

## OBITUARY

### Speros Vryonis, Jr. (1928–2019)

Thanos M. Veremis

In 2019 one of the original members of the Editorial Board of *BMGS*, and one of the most illustrious sons of the Greek-American Diaspora, Speros Vryonis, departed this life. He was known, not only for his exceptional contribution to scholarship, but also as a scourge of Greece's enemies. In Hamlet's words: 'We shall not look upon his like again.' His learning was unique: he read Slavonic, Ottoman Turkish, and Persian, over and above ancient Greek and Latin: from his hospital bed, he was reading Homer and Lucretius. For many years he taught medieval and Byzantine history at the University of California, Los Angeles, and he served also as Director of the Alexander S. Onassis Center for Hellenic Studies, New York University, from 1988 to 1993.

Though of American birth, Vryonis was a true son of Cephalonia and possessed the quick wit associated with his compatriots. Of his many contributions to scholarship, I believe that the most significant was *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century* (1971). Vryonis relates, systematically and with recourse to evidence from the lost dioceses, the economic decline of the Greek settlements. The Turkish conquest of Asia Minor lasted some four centuries. Over that period, the seizure of the bishops' estates, mass Islamization, and feuds among the emirates which brought uncertainty to the Christian populations, weakened Hellenism. On the fall of the Seljuks, the former Byzantine lands became a field of confrontation between various Turkish rulers. In the Balkans, the Christian populations were in the majority following a territorial conquest that stood for only a century (1352–1453) but was implemented in an organized fashion. Many Christian statelets became embedded in the Ottoman Empire, subject to taxes, but not assimilated in religion. Hence the old Christian and Greek-speaking communities survived, until centuries later they came to seek their independence.

Vryonis became well known for his disputes with illustrious foreign Byzantinists and other historians, and also with mediocrities such as Stanford Shaw, the author of a controverted history of Turkey: this issued in Vryonis' study, *The Turkish State and History: Clio Meets the Grey Wolf* (1991). Also of importance are his studies of relations between the Turks and Byzantium. In his view, the Seljuks and the Ottomans drew on the Muslim world for most of their cultural and military institutions, when they made their entry into it in the tenth and eleventh centuries; yet they differed from other Muslims in also adopting and adapting Byzantine institutions and traditions. On

Vryonis' account, the adoption of Byzantine elements took three main forms: direct assimilation of institutions prevailing among their subject peoples; openness to older customs from Syria and Egypt that the Arabs had taken for Christian; and the development of strategies which coincided with those of the Byzantines.

Vryonis' personal life knew tragedy and trauma. His elder son, a scholar with brilliant prospects, died young; his younger was the victim of an incurable handicap. Despite it all, and despite the cancer he underwent, Vryonis possessed Herculean strength, surviving to continue his great scholarly enterprise. He loved the land of his ancestors as few have done, and he was a doughty warrior against anything he found amiss.

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