

Past and Present in Mid-Byzantine Chronicles: Change in Narrative Technique and the Transmission of Knowledge

Staffan Wahlgren
Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim

In this article I will discuss the presentation of the past and, to some extent, the present (or immediate past) in selected Byzantine chronicles of the ninth and tenth centuries, from prosopographical-political, geographical and other perspectives. Particular emphasis will be placed on the Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor and the Chronicle of Symeon the Logothete. My main contention will be that changes in a narrative's form can, to a considerable degree, explain why the knowledge therein is so different in each text. In other words, how a text is organised decides the kind of information it will contain, and therefore, the value of a text as an historical document is very much dependent upon its form.

This article takes as its starting point a message by our conference host who, in an early email, wrote about 'how deeply medieval literary chronicles were tied to literary etiquette in their presentations of the past'. This is certainly true, although we should perhaps not stress the word literary too much, because it is obvious that *literary* devices are present in all kinds of texts, and it is hardly possible to make any meaningful distinction between *literary* chronicles and other chronicles. At any rate, the importance of literary form for how the past is conceived has all too seldom been stressed in research, which, as far as chronicles in general are concerned, and Byzantine chronicles in particular, has had a very strong focus on the purely philological study and usefulness of the texts as historical sources.¹

¹ For an attempt at treating Byzantine chronicles as literature, see the special issue of *Symbolae Osloenses* (Ljubarskij 1998), in particular J. Ljubarskij's introductory report (p. 5): 'Quellenforschung and/or Literary Criticism: Narrative Structures in Byzantine Historical Writings.' After this groundbreaking collection of papers, other items have followed, e.g. Burke 2006, Odorico et al. 2006, Markopoulos 2009, and Macrides 2010. There is also a Brill's Companion of Byzantine Chronicles underway, under the editorship of R. Tucci. Of the standard works on the history of Byzantine literature, Kazhdan 2006 is the most useful when it comes to assessing the Middle Byzantine texts as literature and not only as quarries of historical information. Some of the ideas put forward here were presented in Wahlgren 2007 and 2008 (both in Swedish). Of research predating the modern (post-Ljubarskij) interest in the literary form of Byzantine chronicles the papers by Jenkins (1965) and Treadgold (1979) on Symeon the Logothete deserve mention.

Mari Isoaho (ed.)

Past and Present in Medieval Chronicles

COLLEGIUM

Therefore, my subject will be the transmission of historical knowledge and literary form, and a way of putting this, which is by no means original (in the sense that it has been the concern of scholars working on other texts and epochs), is that the form chosen for the narrative is of decisive importance in the ability of an historical text to function as a carrier of information.² A text's literary form decides what information the text will contain and what it can tell us about the past or, for that matter, the present (even though I consider it clear that the kind of stylization which we will discuss here is less common when the events of recent times are narrated). If an old chronicle by virtue of its literary form has restricted information about the past, then a later text dependent on this older one will have the same serious limitations in its depiction of the past. Indeed, literary conventions can have far-reaching consequences for collective memory.

Texts

I will try to give some examples of how this works in practice and how a new literary form restricts the knowledge of the past, and I will focus on two texts, from the ninth and tenth centuries respectively.³ The first of these is the *Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor*, and the second is the *Chronicle of Symeon the Logothete*. There is a distinct difference in literary form between these texts, and it is certain that Symeon depends upon Theophanes. Thus, the prerequisites for my demonstration are present: we have an older text (that of Theophanes) and a younger text (that of Symeon), there is a change in narrative technique from the one to the other, and the younger text transmits only certain kinds of information from the older. Therefore, the younger text in turn has only a limited amount of the older text's material to convey to any even younger text that might be dependent upon it. Put very simply: if you have read about, say, Constantine the Great only in Symeon, you will know less about him than if you had read Theophanes.

Here is some basic information about our authors: Theophanes the Confessor was born around 760, probably in Constantinople.⁴ He served at the court of Emperor Leo IV (who reigned 775–80). Theophanes married a certain Megalo, the daughter of a friend of the emperor, but after a short period

² The work of Hayden White springs to mind; see e.g. White 1987 (*The Content of the Form*) and White 2010 (a collection of his theoretical papers). Also relevant are several contributions by Simon Hornblower on narrative and content in Ancient Greek literature (Herodotus and Thucydides in particular).

³ Needless to say, this is a limited approach to a much larger subject. It is not a technical approach, and it does not pretend to be narratological in any stricter sense: this means that no one should expect explicit reference to G. Genette and the tradition originating with him, nor expect the use of the technical terminology of narratology. Other texts could also be investigated. For instance, the use made of Malalas in later chronicles would be worth investigating.

⁴ On Theophanes and his chronicle, see de Boor 1883 and Mango & Scott 1997 (with modern bibliography).

together, the two decided to separate and each took monastic vows. Theophanes went on to found a monastery, Megas Agros, on the southern shore of the Sea of Marmara. He involved himself to a mild degree in the ecclesiastical controversies of the day, and he refused to join the iconoclasts. For this he was punished and forced into exile, from which he returned shortly before he died, in the year 817. In the Christian church he is considered a saint.

Theophanes was the author of a chronicle that covers the years from Diocletian (285) until Theophanes' own day (ca 813). There are many problems connected with this text: What were Theophanes' sources? What was his contribution in the sense of texts actually composed by him and not taken from others? (Theophanes claimed not to have written anything himself, taking everything from his predecessors; the question is whether we believe him or whether we take his words to be a kind of commonplace of modesty). Finally, there is a discussion about whether the Theophanes text that we have is really the saint's text from the early ninth century or an elaborated version from the tenth century. However, the answers to these questions are probably not important for us here: all varieties of this chronicle are likely to have shared a common, very distinct form, namely a text that is annalistic in structure with a heading for each year, indicating the world year, and in which year various events took place during the reign of certain potentates (especially the emperor and the popes and patriarchs). The text is highly additive, paratactic, with information appended successively and showing little connection.

As our second specimen we have the *Chronicle of Symeon the Logothete*.⁵ Symeon is a very obscure figure today. He must have lived in the second half of the tenth century. Some have identified him with a famous Symeon of this age, namely Symeon Metaphrastes, responsible for a collection of the lives of the saints. I myself am not convinced of that identification and, in any case, it does not matter much here. It would help us to date our author a little more precisely, but no more than that.

Symeon's *Chronicle* spans the time from the Creation of the World until the death and burial of Emperor Romanos I Lekapenos in the summer of 948. Accordingly, it is a text whose narrative stretches much further into the past than Theophanes' *Chronicle*, which starts in the year 285 AD. The *Chronicle of Symeon* is just as much a patchwork as the *Chronicle of Theophanes*, perhaps even more so. This means that it has been put together from various older sources. How this was done we can only guess. We do not really know, for instance, whether Symeon took several older texts and put them in, one after the other, with one perhaps covering the period from the Creation of the World through Julius

⁵ See the introduction to my edition in Wahlgren 2006. There is as yet no translation into a modern language (I am currently preparing an English translation for Translated Texts for Byzantinists with Liverpool University Press).

Caesar, another covering the Roman emperors of the West, one covering the period from the permanent establishment of the emperors in the East until the early ninth century and one covering the remaining time span, that is, roughly the one hundred years up to 948. Another alternative is that Symeon took over much greater chunks of text and only worked in detail with the latest part of the story, presumably roughly the tenth century, of which something like its last thirty years could have been based on his personal reminiscences.

However this may have been done, it is evident that Symeon's *Chronicle* contains information taken from Theophanes' *Chronicle*. This can be seen just by opening the edition and looking through appropriate parts: a sufficient number of paragraphs contain virtually the same text. Yet even such striking similarities do not prove the nature of the dependence. There could have been either a *direct* dependence (Symeon has a copy of Theophanes, which he uses) or an *indirect* dependence (Symeon uses an author who in turn had used Theophanes). We can only say that we do not know.

As for the structure of Symeon's *Chronicle*, it is quite different from that of Theophanes, as mentioned above. Instead of Theophanes' simple accumulation of facts and episodes, Symeon's text is organised into larger chapters.⁶ Each Byzantine emperor is given his own chapter. Yet the organisation is the same prior to Byzantine times. For instance, in the portion on the Roman Empire in Antiquity each Roman emperor is also given his own chapter, and a Roman emperor functions in the same role here as a Byzantine emperor. And before that, the members of the Macedonian dynasty reigning in Egypt, the Ptolemies, fill the same function and are positioned the same way in the text, and before them the Persian kings, and before them, the Jews – and so it goes all the way back to Adam, who is presented much in the same way as a Byzantine emperor: Adam is given his own chapter, and the narrative centres on him. I would go as far as to say that Adam is treated as a kind of proto-Byzantine emperor.

Thus, through a literary device a thread is established through history in line with the conception of epochs as in the Book of Daniel, and the need for this thread explains the focus on certain rulers and not on others. This can be illustrated by looking at what happens when we come to the death of Adam as narrated in the *Chronicle*: the next person given the honour of having a chapter devoted to him is Seth. There were, of course, two elder brothers in that family, Cain and Abel, of whom, when Adam died, one was dead, and the other was not. However, the progeny of the surviving brother, Cain,

⁶ Of course, Symeon the Logothete was not the inventor of the thematic approach and of organising his text into chapters. Of comparable works slightly prior to his, the *Chronicle of George Hamartolus*, which covers the period from the Beginning of Time until the reign of Michael III (843–67), is also organised by chapters, and it seems very similar to Symeon's text from a structural point of view. However, it is almost certain that Symeon did not use the *Chronicle of George Hamartolus*.

does not (because of Cain's sin) represent the thread through history or the line from which we all are ultimately derived. Instead, our ancestor is Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve, who is also the subject of the chapter after Adam. Thus, a real ruler, and the subject of attention in this kind of literature, is essentially a person with a future.⁷

The Problem

Now to our topic: how is a new literary form – in this case, the form of Symeon's *Chronicle* – able to convey information contained in earlier sources in another form?

With Symeon's book, which differs from sources such as Theophanes with its open, paratactic structure (and no historical thread), we arrive at a kind of text in which each chapter is a rounded entity, built around the person of the emperor or an earlier ruler. The text focuses on this person and therefore tends to eschew all information that does not pertain to this individual, as I will demonstrate with some examples.

People

First, let us consider people. If we compare text samples from the chronicles of Theophanes and Symeon for the years 518 to 527, in other words, more or less the reign of Emperor Justin I, and if we simply count the individuals mentioned, we observe the following: the number of individuals mentioned in Theophanes is much greater, 53 different people, whereas the number mentioned in Symeon for the same period is just 10.⁸ As for categories of people, Theophanes mentions three emperors, two empresses, 14 other state officials, 16 ecclesiastical personalities of different sorts (popes, patriarchs, ordinary priests, etc.), and a number of others (18 individuals to be precise): foreign rulers, locals and so on.

Symeon, on the other hand, mentions the same three emperors (the then current ruler and his two predecessors), but he does not mention the empresses at all. Only three state officials are mentioned, and just four other individuals. And it is clear why these (seven) persons are named: they were connected with episodes in which the emperor was involved. A close look at the state officials may demonstrate this. Vitalianos, the first to be mentioned, a close personal friend of the emperor, figures in a passage in which the emperor's appointment policy at the beginning of his reign is discussed. The two other

⁷ According to biblical, and Byzantine, understanding, Cain's branch of the family was lost in the Great Flood.

⁸ The text samples correspond to pp. 249–65 in Mango/Scott 1997 (Theophanes) and Chapter 103 in Wahlgren 2006 (Symeon the Logothete).

state officials mentioned are the *praipositoi* named Amantios and Theokritos. They are important for their roles in an episode that explains how Emperor Justin attained the throne in the first place: Amantios, acting as a sort of king-maker, tried to promote Theokritos to the imperial throne, creating a commotion that ended with Justin's appointment. In sum it is fairly obvious that these persons are mentioned in order to tell the story of Justin's career, and it can be argued that more or less all the information included about individuals in Symeon's *Chronicle* is connected in some way to an emperor. In Theophanes' *Chronicle*, on the other hand, there does not seem to be a necessary connection to the emperor and his activities to justify including a state official or any other person.

Now, it can be argued that the text sampled from Symeon's *Chronicle* is shorter than that from Theophanes' sample. All the same, it is clear that the very literary technique used by Symeon explains the lack of, as we might call it, irrelevant detail.

Places

Our second category to be used as an example of how the transmission of information is limited by a new literary form is places. Comparing Symeon's *Chronicle* with Theophanes', and also with other older texts, we see that a much smaller number of places is mentioned, and these function as the scene of action in Symeon. The earlier texts often give broad surveys of happenings in various parts of the empire and the world as it was known, from theatres of war to less significant events. Symeon's text does not follow this pattern. In his text there is much more focus on Constantinople, with only a pale vision of the immediate neighbourhood of Thrace and Asia Minor for most of the Byzantine emperors.

Now, this is of course in line with my view of the development of narrative technique, and in line with the view that everything focuses on the emperor. But it also makes one wonder, on the one hand, about the geographical knowledge of a writer in this time (the mid-to-late tenth century), and, on the other hand, about the influence of geographical knowledge on the development of a new narrative technique. Probably the known world became smaller for a Byzantine from Late Antiquity through the Middle Period. Important parts of the empire were lost. Perhaps this is bound to show in literature, even when a text deals with earlier times before these large territories had been lost. It may be argued that the ability to picture a large world in the past is dependent on a certain experience of a large world in the present. Thus, just as the emperor ruling when Symeon was active as an author was depicted sitting in his capital and not travelling, so too the earlier emperors, those of ancient Rome, for instance, are not depicted spatially at all or as being on the move, although in fact they were. In other words, I

think it reasonable to suggest that the political situation in the mid-tenth century has to some extent favoured a narrower literary vision than that prevailing in the earlier, much larger empire.

Palaces

Having discussed persons, or cast, and geographical space, I would finally like to say something about an element in the texts that can represent an immaterial institution or a building: palaces. In texts such as that of Theophanes, palaces abound. These palaces may be in different locations and, not least, can be the abodes of very different rulers: Byzantine emperors, as well as foreign rulers, rulers in Antiquity (whenever the texts treat this topic) and so forth.

It should come as no surprise that in Symeon's *Chronicle*, however, a palace is almost exclusively a palace in Constantinople (mostly the Great Palace, or in some cases other buildings, such as the complex at the Blachernae), whereas distant rulers – whether in a geographical sense or in the distant past – do not seem to live anywhere in particular. Augustus, for instance, or his successors, does not really live anywhere.

Conclusions

To sum up, the aims of this article have been to make the case that a change occurred in narrative technique in the Byzantine chronicles and to discuss the consequences of how the past and, to some degree, the present, or at least the recent past, are depicted. Earlier, I cited our host's remark about 'how deeply medieval literary chronicles were tied to literary etiquette in their presentations of the past'. Going a step further, I have tried to show how the very ability of a text to transmit knowledge is dependent upon its form, and thus this change in narrative technique had consequences for future generations' knowledge of the past.

Theophanes' *Chronicle*, based on an early Byzantine concept, is an example of a text with a very broad vision: there is a lot of information about different people and different places, and many events are recounted that are not necessarily connected to each other in any way.

Symeon's *Chronicle*, on the other hand, is basically a mid-Byzantine concept, a much narrower affair. Each chapter is a close-knit unit, and in each there is a thread (consisting of the emperor's activities and those in his capital and his empire) and a strong tendency to disregard all information not connected with this thread.

This new narrative technique of the mid-Byzantine period probably had consequences for posterity. Among other things, I think it may have played a role in the Slavonic reception of Byzantine culture.

Some Slavs had to depend upon texts like Symeon's for knowledge of Greece and Byzantium. There are at least two Slavonic translations of Symeon's *Chronicle*, and those Slavs who depended upon them had a view of Greek and Byzantine matters that was very narrow.⁹

In all this, we have not talked about the future. The future is of course present – in all the chronicles – in the shape of a common understanding of where we are going and how the world will end. However, in texts like Symeon's, which are so focussed on closure and on creating a thread through history, there is also the sense conveyed of another, more immediate future – a tendency to look forward in time, which is not found in Theophanes' text (where events are simply added onto each other). This may be illustrated by the following: Symeon may refer to a prince who is going to become emperor precisely because of that glorious future, which the author knew was in store, whereas he does not mention other princes, or princesses for that matter, who never made it to the throne. Therefore, a seemingly unconnected reference to such a prince may actually contain a message to us (i.e. that this person will become important), which a similar reference in Theophanes would not convey. Thus, if not a view into the distant future, and into that great unseen which is still ahead of us, there is, in the tenth century at least, a way to construct the narrative in such a way that there is a future in the past.

References

Sources

Theophanis Chronographia I. de Boor, C. (ed.) 1883. Leipzig (reprint Hildesheim 1980: Olms Verlag).

English translation in

The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, A. D. 284–813, translated with introduction and commentary by C. Mango and R. Scott with the assistance of Geoffrey Greatrex. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997.

Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae Chronicon. Wahlgren, S. (ed.) 2006. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter.

Research Literature

de Boor, C. (ed.) 1883. *Theophanis Chronographia* I. Leipzig (reprint Hildesheim 1980: Olms Verlag).

Burke, J. (et al.) (eds.) 2006. *Byzantine Narrative: Papers in Honour of Roger Scott*. Melbourne: Byzantina Australiensia 16.

Jenkins, R.J.H. 1965. The Chronological Accuracy of the 'Logothete' for the Years A.D. 867–913. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 19, 91–112.

Kazhdan, A. (ed. Ch. Angelidi) 2006. *A History of Byzantine Literature (850–1000)*. Athens.

Ljubarskij, J. (ed.) 1998. Quellenforschung and/or Literary Criticism, *Symbolae Osloenses* 73, 5–73.

Macrides, R. (ed.) 2010. *History as Literature in Byzantium*, Farnham.

⁹ See Wahlgren 2006 and, particularly with reference to the Slavonic translations, Wahlgren 2003/2004.

- Mango, C./Scott, R. 1997. *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, A.D. 284–813, translated with introduction and commentary by C. Mango and R. Scott with the assistance of Geoffrey Greatrex*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Markopoulos, A. 2009. From Narrative Historiography to Historical Biography: New Trends in Byzantine Historical Writing in the 10th-11th centuries. *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 102, 697–715.
- Odorico, P./Agapitos, P.A./Hinterberger, M. (eds.) 2006. *L'écriture de la mémoire. La littérature de l'historiographie* (Actes du IIIe colloque international philologique; Dossiers Byzantins 6). Paris.
- Treadgold, W. 1979. The Chronological Accuracy of the Chronicle of Symeon the Logothete for the Years 813–845. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 33, 158–97.
- Wahlgren, S. 2003/2004. The Old Slavonic Translations of the Chronicle of Symeon the Logothete. *Acta Byzantina Fennica* 2 (N.s.), 151–166.
- Wahlgren, S. 2007. Bysantinsk byhistorie og bygningshistorie. In J. F. Hatlen & P. Thonstad Sandvik (eds.) *En sann historiker: festskrift till Svein Henrik Pedersen*. Trondheim, 23–26.
- Wahlgren, S. 2008. Att gå till historien. In P. Beskow, S. Borgehammar & A. Jönsson (eds.) *Förbistringar och förklaringar: festskrift till Anders Piltz*. Ängelholm: Skåneförlaget, 652–656.
- White, H. 1987. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press.
- White, H. (ed. R. Doran) 2010. *The Fiction of Narrative (Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007)*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.