

1. Sources for Early Medieval Byzantium

AS ONE would expect, this book is written on the basis of a body of Byzantine sources, written mostly in Greek between the seventh and the eleventh centuries, that includes chronicles, saints' lives, law codes, property documents, inscriptions, the acts of church councils, works of theology, sermons, homilies, letters, panegyrics and handbooks to diplomacy, warfare, court ceremony and protocol. More evidence comes from archaeology, numismatics and art history; and the whole has been interpreted in the light of how regional geography shaped the historical development of the empire, and of how comparable societies developed elsewhere. But in fact this list is rather misleading. Even compared with other early medieval societies Byzantium is an obscure and ill-recorded world, and it is worth making clear at the outset of a book on Byzantium that it is based on significantly less evidence than is available for any of the other important Christian states of the early medieval world.

The biggest gap is in documentary material. Byzantium was a literate society which produced a great number of documents of all sorts. The best proof of this lies in the lead seals which the Byzantines used to close confidential communications and to authenticate documents. A piece of string was inserted through a hole in the document, and the two ends were then passed through the channel in a lead blank. The lead blanks used in this process vary in size but they can be imagined as roughly equivalent to that of a coin. The blanks were cast in a mould and so made that they had a hollow channel from top to bottom. The string was passed through this channel and then knotted. The lead blank was then placed between the jaws of a *boulloterion*, a device which resembled a pair of iron pincers with disc-shaped jaws, a little smaller than the lead blank itself. The face of the jaws was engraved with an inscription, or an image, or a combination of the two. The boulloterion had a projection above the jaws so that when it was struck with a hammer the lead blank would be compressed, sealing shut the channel and locking in the two ends of the string attached to the document. At the same time the design engraved on the boulloterion was stamped on the lead blank.

The emperor, the patriarch, all imperial and ecclesiastical office holders, institutions and a great number of individuals had boulloteria, usually engraved with their name and title. As an individual changed office over his career, or was promoted in rank, so a new boulloterion was engraved with the new title. These stamped inscriptions are a vital source for Byzantine history, but the seals themselves are also the ghosts of vanished archives. Over 40,000 lead seals are preserved in public and private collections. Of these perhaps a quarter pre-date 1025. Each was once attached to a document, but the number 10,000 is only the tip of an iceberg. Apart from the comparatively rare cases where the seal was authenticating a document of special importance, most seals had served their purpose when the document was opened. Lead was not expensive, but it was not without cost, and most lead seals would almost certainly have been recast as new blanks. What the proportion of surviving lead seals is to the number of documents once issued in the Byzantine period cannot even be guessed at, but quite clearly we are talking about a society which produced a very great number of documents indeed.

As the inscriptions on the lead seals and occasional mentions elsewhere show, imperial officials and administrators, monasteries, cathedrals and many lay households sent out documents, and kept archives. In many cases these would have amounted to no more than a chest full, but for major institutions in state and church one must envisage something more substantial. The excavations of the headquarters of the Byzantine military governor at Preslav in Bulgaria found over 350 seals from the period 971 to 986. Given what has just been said about the reuse of lead seals, this presumably is the ghost of an archive which had amassed several thousand documents in under fifteen years.¹

The greatest archives of all were those of the departments of state in Constantinople. In the mid-sixth century John Lydos tells us that the Praetorian Prefecture of the East, the office that up to the seventh century ran the civil administration of Thrace, Asia Minor, Syria and Palestine, kept its legal records dating back to the 360s in the vaults which supported the raised banks of seating in the hippodrome in Constantinople. When John Lydos was writing, this archive stretched some 250-300

metres along the east side of the hippodrome from the imperial box to the curve of the race track at the southern end, and it was arranged so that any case could be retrieved on request.² The empire after the seventh century did not rule such extensive territories, and its archives were probably not quite on this scale, but they certainly existed. The fact that a great many of the thousands of seals now known were collected from the shores of Constantinople next to the site of the imperial palace is proof that in the early middle ages tax records, military lists, and reports from all over the empire, financial documents, diplomatic papers – all the materials in fact that a historian of Byzantium could desire – were once preserved here in quantities.

Nearly all of this, however, has disappeared. Important collections have survived in southern Italy, but – as shown in the last section of Chapter 8 – this is hardly representative of the heartlands of the empire in Asia Minor, the Balkans or Constantinople itself where virtually everything has been destroyed. The largest surviving collection of Byzantine documents drawn up before 1025, containing about 75 items, is preserved in the monasteries on Mount Athos (near Thessalonica in northern Greece) which exceptionally have had a continuous history from the tenth century to the present day. Only one of these texts dates to before 900.³

There is therefore nothing to match the thousands of ninth- and tenth-century documents preserved either in their originals or in later copies from Catalonia, northern and central Italy, France or Germany. Anglo-Saxon England has left a richer documentary inheritance than Byzantium. When one remembers that some of the most striking advances in the historical study of these societies have come from the masses of information preserved in monastic and episcopal archives, it does become clear what the lack of this resource has done for our knowledge of the Byzantine world. A number of the most innovative and exciting studies, for example, on the social and political structures of the early medieval west would be impossible to write on Byzantium.⁴

What survives are principally fragments which have found their way into literary works, the acts of church councils or into various handbooks. The most remarkable examples of the

latter are perhaps those associated with the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos (913–59). The emperor wrote or rather sponsored the production of a number of literary works, among which are included two traditionally known to scholars as the *De Administrando Imperio* and the *De Ceremoniis* – titles coined by their first editors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries respectively. Neither of these works is really a homogeneous work of literature; rather they are tenth-century manuscript collections of documents from the imperial archives. They have undergone a certain amount of minimal literary reshaping, and received prefaces setting out Constantine's overt aims in producing them, but they remain very much manuscript 'scrapbooks'. The *De Administrando Imperio*, for example, contains amongst other things a detailed official report on a Byzantine attempt to seize by subterfuge the strategic Georgian stronghold of Ardanoutzin, an eyewitness description of a journey down the Dnieper river, as well as a list of military service owed by officials and property holders in the Peloponnese.⁵ The *De Ceremoniis* not only includes the descriptions of court ceremonies its title would imply, but also such items as a list of salary rates for various classes of official, and a remarkable collection of documents associated with the failed expeditions to retake Crete from the Arabs in the tenth century. Among these is an attempt in the immediate aftermath of the 949 expedition to draw up accounts and to assign responsibility to various departments to cover the costs. The document reveals officials unsure of who went on the expedition, and uncertain as to who had the responsibility for paying them, trying to pass the problem off on to another department.⁶ Both the *De Administrando Imperio* and the *De Ceremoniis* are texts of great importance which give a tantalising glimpse of what the imperial archives must once have contained, but the fact that they are used so often – in this book as elsewhere – serves to underline how much has been lost and how much of our picture of early medieval Byzantium rests on only a very few pieces of evidence.

A type of evidence which can go some way to fill the gap are Byzantine letters. About 1700 written before 1025 have survived, and they are an essential historical source – but at the same time their value is also limited. No archival collection of Byzantine letters has survived. In Egypt the peculiar climatic conditions

have preserved a huge body of papyrus fragments from the Roman and Islamic periods which include great numbers of letters saying all the kinds of things of passing interest one would expect: children asking their fathers to bring them a present back from town, traders reporting on prices, families sending news of relations, husbands telling wives they miss them, all written in a very unremarkable standard of Greek, Coptic, Hebrew and Arabic. Using this extraordinary material one can construct a detailed picture of medieval Egypt that is quite impossible for Byzantium.⁷ Without any doubt the Byzantines did write letters like this, but none survive. The ones which have been preserved instead belong to a distinct and elevated literary genre somewhat distant from the reality of contemporary life.

Letter writing of the type preserved in Byzantine manuscripts was a branch of rhetoric and had a long classical ancestry. They were not composed in the language of contemporary spoken Greek, or even in the standard written language of official reports, but instead in a deliberately elevated style modelled on the Attic Greek of the fourth and third centuries BC, and their authors embellished them with references to classical and biblical texts. An ordinarily literate Byzantine would almost certainly have found many of these letters difficult to understand – and modern readers have shared the same problem. Those in search of historical information have tended to find them very frustrating: some Byzantine letter collections give the impression of saying very little, at length, very elegantly. In some cases this has been exaggerated by the means of their preservation. The major incentive behind publishing a letter collection in a manuscript was not a desire to record documentary information, but admiration of the letters' literary qualities. If a copyist were short of space what he was most likely to cut was the (from this perspective) non-essential references to specific events, leaving more room for the rhetorical flourishes which made the letters attractive. The result in that case would tend to be an elegant but timeless literary text.

Recent research, sympathetic to the literary values these texts embody, has done a great deal to show how much information they can provide. Of the 1700 letters the great majority were written after the late eighth century. Among these are large collections of such important political figures as Theodore, the

abbot of the Stoudios monastery in Constantinople in the late eighth and early ninth century, Photios, patriarch from 858 to 867 and again from 877 to 886, and Nicholas Mystikos, patriarch from 912 to 925. By comparison with some, such as for example the small late tenth-century collection of Nikephoros Ouranos,⁸ who either by personal choice or later editing reveals comparatively little about his key role in the politics of Basil II's court, these letters show their authors as closely concerned with the real events of the world around them. All three had tempestuous careers, including periods of exile, and each used the circle of letter writing to maintain and reinforce the ties of friendship and political loyalty. In addition the two patriarchs carried on diplomacy by letter. The recipients of Photios' correspondence include successive popes, the ruler of Bulgaria, the prince of princes and the katholikos of Armenia, and the patriarchs of Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria. Nicholas was even more involved in foreign policy, first as regent for the infant Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos in 913–14, and then later from 917 to 925 as the only Byzantine authority that Symeon of Bulgaria was prepared to recognise. As a result Nicholas' letters to Symeon are of crucial importance for the history of Byzantine–Bulgar relations (see the fourth section in Chapter 8), and together with his letters to the caliph al-Muktadir, the emir of Crete, the prince of Abasgia, and various Italian leaders go a small way to make up for the lack of a foreign office archive, at least for these few years.⁹

Yet this should not disguise their limitations. An author chose this manner of communication in an elegant, polished and often deliberately obscure style, because as well as the message itself the letter carried a cultural statement. Between friends such letters gave the pleasure of a shared membership of an élite literary coterie (similar to that enjoyed by early twentieth-century Englishmen sending Horatian odes to one another); rivals and enemies could be patronised by a demonstration of literary superiority; letters asking for a favour were more likely to be successful if the potential patron had first been given a suitable literary gift; diplomatic letters in this form demonstrated the sender's cultural status and preserved face. In each case, however, the purpose of the letter was to present a carefully polished image according to a literary ideal. In such letters,

Theodore, Photios, Nicholas and others do reveal a considerable amount about their actions and ideas, but it is always in a manner shaped and transformed by the demands of the genre. The reality behind it is hard to assess.

With so meagre a documentary base more attention is inevitably focused on the Byzantine chronicles and histories which have to provide the basic narrative account of the years between 600 and 1025. Unfortunately their coverage is patchy, they are often written long after the event, and they are frequently distorted by a propagandist bias. The same could be said of great deal of early medieval history writing. The Italian chronicles are little better and the Spanish considerably worse, but in both cases their deficiencies can be off-set by other material. In the Frankish world – at least from the last quarter of the eighth century onwards – there are more documentary sources and the chronicles are better, not just in themselves but there are more chronicles and histories giving alternative and independent accounts.

At the beginning of the seventh century the late Roman tradition of chronicle and history writing was still active. One of its later products was the extremely valuable *Chronikon Paschale* which stops in 628. After this there is a break in the surviving texts until the appearance of Nikephoros' *Historia Syntomos* in the 780s and Theophanes' *Chronographia* in the early ninth century. These two are closely related and were obviously using the same sources. For the period between 629 and the end of the *Chronographia* in 813 we are essentially dependent on the information they contain. Neither is a very impressive work of history. Their coverage of the seventh century is poor (Nikephoros in fact misses out the years 641–68; Theophanes only covers them by repeating a Syriac chronicle which he knew in a Greek translation). For the eighth century the value of their brief account is limited by the politically correct desire to abuse the iconoclast emperors – Leo III (717–41), Constantine V (741–75) and Leo IV (775–80) – and to admit as little as possible in their favour.

After Nikephoros and Theophanes there survive from the ninth century little more than two short fragments of a work conventionally known as the *Scriptor Incertus* ('The Unknown Writer') and possibly to be identified with the *Ecclesiastical History* of Sergios the Confessor,¹⁰ and the Chronicle of George the

Monk. The latter was written apparently during the reign of Basil I (867-86). Its author had available a no longer surviving mid-ninth century reworking of Theophanes known as the *Epitome* which continued the *Chronographia* up to 829. From 813 to 829 he reproduced that (although with much left out), but from 829 to where it finishes in 842 the text is hardly more than an anti-iconoclast rant.¹¹ Apart from these two the history of the ninth century is only recorded in texts compiled in the second half of the tenth century: the Logothete's chronicle;¹² the History of Genesios; Theophanes Continuatus; and Pseudo-Symeon *magistros*.

The Logothete's Chronicle also copies the *Epitome* but in greater detail than George the Monk, and its author had a longer version of the text which extended to 842. The tone throughout is moderately hostile to the reigning emperors. From 842 to 913 the Logothete gives an extremely critical account of the rise and reign of Basil I and his successor Leo VI, the first two emperors of the Macedonian dynasty. Possibly he was copying another ninth-century text like the *Epitome* but nothing can be said with certainty.

Genesios (who stops in 886) and Theophanes Continuatus are closely related and like the Logothete begin approximately where Theophanes stops. They give a different account of the first half of the ninth century to the Logothete, but one equally hostile to the iconoclast emperors of the Amorion dynasty. After 867 and the rise to power of the Macedonian dynasty the tone changes dramatically to one of loyalist flattery. Theophanes Continuatus, book five, is a panegyric biography of Basil I commissioned by his grandson, Constantine Porphyrogenitos, but otherwise their sources are unknown.

Pseudo-Symeon *magistros* is a late tenth-century compilation based on the Logothete's Chronicle but with chaotic interpolations from a variety of sources that include Theophanes Continuatus and a pamphlet written in the ninth century to vilify the patriarch Photios.¹³

None of this is very impressive and the historical quality of these texts hardly improves when they reach the century in which they were compiled. The first version of the Logothete carries on up to 948. It is usually said that the Chronicle is written from the standpoint of the Lekapenos family who seized power in 919. If so, its account of the reign of Romanos I

Lekapenos is strikingly ill-informed. Theophanes Continuatus repeats the Logothete's inadequate history of Romanos with a few details added from a lost eight-volume biography of the emperor's leading general, John Kourkuas.¹⁴ From 944 to where it stops in 961 Theophanes Continuatus returns to praising the ruling Macedonian dynasty. For this, its anonymous author used a panegyric of the emperor Constantine VII, which dwelt on his building activities, and a chronicle favourable to the emperor's leading generals, the Phokas family. Neither of these survive, but the chronicle is independently repeated in a more or less abbreviated form by Pseudo-Symeon *magistros*, and in a second version of the Logothete's Chronicle which has been continued to 963.¹⁵

The late eleventh-century historian John Skylitzes copies Theophanes Continuatus up to 944, but from 944 to 963 he reproduces a near contemporary anti-Macedonian account of the reigns of Constantine Porphyrogenitos and his son, Romanos II. For the thirty years after 959 Skylitzes is supplemented by the History of Leo the Deacon who gives a flattering account of the reigns of Nikephoros II Phokas (963–9) and John Tzimiskēs (969–76), and some stories set in the early part of the reign of Basil II, but after 989 Skylitzes is the only Greek narrative source to survive. The account it gives is disjointed and ill-informed, and were it not for the Arabic chronicle of Yahyā b. Sa'īd, an Egyptian Christian who moved to Antioch in the early eleventh century, the latter part of Basil II's reign from 989 to 1025 would be virtually unintelligible.¹⁶

Apart from the uneven coverage, the main problem with all these texts – even the better ones such as Leo the Deacon – is their obvious unreliability. This is a problem that is as applicable to Nikephoros and Theophanes as it is to the later writers, and it is one that some modern Byzantinists still ignore. For much of the period between 600 and 1025 only one account of events has been preserved – or at least only one with minor variations. This does not mean that it can be regarded as basically correct. The Byzantines had inherited from the traditions of late Roman literature the view that all historical writing should serve a didactic end. The Byzantine author set about recording the past for a purpose, whether to praise his patrons, abuse his enemies, attract reward, or generally to present a version

of the past which fitted contemporary political and religious dogma and served current ends. For example, all the authors whose works survive believed, or thought it politic to be seen to believe, that the eighth-century iconoclasts were dreadful heretics and thus they regarded the principal purpose of recording the history of these heretics as to show how these God-detested people came to an appropriate end. The ninth-century iconoclasts were treated in much the same way in the tenth-century sources, but the historiography, is further complicated by the fact that the then ruling Macedonian dynasty had its dubious origins in the mid-ninth century. Consequently all the tenth-century accounts are written either to blacken or to whitewash the current regime. The Logothete's chronicle presents a uniformly critical account of the Macedonian emperors. Does it represent the attitude of the great military families who may well have wished to present all their civilian rivals as knaves and fools? Does it come close to the truth? Even where we have an alternative version it is very difficult to judge. In Theophanes Continuatus the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos is presented as a wise and learned statesman; Skylitzes preserves an account which presents him as a hen-pecked drunk with unholy designs against the patriarch Polyeuktos. Theophanes Continuatus may represent the official version during the reign of his son, Romanus II; the origins of Skylitzes' account can only be guessed at.¹⁷ The key point, however, is that in the absence of other evidence there is no good reason to believe one rather than the other, and a combination of the two is just as likely to be a combination of two totally misleading versions.

The problem of reliability and truth can be highlighted by comparing Byzantine history writing with the production of Byzantine saints' lives. While there are comparatively few Byzantine histories and chronicles, Byzantine saints' lives survive in huge numbers, and what is known of Byzantine reading habits shows that they were a much more esteemed and appreciated genre.

Consider the following passage from the Life of St Ioannikios:

The wife of Stephen who was then *magistros*, because of the jealousy of the devil was hated by her servants, and took poison from them, which, by God's permission, she unwittingly

tingly drank and lost her mind. Having expended a great deal of money on doctors to no advantage, she finally went to the holy father, and throwing herself at his feet she begged him to obtain mercy. The saint knowing that this had come about by magic, said: 'O woman, if you wish to obtain healing and agree not to punish those who planned to kill you, the Lord will swiftly cure you.' Having agreed this by oath, the saint prayed over her and sealed her three times with the sign of the life-giving cross, restoring her mind to sanity so that she departed in health praising God.¹⁸

This is a typical story from a saint's life, perhaps only remarkable for its comparative lack of miraculous content. At first sight there is no need to take it as any more than a pious legend. All the component parts of the story are hagiographical clichés. The poisoning inspired by the devil, the failure of doctors, the promise not to punish the guilty, the successful cure after which the woman goes on her way praising God, all have hundreds of precedents in saints' lives. Anyone familiar with the genre will know that the greater part of it is made up in this way out of ready-made component parts.

Consider now this passage from a work of history, Theophanes' *Chronographia*:

[811] Having gathered troops not only from Thrace, but also from the Asiatic themes, [the Emperor Nikephoros] invaded Bulgaria. With the soldiers went many poor men armed with their own hunting slings and clubs, and many blasphemers too. When they reached Markellai, [the Bulgarian *qaghan*] Krum, fearing their numbers, asked for peace. [Nikephoros] however was prevented from doing so by his own bad counsel and the counsel of his advisors who were of the same opinion Three days after the first engagements he ascribed his glorious success not to God, who had made him victorious, but rather he praised the good fortune and wise counsel of Staurakios alone, and he threatened those officers who had opposed the advance. Without mercy he ordered animals, and children and people of all ages to be slaughtered; he allowed the dead bodies of his own troops to remain unburied, thinking only of collecting the spoils; and shutting up Krum's

treasury with bars and seals he ensured that in future they would be his own.¹⁹ [The passage then goes on to describe how Nikephoros tried to return to imperial territory by crossing the Haimos mountains, but was ambushed, defeated and killed.]

Theophanes wrote this within four years of the event and the natural response is to take this as a basically reliable account. But in fact Theophanes detested Nikephoros, and it seems just as likely that the story of the expedition which led to the emperor's disastrous defeat and shameful death in Bulgaria gave him an ideal opportunity to denigrate the dead man. What at first sight seems a straightforward narrative, on close examination – just as the story from the life of St Ioannikios – breaks apart into a series of clichés. The poorly equipped army, the ill-advised rejection of peace, the hubris of failing to attribute success to God alone, the merciless slaughter, the impiety and the premature greed are all the ready-made components of a military disaster story. Clearly there is a truth behind Theophanes' words. Nikephoros was defeated and killed in Bulgaria; but how much of this account is owing to literary precedent and a desire to abuse a fallen enemy, and how much actually occurred is very difficult to say.

Part of the difficulty is that the clichés of historians and chroniclers are harder to spot than those of the authors of saints' lives. The latter was a literary form created out of a combination of the pattern of the life of Christ decked out in the rhetorical structure of classical panegyric biographies. The model allowed a wide degree of creative variation, but at its most basic a saint enjoyed an exemplary childhood, attended by suitable prodigies, after which came a period of withdrawal from the world and isolated ascetic endurance, corresponding to Christ's forty days in the wilderness. Following this the saint would return having subdued all earthly passions and bodily desires, and henceforth he would be able to act as a channel for God's power to be exercised in this world. The saint would then demonstrate this by a series of miracles, which usually included healing the sick, casting out demons, foretelling the future and cursing the ungodly. In due course he would foresee his own death, and die in a literal odour of sanctity. The sweet-smelling and miraculously preserved corpse would subsequently act as the focus for a series of posthumous miracles.