

SHORT NOTE

Ruth Macrides: an appreciation

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The anniversary of Ruth's death and the funeral at St Andrews has just passed, reminding me how much I miss her and how profoundly she is admired by many medievalists, not just those specializing in Byzantine Studies, for a wide range of exciting studies not often brought together.

I always felt that like many female historians she did not enjoy a regular career. However, she made one decisive choice which I think proved the turning point. In 1980–1 she went to the outstanding centre for research in Byzantine Law in Frankfurt and spent the year with the brilliant team of experts led by Dieter Simon. This exposure to a highly developed field of legal specialism enhanced her already unusual

skills and produced some of her most original articles – ‘The Byzantine Godfather’, ‘Killing and asylum’, ‘Court business and murder’, ‘Chomatenos’ interpretation of the law’, and ‘The ritual of petition’. In this early legal work, which included issues of adoption, spiritual relations, law and the family – many collected in *Kinship and Justice* (1999) – she opened new avenues of research and made us all aware of the significant contribution legal sources can make to social as well as political analysis.

Ruth was born in Boston into a family of Pontic Greeks who had emigrated to America and she studied at Barnard College–Columbia University, where the art historian Professor Stričević encouraged her interest in Byzantine Studies. He suggested that she pursue graduate work with Donald Nicol in London and we first met there in the early 1970s when she was working on her PhD at King’s College London. I lent her my copy of the Teubner text of the *History* of George Akropolites, which was to be the subject of her research, and she gave it back to me thirty years later. From 1974 to 1977 she extended her research at Dumbarton Oaks where she made life-long friends, Michael Hendy, Anthony Bryer, Tom Brown, Nicolas Oikonomides and Elizabeth Zachariadou. We were never colleagues who worked in the same institution though we met from time to time at conferences and I was always a great admirer.

In 1977 she moved to Scotland when her husband Paul Magdalino got a lectureship at the University of St Andrews, and they later proposed to share the position, which would have given the Department of Mediaeval History two brilliant Byzantinists with distinct interests, but this was refused. Instead, from 1983 to 1986 Ruth was associated with the Centre for Byzantine Studies in Belfast then under Margaret Mullett’s inspirational guidance. In 1987 her daughter Anna was born. St Andrews later recognized her skills but employed her in the relatively lowly position of teaching assistant/research fellow (1991–4). With a grant from the Greek government she undertook responsibility for Modern Greek studies in Scotland and investigated Byzantine connections with Scotland. Much later I taxed Professor Donald Bullough who was still running the History department with his decision. He admitted that he had been wrong and regretted that it had taken so long to admit Ruth to full membership and proper teaching responsibility at St Andrews. They finally made her an honorary lecturer in 1995.

Everything changed in 1994 when she and Leslie Brubaker applied to share the one job on offer at Birmingham, and her career took off. From the very beginning of her research many years before, she had been committed to thirteenth- and fourteenth-century history, evident in her determination to work on George Akropolites and visible in her earliest publications on Palaiologan saints (in *The Byzantine Saint*, 1981), and ‘The New Constantine and the New Constantinople – 1261?’, in *BMGS* 6 (1980). This period of late Byzantium was somewhat neglected in England at the time. Donald Nicol concentrated on the study of post-1204 Epiros and the Last Centuries of Byzantium, and Dimitri Obolensky’s outstanding graduates, Michael Angold and Anthony Bryer, had taken on the empires of Nicaea and

Trebizond respectively. But many Byzantinists shared the opinion of Alexander Kazhdan that after the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204, Byzantium was merely a pale shadow of its former imperial character. Ruth was about to change that perception, together with Paul and scholars abroad such as Angeliki Laiou.

Initially, she concentrated on the imperial office, the power of the emperor, the court and ceremonial, and historical writing. Her study of imperial models in decline and exile (1992) compared the rhetorical encomia dedicated to emperors of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the judgements of the great historian Niketas Choniates, who lived through the disaster of 1204, stressing their shared emphasis on renewal and revival. Through this comparative perspective she realized the significance of the fourteenth-century 'Book of Ceremonies', known as Pseudo-Kodinos. While this anonymous description of dignities and offices, as well as particularly symbolic ceremonies, such as coronation, had been generally dismissed as derivative or ignored, she re-assessed its contribution to the Palaiologan court, organized a reading group to translate it and ensured its publication in 2013 as *Pseudo-Kodinos. The Constantinopolitan Court Offices and Ceremonies*. This collective work with Joe Munitiz and Dimiter Angelov was typical of her capacity to involve other specialists in order to maximize the impact of a text. A similar group project with Mary Cunningham will hopefully result in the translation of the *Memoirs* of Syropoulos, a fascinating text of the fifteenth century, when the author accompanied Emperor John VIII to the Oecumenical Council of Ferrara–Florence.

Her magnum opus on the writings of George Akropolites came to fruition in 2007 with *George Akropolites, The History*, a full account of his life, education, career and beliefs that precedes her lively translation of the text accompanied by a very detailed commentary. The introduction sets out the importance of his work, the sole surviving account of the empire of Nicaea, in which Akropolites lived, was trained and performed basic administrative roles for the rulers until its forces regained possession of the Byzantine capital and Michael VIII returned the imperial court to Constantinople. It assesses his literary style, comparing it with earlier, contemporary and later writers, and draws attention to its many personal interventions. She raises the question, is this literature, history, autobiography? and answers it with a rich analysis of the literary influences and classicizing history on Akropolites, his own display of personal status as a feature of his close relations with members of the imperial family and his detailed knowledge of medical terminology and treatments. Here is a prime example of the cross-fertilization of literary, historical and social genres.

The publication of these three books was more than equalled by her devotion to teaching, training graduates, directing the symposia on Travel and History as literature, and effectively promoting interest in Byzantium, through her participation in many committees. In 2006, for instance, we both worked on the Organizing Committee for the International Congress of Byzantine Studies held in London. Her students posted a panoply of the most appreciative and affectionate accounts of her

skills as a teacher, which had inspired many to switch from courses they assumed to be their main interest into the field of Byzantine Studies. Ruth's dedication to their work was recognized in 2014 in the University Award for Excellence in Supervision given by the Graduate School. In 2005 she also took on another very demanding job when she became editor with Peter Mackridge of *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, the journal founded by Bryer and Nicol, based in the Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies at Birmingham University. Since its foundation in 1975 this had become an internationally acclaimed publication that appeared twice a year, and was now strengthened by Ruth's particular skills and energy.

In the two Birmingham symposia that she directed, this capacity to combine unexpected topics, to showcase the work of younger scholars and to bring international experts to the Midlands is clearly represented. Travel was one of the most amusing as well as informative of these topics, while 'History is Literature' made a notable contribution to fields normally kept in separate departments and sealed mental boxes. She challenged specialists of both history and literature to read all the available texts in novel ways.

Her skill as a translator made her an essential member of the committee that I established in 2012 to launch *Texts in Translation for Byzantinists*, modelled on the TTH series published by Liverpool University Press. With the most generous support of Costas Kaplanis, this project aimed to make available in English translations texts that would be useful to Byzantinists, starting with the *Four Byzantine Novels* (translated by Elizabeth Jeffreys) and other works in medieval Greek, but also including texts in other languages – Bulgarian, Turkish, Armenian and Spanish. Ruth's work on this committee, reading proposals, assessing translations and participating in Mary Cunningham's group reading of the *Memoirs* of Syropoulos will be profoundly missed.

Throughout her career Ruth and Paul shared a profound collaboration displayed in their joint article on Paul the Silentiary's description of Hagia Sophia (1989) and acknowledged in her study of Akropolites. Their complementary skills continuously enriched their work. While his career had followed an established path, hers had taken many backwaters that delayed her recognition as an exceptional scholar. Dumbarton Oaks had supported her work from an early date and made her Senior Fellow and European Member of its Advisory Committee from 2013 to 2017, extended to three years as Senior Fellow, 2017–20. It was, however, a richly deserved reward when Ruth was appointed as Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, for the year 2019–20. Since she was already in the throes of planning the 2020 Spring Symposium, dedicated to Byzantium and the Environment, this would have meant two major triumphs in the same academic year. Cruelly, it was not to be, though the Symposium she had envisaged will take place in 2021.

No one will forget the enthusiasm of her lectures, delivered with passion and always to time, such as the one on Blood at Cambridge just a year ago; her recent presentation of

the Scottish dimensions of Byzantium at the Gennadion Library in Athens, or the electrifying analysis of the Fourth Crusade, only mildly reflected in her important contribution to the volume *Urbs Capta* (2005). In addition, her presence as one of the best-dressed women, stature enhanced by her high heels and elegance and emphasized by dramatic make-up, impressed the world. All the tributes to Ruth stressed her sense of fun and her wonderful smile, which brought such warmth and sympathy to all who witnessed it.

Dear Ruth, we will treasure your memory.



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