

# Looking Back to Antiquity: Three Notes

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## I. Nicetas Choniates and Flavius Josephus

**F**LAVIUS JOSEPHUS was well known in Byzantium. Not only did Photius refer to him,<sup>1</sup> but even later traces of his works can be found in such authors as Zonaras, Tzetzes, and Glycas. The comprehensive monograph of Schreckenberg<sup>2</sup> presents a long list of mediaeval authors acquainted with Josephus but omits Choniates; in his second monograph Schreckenberg mentioned Choniates' work *Thesaurus tes Orthodoxias*, even though he was still uncertain whether Choniates had used Josephus directly or through intermediary texts.<sup>3</sup>

There can be no doubt that Choniates knew Josephus. In the Index locorum to the recent edition of Choniates' *Chronike Diegesis*,<sup>4</sup> van Dieten indicated one and only one passage, referring to *Bellum Judaicum* 6.24ff: Choniates relates (p.241.77–81) that Titus, while besieging Jerusalem, tried not to damage the Temple. There is, however, another passage in the *Chronike Diegesis* that seems to reflect Choniates' knowledge of the *Jewish War*.

Choniates describes Kalojan's siege of Didymotichus in Thrace in 1206 (pp.632f), and in order to conjure up the image of the Bulgarian attack he applies words and renderings borrowed from Josephus' description of the Romans' siege of Jotapata. I quote Choniates' text, indicating the references to *Jewish War* III and underlining the words that are to be found in Josephus.

κατ' οὐδὲν ἠφίετο τοῦ ἀγῶνος ἐπάλξεις ἀποσύρων τῇ βίᾳ καὶ τῷ  
ροίζῳ καὶ τῷ μεγέθει τῶν ἀφιεμένων χερμάδων καὶ γωνίας πύργων  
(243) κατασπῶν καὶ καταρρηγνῦς τὰ τούτων θωράκια (286). οἱ δ'  
ἐντὸς δρυφάκτους καὶ γέρρα πηξάμενοι καὶ νεόδορα (173; γέρρα

<sup>1</sup> J. Schamp, "Flavius Josephus et Photios," *JOB* 32 (1982) 185–96.

<sup>2</sup> H. Schreckenberg, *Die Flavius-Josephus-Tradition in Antike und Mittelalter* (Leiden 1972).

<sup>3</sup> *Rezeptionsgeschichtliche und textkritische Untersuchungen zu Flavius Josephus* (Leiden 1977) 25f.

<sup>4</sup> Nicetas Choniates, *Historia*, ed. J. L. van Dieten (Berlin/New York 1975).

240) νάκη (192) τοῖς τείχεσι προπετάσαντες . . . καὶ πρὸς ἐπιβατηρίους ἔβλεπε μηχανὰς (252, 254) καὶ τὸ λοιπὸν ἀντιπαρεξέτεινε (255) στράτευμα πολλαχῆ, τότε καὶ αὐτοὶ τὰ τῶν ὑποπιπτόντων ἀποδύμενοι προσωπέα καὶ τὸν λαμπρὸν πολέμον παραφαίνοντες ἐν οἷς εἶχον ἠμύνοντο (270), ἐν τοῖς τείχεσι κειμένην ὀρῶντες τὴν σωτηρίαν καὶ μηδὲν τῆς ἀνάγκης βιαιότερον ἕτερον κρίνοντες, ἀπογνώσει τε καὶ θυμῷ (153) στρατηγούμενοι οὐκ ἐλάσσω ἔδρων ὧν ἔπασχον [ἀντέπασχον Jos.] χειρῶν καὶ τόλμης ἔργα ἐπιδεικνύμενοι (152).

This passage evidently will be of no avail for a future critical edition of Josephus, but it is very relevant for Byzantinists interested in Choniates' technique of employing the ancient heritage. Far from being a mechanical compiler, he inserted both individual military terms and whole 'blocks' of words in his description of a contemporary war, and by doing so he was able to implant in the erudite reader an impression that the Bulgarian attack on Didymotichus, if not identical with the notorious sack of Jotapata, was to some extent a very similar event.

## II. Eustathius of Thessalonica on Arbogastes

In his Commentary on the *Iliad*, Eustathius adduces for the flame of Diomedes "Abrobastes" the Frank, called "flame-like," φλογοειδής, because of his physical strength and the crudeness of his emotions: Ἀβροβάστης Φράγγος κατὰ ἀλκὴν σώματος καὶ θυμοῦ τραχύτητα φλογοειδής ἦν. Indeed, adds Eustathius, this man, in his battles with barbarians, resembled fire and performed superhuman deeds.<sup>5</sup> Eustathius' Abrobastes is quite probably the Frank Arbogastes, one of the most active Roman generals at the end of the fourth century.<sup>6</sup> This identification is the more plausible because the manuscript reading of Zosimus' *Vaticanus gr.* 156 of the eleventh to twelfth centuries (*i.e.*, quite contemporary with Eustathius) is very similar—Arbobastes;<sup>7</sup> Eustathius needed only a metathesis to arrive at his version of the name.

So far as I know, the Greek tradition did not preserve an image of Arbogastes as "flame-like." We can only hypothesize in what source Eustathius found this expression. We know, however, that he was

<sup>5</sup> Eust. *Il.* 513.20–22 (II 5.9–12 van der Valk: "fontem nescio").

<sup>6</sup> On him see *PLRE* I 95–97; see also O. Seeck and G. Veith, "Die Schlacht am Frigidus," *Klio* 13 (1913) 453f.

<sup>7</sup> See Zos. 4.33.1, ed. F. Paschoud II 296 n.

deeply interested in the image of Diomedes, from whose head and shoulders, we are told, flame spurted (*Il.* 5.4–7). Eustathius even suggested a rational explanation for this marvellous phenomenon which Homer credited to Athena: perhaps, he explained, some mirrors had been inserted in both his helmet and shield, which struck the eyes of those who looked at the hero (513.14–18 [II 5.1–7]). Again, we do not know whether this rationalization of the mythical image of the flame-like warrior owed something to Byzantine legends of victorious generals spurting flames in battle. One of these generals was, according to the Life of Saint Basil the Younger,<sup>8</sup> Constantine Ducas, the unsuccessful usurper of 913. Eustathius' readers might be aware of this text or of a similar legend.

### III. The Cyclopes and the Hermits

In his Commentary on the *Odyssey*, Eustathius of a sudden equates the Cyclopes, who “trusting in the immortal god [where Homer has the plural] plant nothing and dwell in hollow caves” (*Od.* 9.107f, 113f), with “the anchorites of our own time,” who seek to escape from cities and to dwell on lofty mountains and in caves, and who neither plant nor labor in any other way, but receive goods without sowing or ploughing (1618.31ff). A Byzantine reader would surely be reminded of the “fowls of the air” that “sow not, neither do they reap” (Matth. 6:26).

If we recall that Eustathius produced a pamphlet to scold the misconduct of monks,<sup>9</sup> that in his Vita of a very suspect Saint Philotheus of Opsicium (recorded in no other source) he overtly opposed the pious mundane life to hermitic exploits, with the former as the more virtuous,<sup>10</sup> then his comments on the Cyclopes cease to be an innocuous joke and antiquarian game with ancient topics. Ancient images could be and actually were used by Byzantine writers as relevant tools of their contemporary polemic. We only have to learn how to read them.

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<sup>8</sup> S. G. Vilinskij, “Žitie sv. Vasilija Novogo v russkoj literature,” *Zapiski Novorosijskogo Univ. Ist.-Fil.* 7 (1911) 292.1–14.

<sup>9</sup> *Eustathii opuscula*, ed. T. L. F. Tafel (Frankfurt 1832) 214–67.

<sup>10</sup> Tafel (*supra* n.9) 145–51; Migne, *PG* 136.141–61; *BHG* II no. 1535.