Byzantium before Byzantium: Local and Hellenistic Culture between the Bosporos and the Hellespont

The best-known figure of Hellenistic Byzantium is probably the philologist Aristophanes. This is despite the fact that he spent most of his life in Alexandria, from which, Suda tells us, he nonetheless tried in vain to escape in order to work with Eumenes II of Pergamum.

Local luminaries were therefore of another kind. They were for the most part connected in various ways to the history and interests of Byzantium, the economic and political point of reference of the Sea of Marmara, albeit progressively cornered by the unscrupulous policy of the sovereigns of nearby Bitinia. Demosthenes of Bithynia, author of Κτίσεις, who lived between the 3rd and 2nd century BC; Agatocle of Cyzicus; Teucer of Cyzicus, who probably lived in the 1st century BC; and Damone are the principal Greek literary and cultural figures associated with the region.

An interesting aspect of the area’s cultural life during the Hellenistic era is the late and conscious use of the Ionian dialect, as testified by inscriptions and fragments. The distance from Pergamum and Alexandria, along with a political pride that had always cherished local autonomy, probably explain the historical quality of the literary output in the Hellenistic period and the vitality of this dialect.

This contribution relies on epigraphic evidence to reconstruct in detail the principal cultural events and figures of Byzantine territory and the Sea of Marmara between the 3rd and 2nd century BC. The article presents a picture of remarkable cultural vitality, often forced to choose between emigration to the more glamorous cultural capitals of the time and local pride. The article concludes with a complementary survey of contemporary literary sources that refer to the places in question.