archaeological study of *Roman Byzantium*" (50). Without archaeology, Kaldellis cannot find the places where and things by which (absent mass literacy and mass media) Roman ethnicity was fashioned and reproduced.

The natural objection is therefore that textual accounts of Romanness cannot speak for illiterate subjects. This objection does not require (*pace* Kaldellis) that “a tiny number of elite authors in Constantinople somehow conspired to manufacture a false picture, a rhetorical fiction” (74). It assumes merely that those authors perceived the world in a manner substantially conditioned by their own literacy; that they were textually constructed in a way that most people were not.

The thesis that requires conspiracy is rather Kaldellis’s history of his discipline. “Roman denialism is today one of the pillars of Byzantine Studies” (xii). For Kaldellis, Roman denialism is a rhetorical fiction created by a tiny number of elite scholars. It stems from the “western medieval ... image of Byzantium,” “a package of distortions and strategic misunderstandings that stripped Byzantium of its claim to Rome.... This image continued without interruption down to the nineteenth century, when the field of Byzantine Studies came into being.... That field was at first a systematization of preexisting prejudices: biases with references” (13). “The unambiguous evidence of the sources for the polity of the Romans was disregarded, a feat of intellectual discipline that can be accomplished only after years of graduate training” (269).

Biases persist because the Roman nation is extinct. Just as “we lack an Iranian lobby to push for its own ‘ethnic rights’ in Byzantine Studies” (185), so too do we lack Roman lobby, albeit for different reasons. “Had [the Romans] *genos* survived to modern times and developed its own scholarly traditions, there would inevitably have been a reckoning between it and these western ideologies. I suspect that these hypothetical *Romaioi* would have gained the upper hand.” (14-15). However, “there are now no more eastern Romans” (272); they are “extinct” (273).

This account has two flaws. First, its insistence on Roman extinction. Kaldellis never says when the *genos* perished, only that its demise was “precipitated by conquest, incentives, and dramatic historical change” (273). He does not discuss Roman identity in the Ottoman Empire.¹ Insistence on Roman extinction moreover denies the self-understanding of a living community. Thus Vangelis, born in Istanbul in 1934, interviewed in 2012: “I adore Byzantium, or that which they call Byzantium [...] If you read and you know the books, they speak of the Eastern

¹ See, e.g., Cemal Kafadar, “A Rome of One’s Own,” *Muqarnas* 24 (2007), 7-25.

Roman Empire, and that is what it is. I am a *Romiós*. The ‘*Rum*’ is correct. I’m not a Hellene, I’m a *Rum, Romiós*, Roman.”²

Second, its paranoid view of disciplinary history. Kaldellis assumes that Byzantinists write on behalf of a favorite minority (Armenians, Bulgarians etc.), as Roman deniers or both. This is an ungenerous view of a discipline whose distinctively transnational constellation and polyglot scholarly literatures might rather count as strengths. It is also self-serving, as Kaldellis himself becomes lone defender of a forgotten folk.

Shorn of the bluster, this perspective generates important questions. Number one: “A separate book can (and should) be written on how the Roman nation that we call Byzantium came into being in the Greek east” (114). Number two: “It remains then to show in detail how the institutions and public ideology of the state could create, sustain, reflect or be enmeshed with the Romanness of the majority of its subjects” (275). The topics are, by nature of both their complexity and the disparate source materials, best suited to collaborative inquiry and debate; differences in opinion need not reflect bias or prejudice.

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² Quoted in Huw Halstead, *Greeks Without Greece: Homelands, Belonging, and Memory Amongst the Expatriated Greeks of Turkey* (Routledge, 2019), 66.