

# Haunted pasts and the future of Byzantine historiography: George Sphrantzes' *Chronicon Minus* as witness literature

Adam J. Goldwyn 

North Dakota State University

[adam.goldwyn@ndsu.edu](mailto:adam.goldwyn@ndsu.edu)

In 1478 a Byzantine courtier-turned-monk named George Sphrantzes related in a work conventionally called the *Chronicon Minus* the story of his life and times in the decades before and after the Ottoman conquest of Byzantium. The work's English translator, Marios Philippides, notes in his introduction that 'students of history, sociology, and literature will find passages of interest in Sphrantzes' account. In addition to its immense value as a historical testimony, Sphrantzes' narrative is a linguistic document of great significance to the study of the evolution of the modern Greek language.' (This latter point refers to Sphrantzes' fifteenth-century idiom, very different from the classicizing or Atticizing style of pre-conquest Greek historiography.)<sup>1</sup> Philippides' approach reflects typical historiographical praxis in modern scholarship: a source text is strip-mined for those facts for which the empiricist historian is searching, and the rest is ignored or derided as superfluous.

To see Sphrantzes' text only as a historical account, however, is to miss the traumatized psyche and body in pain from which his text emerged. Considering the *Chronicon Minus* within the now well-established genre of 'witness literature',<sup>2</sup> or what the Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel called the 'literature of testimony'<sup>3</sup> reinscribes Sphrantzes' voice as an eyewitness and victim of atrocity within the text, revealing both how he experienced, and how, at the end of his life, he recalled experiencing, the traumatic events against which his own life was set. Witness literature, which Robert Gordon defines as 'the writing of and out of suffering, from the bare body of the victim at the edge of death, the essentially human act of voicing, of stating that "this happened"'<sup>4</sup> is thus different

1 M. Philippides, *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire: a chronicle by George Sphrantzes, 1401–1477* (Amherst 1980) 13.

2 See e.g. H. Engdahl (ed.), *Witness Literature: proceedings of the Nobel centennial* (River Edge NJ 2003).

3 E. Wiesel, 'The Holocaust as literary inspiration' in E. Wiesel et al (eds) *Dimensions of the Holocaust* (Evanston 1990) 5–19 (9).

4 R. Gordon 'Introduction: Bare Witness' in P. Levi, *Auschwitz Testimonies: 1945–1986*, tr. J. Woolf (Cambridge 2006) i-xi (iii).

from the adjacent genres of ‘pure history’<sup>5</sup> and autobiography,<sup>6</sup> replacing the primacy of historical fact with subjective experiential truth.

The *Chronicon Minus*, therefore, demands consideration from within the theoretical framework of witness literature, a framework that reveals the work in a different light than the two genres with which it has most often been associated, autobiography<sup>7</sup> and historiography.<sup>8</sup> In the introduction to a new forty-fifth anniversary translation of *Night*, Wiesel’s account of his survival in Auschwitz, he posed a series of rhetorical questions that can be similarly asked of other texts of witness literature:

Did I write it so as *not* to go mad or, on the contrary, to go mad in order to understand the nature of madness, the immense, terrifying madness that had erupted in history and in the conscience of mankind?

Was it to leave behind a legacy of words, of memories, to help prevent history from repeating itself?

Or was it simply to preserve a record of the ordeal I endured as an adolescent[. . .]?<sup>9</sup>

These three questions demonstrate the interweaving of the personal and the political, the objective and the subjective. Wiesel points to a psychoanalytic component of his text—‘to go mad or not to go mad’—but this psychological inquiry is tied to broader historical trajectories: ‘to prevent history from repeating itself’ and ‘to preserve a record of the ordeal’. Texts of witness literature must be read holistically, for the meaning-making capacity of this mode of writing comes from the juxtaposition of the extremes of the historical insignificance yet subjective importance of the individual witness as a historical actor against the totalizing power of the historical forces shaping their life.

Witness literature is thus fundamentally not comprehensible within a framework of historical inquiry—the systematization of rationally comprehensible and externally verifiable facts about the past. To look only at the historical information and facts is to silence the voice of the witness. Witness literature resists empiricist historical inquiry, since every work of witness literature is fundamentally a work of grief and denial, haunted by the spectre of the what-if counterfactual history in which traumatic events never occurred. Derrida referred to this as ‘hauntology’, a traumatized subjectivity

5 On Hayden White’s definition: ‘a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*’: *Metahistory: the historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore 2014) 2.

6 On Philippe Lejeune’s definition: a ‘retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality’: *On Autobiography*, ed. P.J. Eakin (Minneapolis 1989) 4.

7 See e.g. M. Hinterberger, *Autobiographische Traditionen in Byzanz* (Vienna 1999), esp. 332, 342–3.

8 L. Neville, *Guide to Byzantine Historical Writing* (Cambridge 2018), esp. 302–7.

9 E. Wiesel, *Night* (New York 2006) no page.

which ‘does not belong to ontology, to the discourse on the Being of beings, or to the essence of life or death’.<sup>10</sup>

A ‘purely historical’ reading of a paradigmatic work of witness literature demonstrates both the spectral presence of the counternarrative in the text and the inadequacy of a historical analysis accounting only for extricable facts. Primo Levi’s *If This is a Man* (1947), the author’s account of the eleven months he spent in Auschwitz from early 1944 to the camp’s liberation in early 1945, for instance, contains useful historical information about the polyglot environment of the camp. Levi writes that

the Greeks have been reduced to very few by now, but they have made a contribution of the first importance to the physiognomy of the camp and to the international slang in circulation. Everyone knows that ‘caravana’ is the bowl, and that ‘la comedera es Buena’ means that the soup is good; the word that expresses the generic idea of theft is ‘klepsiklepsi’ of obvious Greek origin.<sup>11</sup>

If one were to read Levi as Philippiades reads Sphrantzes—‘a linguistic document of great significance to the study of the evolution of the modern Greek language’—one would miss how, for Levi, there is a moral purpose underlying this historical information:

that these few survivors from the Jewish colony of Salonica, with their two languages, Spanish and Greek [...] are the repositories of a concrete, mundane, conscious wisdom, in which the traditions of all the Mediterranean civilizations blend together. That this wisdom was transformed in the camp into the systematic and scientific practice of theft and seizure of positions and the monopoly of the bargaining Market, should not let one forget that their aversion to gratuitous brutality, their amazing consciousness of the survival of at least a potential human dignity made of the Greeks the most coherent national nucleus in the Lager, and in this respect, the most civilized.<sup>12</sup>

The historical information about the evolution of the modern Greek language cannot be extracted from the counter-history which haunts it, a world in which there are not only ‘few survivors’ from Salonica, a city which within living memory been majority-Jewish, and in which ‘this wisdom’ had not been ‘transformed’ from one that brought civilization and respect into one which systematized theft as a means of survival in a world of mass death for lack of the basics of physical survival. Indeed, the chapter concludes with Levi speaking directly to his audience:

we invite the reader to contemplate the possible meaning in the Lager of the words ‘good’ and ‘evil’, ‘just’ and ‘unjust’; let everybody judge, on the basis

10 J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new international*, tr. P. Kamuf (New York 1994) 63.

11 P. Levi, *If This is a Man*, tr. S. Woolf (New York 1959) 92.

12 Levi, *If This is a Man*, 92.

of the picture we have outlined and of the examples given above, how much of our ordinary moral world could survive on this side of the barbed wire.<sup>13</sup>

Levi's linguistic history is haunted by a historical counterfactual: the world of the camp haunted by the spectre of a morality that should have existed instead of the camp. 'We now invite the reader', he says, to imagine the world on 'this side of the barbed wire', thus summoning the spectral counter-world on the other side of the barbed wire that haunts the imagination of the witness's traumatized memory. The description of the camp is only comprehensible to readers who already have in their mind the unspoken comparator—the world that exists outside the genocidal boundary of the barbed wire, a world in which ordinary words did not have to take on new meanings explicable only within the context of the extermination camp.

The *Chronicon Minus*, seen in this light, is a bifurcated narrative in which visible and explicable surface histories of destruction and death are haunted by an imaginary counter-narrative in which those atrocities never existed. Sphrantzes' physical and emotional suffering (both during his own life and in the act of recollecting and writing about it as he lay dying), is an integral yet often overlooked element of his *Chronicon Minus* from its opening lines. Leonora Neville, for instance, writes that the chronicle 'begins with a brief prologue in which the author introduces himself, cites his birth year, and discusses the political situation of the Ottomans'.<sup>14</sup> But this framing overlooks the deep notes of sorrow that infuse the text from its opening lines: he writes that he is 'George Sphrantzes the pitiful (οἰκτρὸς) First Lord of the Imperial Wardrobe' who will write about the events of his 'wretched life' (ἀθλίᾳς ζωῆς) even though 'it would have been fine for me not to have been born or to have perished in childhood'.<sup>15</sup> Thus, from the beginning of his text, Sphrantzes summons a counter-narrative that haunts the entirety of the narrative: a world where he had not been born or in which he had perished in childhood. Every moment for the remainder of the text, then, particularly those in which he suffers most acutely, is haunted by the possibility of a world in which he had never been born and thus did not have to endure such suffering.

Hidden behind Philippides' bland, even frigid, language—'descriptions of historical and sociological interest'—is another narrative. Sphrantzes weaves together his own experiences as a conquered person, creating a text in which his individual suffering mirrors the suffering of the empire. In this way, he summons a parallel narrative in which the empire never fell at all. For instance, he narrates the details of the failed Byzantine siege of Patras in 1429, and then adds a personal coda:

13 Levi, *If This is a Man*, 98.

14 Neville, *Guide*, 303.

15 Sphr. *Chron.Min.Pro.* All citations from Sphrantzes are from Philippides, *Fall*. Sphrantzes' wish to have perished in childhood was no mere rhetoric; as he records later in the *Chronicle*, two of his sons died in infancy, for which see A-M. Talbot, 'The death and commemoration of Byzantine children', in A. Papaconstantinou and A-M. Talbot (eds), *Becoming Byzantine: children and childhood in Byzantium*, (Washington DC 2009) 283–208 (293).

So I was taken prisoner; I had sustained multiple wounds and was thrown into a dark tower of a house, full of ants, weevils, and mice, as it was located in front of the grain storage. I was put in secure irons and my leg was held by a strong chain, which was attached to a big post. I was lying there in this prison in a bitter condition, worsened by my wounds, the chains, lack of care, and the detestable accommodations, as I have indicated.<sup>16</sup>

Upon his release forty days later, ‘I was half-dead (ἡμιθανής); when I arrived at my lord’s quarters my appearance saddened Lord Constantine, as I was half-dead’.<sup>17</sup> If he had never been born, or if he had died in childhood—the propositions he laid out at the beginning—such suffering could have been avoided. Indeed, Sphrantzes’ own diction evokes this kind of haunting; he is ‘half-dead, a ghost’. Alongside narratives of deep physical suffering, Sphrantzes narrates his psychological anguish when describing how the sultan executed his son (‘Alas for me, his unfortunate and wretched father’)<sup>18</sup> and how his daughter died of typhus as a prisoner in the sultan’s harem (‘Alas for me, her wretched father’).<sup>19</sup>

A present haunted by the possibility of alternative pasts has been a feature of Greek historiography since its inception; indeed, Irene de Jong notes that ‘in the *Iliad* we find 38 passages of the type: “and now x would have happened, if somebody had not done y”. I call these passages *if not*-situations.’<sup>20</sup> In each of these cases, Homer presents the haunting of what could have happened (‘and on that very day the city of Troy would have fallen’) followed by the crucial signifier that distinguishes the haunting possibility from reality (‘had not’ [εἰ μή]) and then the reality (‘Apollo killed Patroclus after he had caused much destruction’).<sup>21</sup> History and counter-history are contained in the same sentence, with survival or destruction, victory or defeat, always possible, reality always haunted by possibility.

This conception of history and its historiographical representation carried on into the medieval Greek tradition; Sphrantzes was not the only medieval Greek writer to compose his text under difficult physical, emotional, and material circumstances. John Kaminiates’ letter recounting the 904 sack of Thessaloniki was written from a slave prison in Tripoli;<sup>22</sup> three of the most celebrated historians of the middle Byzantine period, Niketas Choniates, Eustathios of Thessaloniki, and Anna Komnene, wrote under only moderately better circumstances, the former living with his family ‘like captives’ (ὡς αἰχμάλωτοι) in a refugee camp in Nicaea after the 1204 sack of

16 Sphr. *Chron.Min.*17.10.

17 Sphr. *Chron.Min.*19.4.

18 Sphr. *Chron.Min.*37.3

19 Sphr. *Chron.Min.*37.9.

20 I. De Jong *Narrators and Focalizers: the presentation of the story in the Iliad* (Bristol 1996).

21 Hom. *Il.*18.454-6, my translation.

22 Kam. *Ex.Thess.*2, from J Kaminiates, *The Capture of Thessaloniki*, tr. D. Frendo and A. Fotiou (Leiden 2002).

Constantinople,<sup>23</sup> the latter *de facto* imprisoned in a monastery after her failed coup against her brother.<sup>24</sup> Eustathios' *Sack of Thessaloniki* (1187), in which the archbishop recounts his eyewitness experience as an inhabitant of the city during its conquest by the Latins, demonstrates the counternarratives that emerge from the author's grief. Eustathios laments seeing the city, 'which once shone so bright among the other cities beneath the heavens, reduced to her present state. Even her enemies would have prayed not to see her in this condition.'<sup>25</sup> His rhetoric may be more elevated and metaphorical than Sphrantzes', but both are representations of hauntological witnessing in narrative: there exists a city in the imagination of each that was not destroyed, that does not exist 'in this condition', and which haunts them.

Much of what survives as historiography, then, bears the marks of the tumultuous lives of their authors and the hardships they endured even while writing, often even recounting moments that were among the worst they had lived through.<sup>26</sup> Each of these texts is similarly haunted by what happened and whether it could have happened otherwise. This contrast between haunted and historical readings can be seen in a passage from Marios Philippides' biography of Constantine XI Palaiologos, in which he attempts to sort out conflicting historical narratives concerning the emperor's various betrothals:

if one accepts [Servopoulos'] view [...] one will have to disregard the testimony of Sphrantzes[. ...] Did Sphrantzes falsify the historical record or was Servopoulos exaggerating or lying? If indeed Sphrantzes falsified the historical record, for whatever reason, there are serious implications, as his *Minus* can no longer be trusted, unless its testimony is backed by other reliable authors.<sup>27</sup>

Again, for Philippides, the important aspect of Sphrantzes' text is how it can be used as a source of historical information, and, from this empiricist position, accuracy is paramount. His assertion that the '*Minus* can no longer be trusted' because some facts corroborated elsewhere differ from the reporting of the witness recalls a famous debate in the study of witness epistemologies.

23 Chon. *Hist.* 645, from N. Choniates. *Histories, O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*, tr. H. Magoulias (Detroit 1986).

24 L. Neville, *Anna Komnene: the life and work of a medieval historian* (Oxford 2016) 163. Neville critiques the traditional scholarly view of her writing 'as something she did to pass the time after her life was over, sitting in prison and stewing in hatred' (6). I am grateful to David Ricks for pointing out that in his poem 'Anna Komnene' (1917), the Alexandrian poet CP Cavafy notes Anna's grief while writing her history.

25 Eust. *Capta Thess.* 2, from Eustathios of Thessaloniki, *The Capture of Thessaloniki*, tr. J. Melville-Jones (Canberra 1988).

26 For Niketas as 'refugee historian' and the difficult circumstances under which he revised his *History*, see Goldwyn, *Witness Literature*, 257-8.

27 M. Philippides, *Constantine XI Dragaš Palaeologus (1404-1453): the last emperor of Byzantium* (New York 2018) 247.

In *Testimony: crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis and history*, a watershed work in the field, the child Holocaust survivor turned psychoanalyst Dori Laub recalls a time when

a woman in her late sixties was narrating her Auschwitz experience. [. . .] She was relating her memories as an eyewitness of the Auschwitz uprising; a sudden intensity, passion and color were infused into the narrative. She was fully there. ‘All of a sudden’, she said, ‘we saw four chimneys go up in flames, exploding’.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, he recounts, ‘many months later’ several historians were reviewing the woman’s video-taped testimony:

The testimony was not accurate, historians claim. The number of chimneys was misrepresented: Historically, only one chimney was blown up, not all four. Since the memory of the testifying woman turned out to be, in this way, fallible, one could not accept—nor give any credence to—her whole account of the events.<sup>29</sup>

Laub ‘profoundly disagreed’ with the historians, arguing for a different approach entirely:

In the process of the testimony to a trauma, as in psychoanalytic practice, in effect, you often do not want to know anything except what the patient tells you, because what is important is the situation of *discovery* of knowledge—its evolution, and its very *happening*. Knowledge in the testimony is, in other words, not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, an event in its own right.<sup>30</sup>

For the historians, the survivor’s factual inaccuracy disqualified her testimony as a whole, since facts are all that matter. For Laub, however, the moment where omniscient historical knowledge (fact) and the limited (and inaccurate) knowledge of the witness collide did not negate meaning but rather became the site of its production: ‘Because the testifier did not know the number of the chimneys that blew up [...] the historians said she knew nothing. I thought she knew more.’<sup>31</sup> This ‘more’, then, is the counterfactual narrative: though she was wrong, ‘the woman testified to an event that

28 D. Laub and S. Felman, *Testimony: crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history* (New York 1992) 59. Laub’s discussion of this moment has been widely discussed; of particular note is Thomas Trezise’s article-length critique, in which he argues that ‘these anonymous historians collectively constitute, for Laub, little more than a convenient straw man’ (T. Trezise, ‘Between history and psychoanalysis: a case study in the reception of Holocaust survivor testimony’, *History and Memory* 20.1 (2008) 7–47 (12)). For a more comprehensive discussion of these passages, see Goldwyn, *Witness Literature* (2021), 66.

29 Laub and Felman, *Witnessing*, 59–60.

30 Laub and Felman, *Witnessing*, 62.

31 Laub and Felman, *Witnessing*, 63.

broke the all compelling frame of Auschwitz, where Jewish armed revolts just did not happen, and had no place. She testified to the breakage of a framework. That was historical truth.<sup>32</sup> For Laub, the discrepancy between what the witness remembers and what the historians know marks the moment in which the counterhistory replaces the history in the mind of the survivor: the world where Jews revolted becomes the real world; the world where they did not becomes the counterhistory.

Considering Sphrantzes' *Minus* from within Laub's psychoanalytic approach to interpreting witness literature, then, Sphrantzes' inability to recall the historical facts of Constantine's betrothal politics reveals hauntological truths that the search for facts erases. He speaks at length about his deteriorating physical condition, particularly during the last years of his life when he was writing his *Chronicle*. His entry for the year 1468 finds him narrating the campaigns and eventual death of Scanderbeg, important historical information about early resistance to the Ottomans in the post-Byzantine Balkans. But it also contains personal information of limited historical significance: 'I was old, sick, and penniless since the days of my enslavement.'<sup>33</sup>

In 1476, two years before the conclusion of the narrative and his presumed death, Sphrantzes recounts how he 'suffered an attack of rheumatism in my head and knees, with the result that so much discharge came from mouth, nose, and ears that I lost all hope. They administered last rite three times to me, unworthy man that I am. I wished that death might have taken me away.'<sup>34</sup> He even describes the physical suffering he endured when he was writing his narrative: 'Even though I escaped death, I remained deaf for a long time; I could not even hear bells tolling next to me. As my feet were in pain, I was confined to bed.'<sup>35</sup> Sphrantzes was thus substantially disabled while writing: he writes at the end that 'if certain events have been omitted, I will only beg for forgiveness, as old age and infirmity did not allow me to finish my work properly.'<sup>36</sup> More pressing, perhaps, than questions of historical accuracy are questions of memory: what does the sweep of a life look like when viewed from its end? What aspects of a life are worth recalling? Why are some moments recollected vividly yet inaccurately? What are the emotional contexts that circumscribe recollection? What meaning can be produced from the overlaying of the autobiographical against the historical? Sphrantzes is less forthcoming on these programmatic issues than modern writers of witness literature, saying only that 'I wrote this account at the request of certain prominent individuals in Corfu, who insisted that I should relate the events I have witnessed and in which I have participated.'<sup>37</sup> His narrative of the past cannot be separated from the context in

32 Laub and Felman, *Witnessing*, 60.

33 Sphr. *Chron.Min.*45.1.

34 Sphr. *Chron.Min.*48.1

35 Sphr. *Chron.Min.*48.2

36 Sphr. *Chron.Min.*48.4

37 Sphr. *Chron.Min.*48.4



which he was composing it: in great physical pain, having lost his homeland, his entire family, his friends, Sphrantzes was forced to recall the most psychologically and physically harrowing moments of his life for the benefit of the wealthy Corfiots on whom he depended. The betrothal politics of a dead empire and dead emperor may have been the concerns of his patrons, they may be the concerns of modern historians, but the future of Byzantine historiography must also account for the subjectivity of those writers who suffered to preserve that history for us. In this way, we will learn not just about the facts, such as they are, of Byzantine history, but also about the experience of being Byzantine.

*Adam J. Goldwyn is Professor of English at North Dakota State University. He is the author of Byzantine Ecocriticism: women, nature, and power in the medieval Greek Romance (2017), Witness Literature in Byzantium: narrating slaves, prisoners, and refugees (2021), and, most recently, Homer, Humanism, Holocaust: Jewish responses to the crisis of enlightenment during World War II (2022).*