

Mysterion, strategike og kainotomia

Et festskrift til ære for Jonny Holbek

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“To Every Innovation, Anathema”(?)

Some Preliminary Thoughts on the Study of Byzantine Innovation

By Apostolos Spanos

A well established notion in Byzantine, and generally in medieval studies, is that Byzantium was a conservative civilization, highly resistant to innovation. This general idea has influenced our evaluation of innovation in Byzantium up to the present time. Even modern scholars have considered innovation as being either totally absent or at least as something the Byzantines were generally opposed to. This article makes a preliminary effort to reexamine this notion, by studying lexicographical and other textual sources, and questioning whether the evaluation of Byzantine innovation has been as thorough as it should be and whether it is based on a sound methodology.

About a year ago, Jonny Holbek honoured me by sharing his ideas on Byzantine innovation. He also shared his puzzlement over the traditional notion in Byzantine and medieval studies, that Byzantium was a civilization stuck in tradition and the past and thus negative to innovation, both in theoretical and practical aspects.¹ As the title demonstrates, what I intend to do here is nothing more than present some preliminary thoughts, focused on putting into question this traditional notion. The point of departure will be the characteristic expression of this notion in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, the mostly used dictionary in Byzantine studies [Kazhdan, 1991].²

The question underlying this article is whether it is historically legitimate and correct to project the present understanding of concepts such as innovation, conservatism and traditionalism into such a different civilization and worldview as the Byzantine. In the following I do not aim to offer a final answer to this question. Rather, I want to make a preliminary examination, by studying lexicographical and other textual sources, and by questioning the historical and methodological foundations of the traditional view.

To use the old but classic definition by Gerald Zaltman and Nan Lin, an innovation is "any idea, practice, or material artifact perceived to be new by the relevant unit of adoption" (Zaltman & Lin, 1971: 656–657). The Byzantine, as well as modern Greek, word for innovation is *kainotomia* (καινοτομία), a derivative of the verb *kainotomein* (καινοτομεῖν), which in turn is a synthesis of the adjective *kainos* (καινός = new) and the verb *temnein* (τέμνειν = to cut); the meaning is thus the opening of new ways, new directions, new understandings.³

Modern scholarship has studied Byzantine innovation sporadically, following mainly two paths. In some publications, mainly on technology in Byzantium (see for example Jeffreys (et al.), 2008: 335–502; Littlewood, 1995; Long, 2003: 9–19), empirical methodology was used to study the introduction (or not) of ideas and practices and the production of artefacts, mainly in the fields of literature, visual art, music, architecture and agriculture. But when it comes to the overall evaluation of innovation in Byzantium, the tendency seems to be merely focused on the study of textual sources on *kainotomia*, more precisely of some individual sources, which do not seem always to be representative. The main aim of this article thus is to put some critical questions to this second method and the sources selected to witness on the Byzantines and their aversion to innovation.

The general idea in Byzantine studies is that the Byzantines were negative to *kainotomia*, if not hostile. This idea could not be summarized in a better way than in the aphorism in the entry on Innovation in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*: "The Byzantines did not appreciate innovation and claimed to have stuck to tradition. Imitation or repetition of the standard authorities was praiseworthy. ... Reforms were usually couched in terms of the restoration of the past rather than of innovation" (Kazhdan & Cutler, 1991: 997). The negative evaluation is moderated by the acknowledgement that "this negative attitude toward innovation does not mean that Byzantine culture totally lacked originality. For example, there were remarkable novelties of both content and style, especially in monumental painting, in and after the 9th c." (ibid.: 998).

The *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium's* entry on *Kainotomia* refers to the meaning of the term in a legal context, where it usually means "new buildings that might interfere with another's rights or public interest". It is only in the last sentence of the entry we read that "the word was also used to designate theological, fiscal, or political innovations, usually with negative overtones" (Fögen, 1991).⁴

The entry on Innovation presents the Byzantine understanding of *kainotomia* in theological terms by claiming that the term "in the narrow sense, as used by theologians, primarily of the 6th–7th c., described the new doctrine of the miracle of Incarnation. ... More often the word was used in a broader sense of novelty and breach of tradition and applied predominantly to heretical doctrines or even rebellions" (Kazhdan & Cutler, 1991: 997, with a reference to specific sources).

Even if this negative evaluation was later indirectly retracted by one of the two composers of the entry on Innovation⁵, it has influenced modern scholarship, as

much as it reflects prejudices of modern scholars going all the way back to the monumental work of E. Gibbon on *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1789). The study of a good number of Byzantine visual and textual sources indeed confirms the high respect of the Byzantines to tradition, to well established motifs and ideas, and to the use of the past as a compass for the future. But was this all? Were the Byzantines really so negative to innovation, so hostile to any ideas opening new ways, so stuck to traditionalism and the restoration of the past? Or do we stand before of a concept that has been understudied and thus underestimated?

The answer to these questions calls for a critical reflection over the main definitions of innovation in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*. This reflection will here follow two different paths; the first is the consideration of Byzantine lexica and the other the critical study of some of the examples used for the foundation of the modern accusations against the ‘ultraconservative’ and ‘innovation-hating’ Byzantines.

Following the orders given by the divinities of Time and Space (so unlimited in Physics, but, alas, so limited —especially Time— when composing an article), the study of Byzantine lexicography is limited here to a representative minimum; it is, however, to be completed in a future publication. The study of Byzantine lexicography shows that the Byzantine understanding of innovation, although not at all the same as our own and not so systematic, well studied and detailed as in the modern period, was not so distant from what we mean by the term today.

The largest surviving Byzantine lexicon, that of Hesychios (5th–6th c.; ed. Latte, 1953–1966) defines innovation in a neutral way: “to innovate: to make/do something new“ («Καινοτομήσαι· καινὸν ποιῆσαι»).

The tenth-century *Etymologicum Gudianum* presents innovation as “something changed, against the rules and the laws of nature”.⁶ Although this could be understood as a partly negative conception, probably this definition derives from the theological understanding of *kainotomia*, that is to say the Incarnation of Christ (see below), which took place exactly “against the rules and the laws of nature”. In this case, the term (again) is not negatively coloured.

The so-called *Souda Lexicon* (ed. Adler, 1928–1938), a compilation of lexica, *etymologica* and other sources, of debatable date of composition but most probably produced around the year 1000, explains the verb *kainotomein* as “to make something new” relating it, strangely (?) enough, to the verb *archein* (ἄρχειν = to begin, to make a beginning, but also to lead, especially in politics). The word *kainotomia* is also listed, without any explanation. What is important for our purpose is that neither the verb nor the substantive bears a negative connotation.

The last lexicon to be considered here is composed by a great Byzantine churchman and scholar, the patriarch of Constantinople Photios (858–867 and 877–886). In this lexicon, *kainotomia* is once more presented in the neutral way mentioned above, as “making/doing something new”.⁷ What is important in the neutrality of this particular definition is that Photios is not simply a lexicographer but one of the

most prominent theologians of his time, with an extremely sensitive political understanding, mainly, but not only, due to his successful career in a high position of the imperial bureaucracy before his elevation to the patriarchal throne. This is why his silence about any theological and/or political connotation of *kainotomia* could be, and I believe should be, considered as revealing the absence of such a meaning in tenth-century Byzantium.

It seems thus, that Byzantine lexicography does not support the claims of the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* on the Byzantines' relation to innovation; even if these claims are enlightened by beams of truth, as they do reflect individual understandings in specific periods and contexts in Byzantine history, they should not be seen as ultimately representative of the Byzantine thinking about *kainotomia*. This deduction asks for an examination of some other textual sources, as well as of some used to support the definitions, namely that innovation in the Byzantine mind had the meaning of: (a) the Incarnation of Christ, (b) heretical doctrine and (c) rebellion.

(a) The definition of *kainotomia* as the Incarnation of Christ may be confirmed by studying the entry in the Byzantine lexicon wrongly attributed to the historian, canonist and theologian Ioannes Zonaras (12th c.). This lexicon, compiled in the first half of the thirteenth century, was the most popular of its kind in the post-Byzantine period. It presents innovation as “what is by any means changed against the common nature and not identified in anything to the human custom”, connecting the concept of *kainotomia* to the Incarnation of Christ: “It is necessary to get a deep knowledge of this term because of those who misunderstand the innovation in Christ. Because although he innovated nature by being born without semination, after his birth and as he was growing, many of the features of his body ... he did not have in innovation but in sameness to us, with only the exception of sin, as the apostle Paul proclaims”⁸.

This entry, which seems to aim at protecting the reader from the heretical views of the Monophysites (who believed that Christ had only a divine, and not a human, nature), is quite representative of the Christological understanding of the word. In a number of religious texts the term *kainotomia* is indeed used to describe the miraculous way of the Incarnation of Christ. One of the most celebrated examples is how Maximos the Confessor presents the double meaning (or level) of *kainotomia*: it is not only God's birth as a human but also the possibility of the human nature to “create flesh” without semination and the capability of a virgin to give birth without defloration⁹.

This particular Byzantine understanding of *kainotomia* has been used quite often in modern scholarship. What has escaped attention is that this understanding could not in any way contain a negative connotation for *kainotomia*, as the Incarnation of Christ is in Christian theology one of the cornerstones (together with Crucifixion and, above all, Resurrection) for the salvation of mankind. Thus, this innovation in particular could only be praised in gratitude by the highly religious Byzantines; and this would normally paint their understanding of innovation in positive colours, something not presented in modern historiography.

(b) To confirm the Byzantine understanding of *kainotomia* as a heretical doctrine one does not need to look further than the so-called *Synodikon of Orthodoxy*, a liturgical document produced in the period between 843 and 920 (ed. Gouillard, 1967). The *Synodikon* has a double aim, to express the gratitude of the Church to all those who contributed to the development of orthodoxy and defended the Church against heresy, and to anathematize heretics and their doctrines. The following anathemas are more than relevant to our case:

“To everything (in general) innovated and done against the ecclesiastical tradition and the doctrines and the outlines of the holy and celebrated Church fathers and to everything done after that, anathema”¹⁰. “To those falsifying the traditions of the apostles and the fathers and the councils of the Church, and any other thing innovating or excogitating against faith, anathema”¹¹.

The abundance of passages in which *kainotomia* is used in this meaning may convince even the most sceptical reader that within the framework of theology the word was understood mainly this way. But is this representative of the general Byzantine understanding and evaluation of *kainotomia*? The anathemas, as a good number of other theological texts of respective content, show clearly that innovation is anathematized when it reflects drastic changes in faith and/or the ecclesiastical traditions; this means that the meaning of the word is not different from in the Byzantine lexica, the making/doing something new, the opening of new paths. The problem for the Church was that any novelty *in these fields* was unacceptable, as it would threaten its foundations.

This understanding of *kainotomia* found its way into post-Byzantine lexicography down to the nineteenth century, as one can see when considering the lexicon composed by a scholar who had the tempting nickname Byzantios, in which *kainotomia* is defined as “to innovate, introduction of new (novel) *dogmas* etc., modernity”¹².

(c) The final claim of the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* on *kainotomia*, namely that it was applied to rebellions, uses as an example the work of an eleventh-century Byzantine scholar, Michael Psellos (1018–after 1081?), namely his book *Chronografia*. In the passage referred to, Psellos speaks about the revolt against emperor Michael V (1041–1042), writing that “by the majority the event was understood as an illogical innovation”¹³. The question here is, again, whether this passage is representative of Psellos’ and (more importantly) the Byzantines’ understanding of *kainotomia* in general.

The words *kainotomia* and *kainotomein* (to innovate) are used twelve times by Psellos in his *Chronografia*, not always in the aforementioned meaning. A search on the data-base *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (TLG) shows that Psellos uses the verb *kainotomein* and its derivatives ninety-three times in his twenty-six works included in TLG, in a variety of contexts and meanings. In one of them he presents what he is going to write about “innovations by the divine justice”¹⁴, while elsewhere the person innovating is none other than the emperor himself!

All the abovementioned taken into consideration it could be deduced that *kainotomia* had a range of meanings in Byzantium, deriving from a basic concept which is similar (even if not equally sophisticated) to our own innovation. Modern scholarship has so far focused on the study of literary expressions of, or on, *kainotomia* in a variety of contexts. It seems that this study was influenced by the evaluation of Byzantium in the work of Gibbon (1776–1789), which, even if proven not to be the best background for the understanding of the Byzantine civilization, enshrines for over almost two and a half centuries the ease by which Byzantium is characterized as purely conservative and anti-innovative.

Facing such degrading characterizations, particularly when discussing Byzantine innovation, one can hardly avoid the temptation of referring to a text, composed by a tenth-century prelate and historian, Liutprand of Cremona, who describes his visit to the Byzantine emperor in the following words of wonderment¹⁵:

In front of the Emperor's throne there stood a certain tree of gild bronze, whose branches, similarly gild bronze, were filled with birds of different sizes, which emitted the songs of the different birds corresponding to their species. The throne of the emperor was built with skill in such a way that at one instant it was low, then higher, and quickly it appeared most lofty; and lions of immense size (though it was unclear if they were of wood or brass, they certainly were coated with gold), seemed to guard him, and, striking the ground with their tails, they emitted a roar with mouths open and tongues flickering. Leaning on the shoulders of two eunuchs, I was led into this space, before the emperor's presence. At when, upon my entry, the lions emitted their roar and the birds called out, each according to its species, I was not filled with special fear or admiration, since I had been told about all these things by one of those who knew them well. Thus, prostrated for a third time in adoration before the emperor, I lifted my head, and the person whom earlier I had seen sitting elevated to a modest degree above the ground, I suddenly spied wearing different clothes and sitting almost level with the ceiling of the mansion. I could not understand how he did this, unless perchance he was lifted up there by pulley of the kind by which tree trunks are lifted.

The study of inventions like those described by Liutprand have started changing the minds of a number of contemporary scholars who now pay more attention to various products of the Byzantine civilization, be they texts, paintings and icons, buildings, weapons, or agricultural and industrial tools. During the last decades the tendency in modern historiography has turned to paths leading to a more positive evaluation of innovation in Byzantium, so that scholars feel free to cry out that, for example, "Byzantine culture was innovative in ways undreamt of by older scholars" (Cutler, 1995: 203), ideas that the Byzantine studies could only whisper thirty years ago, as the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* very carefully and moderately does.

During the last two decades a few publications have offered new insights on Byzantine innovation, mainly in art, architecture, literature and technology (see for example Littlewood, 1995). Nevertheless, these studies seem to have concentrated

mainly on artefacts and secondarily on practices, while the much more interesting and important aspect of (innovation in) ideas has not enjoyed the attention it deserves, for example when it comes to politics, including the very sophisticated Byzantine diplomacy and propaganda (in both of which the Church played a leading role).

Another problem in the study of Byzantine innovation has been that the main question was whether the Byzantines had a *notion* of innovation. But is this the main problem we have to face? Or, to reformulate the question running in the background of the article, is it possible to study whether the Byzantines thought about innovation the way we do? Or should we concentrate on whether they were innovative or not by comparing them to previous and contemporary civilizations? The latter question creates, in turn, a number of others, not only related to specific fields of Byzantine studies but also methodological ones, as for example what kind of innovation(s) we meet in Byzantium¹⁶.

The nature of this amazing puzzle demands a thorough and interdisciplinary examination of both textual and visual sources offering direct and indirect information of Byzantium as both state and society, which I hope we will have the opportunity to do in the future together with Jonny Holbek, whom I would like to thank deeply for having sparked my interest in the fascinating field of Byzantine innovation.

Notes

1. Some of his ideas and questions are presented in this article, which gives one more reason to thank him from my heart.
2. It should be underlined from the beginning that when the subject studied is an ancient or medieval civilization the borders between such concepts as innovation, originality, creativity, novelty and invention are cloudy, if not indistinct (if we accept that we have made these borders clear in our word-loving but not always precisely speaking era and our science, particularly in the area of Humanities).
3. Let it be noted here that both the Byzantine and the modern Greek vocabulary include another word relative to *kainotomia*, namely *neoterismos*; it derives from the verb *neoterizein* (νεωτερίζειν), which has various meanings that we may sum up in “to adopt new ideas or ways of action or behaviour”. Furthermore, the Byzantines used a third, *kainourgema* (καινούργημα), which derives from the verb *kainourgein* (καινούργειν), that seems to have had basically the same meaning as *kainotomia*, without its theological connotations presented below. Neither word has been paid much attention in the study of Byzantine innovation, as one may realize by taking into consideration that they are not used in the innovation entries (*Kainotomia* and *Innovation*) of the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*.
4. This definition is not taken in consideration in the following pages, as it is too narrow, perhaps even an unfortunate choice, as it reflects the study of Byzantine law alone, a field not at all representative for the understanding of Byzantine *kainotomia*. Even so, it unfortunately influenced one of the most recent and prominent lexicographical contributions to Byzantine studies, which presents the verb *kainotomein* as “benachteiligen, schädigen” and *kainotomia* as “Nachteil, Schaden, Schädigung” (Trapp, 2001).
5. “There was both imitation and innovation in Byzantium, and, surprisingly or not, the more the Byzantines imitated (or studied) antiquity the more innovative they became” (Kazhdan, 1995: 11).

6. «Καινοτομία, ἔστι πράγμα, παρὰ τοὺς τῆς φύσεως ὅρους καὶ νόμους παρηλλαγμένον» (Sturz, 1818: 292).
7. «Καινοτομεί· καινουργεῖ» (Theodoridis, 1998).
8. «Τὸ κατὰ πάντα τρόπον παρηλλαγμένον τῆς κοινῆς φύσεως, καὶ ἐν μηδενὶ τῆ τῶν ἀνθρώπων συνηθείᾳ ἐξομοιούμενον. Τοῦτον δὲ τὸν ὅρον ἀναγκαῖον ἐπίστασθαι διὰ τοὺς κακῶς νοοῦντας τὴν καινοτομίαν ἐν Χριστῷ. Εἰ γὰρ ἐκαινοτόμησε τὴν φύσιν ἀσπόρως γεννηθεὶς, ἀλλ' ὅμως μετὰ τὸν τόκον τὴν αὐξῆσιν τῆς ἡλικίας, καὶ τὰ πολλὰ τὰ ἐν τῷ σώματι ... οὐ κατὰ καινοτομίαν ἔσχεν, ἀλλὰ καθ' ὁμοιότητα ἡμῶν χωρὶς ἁμαρτίας, ὡς Παῦλος βοᾷ ὁ χριστοκῆρυξ Ἀπόστολος» (Tittmann, 1808: 1154).
9. «Καινοτομία δὲ κυρίως οὐ μόνον τὸ γεννηθῆναι χρονικῶς κατὰ σάρκα τὸν ἀνάρχος ἡδη γεγεννημένον ἀφράστως ἐκ τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ Πατρὸς Θεὸν Λόγον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ δοῦναι σάρκα τὴν ἡμετέραν φύσιν ἄνευ σποράς, καὶ τὸ τεκεῖν παρθένον ἄνευ φθοράς» (PG 91: 1313C).
10. «Ἀπαντα τὰ παρὰ τὴν ἐκκλησιαστικὴν παράδοσιν καὶ τὴν διδασκαλίαν καὶ ὑποτύπωσιν τῶν ἀγίων καὶ αἰοδιμῶν πατέρων καινοτομηθέντα καὶ πραχθέντα μετὰ τοῦτο πραχθησόμενα, ἀνάθεμα» (Gouillard, 1967: 53).
11. «Τοὺς παραχαράττοντας τὰς ἀποστολικὰς καὶ πατρικὰς καὶ συνοδικὰς παραδόσεις τῆς ἐκκλησίας καὶ ἄλλο τι καινοτομοῦντας ἢ ἐπνοοῦντας κατὰ τῆς πίστεως, ἀνάθεμα» (Gouillard, Synodikon, 1967: 313). *Kainotomia* appears once more in the *Synodikon*, in the above-mentioned meaning of the Incarnation of Christ (ibid, 57).
12. «Καινοτομία: Τὸ καινοτομεῖν, εἰσαγωγή νέων (καινοφανῶν) δογμάτων κλπ., νεωτερισμός» (Skarlatos, 1839).
13. «Τοῖς μὲν οὖν πολλοῖς καινοτομία τις ἄλογος τὸ πραττόμενον ἔδοξεν» (Renault, 1926–1928: 5.27).
14. «Λέξω γοῦν, ὡς ἂν οἶός τε ὦ, ὅποσα μετὰ τὴν τῆς βασιλίδος ὑπεροχίαν ἢ θεία δίκη τῷ τε καιρῷ καὶ τοῖς πράγμασιν ἐκαινοτόμησεν» (Renault, 1926–1928, 5.24).
15. Liutprand, the Bishop of Cremona and historian, visited twice Constantinople as ambassador, in 949 and 968. In two of his works (*Antapodosis* and *Relatio de legatione Constantinopolitana ad Nicephorum Phocam*) he describes his missions, the city, and some elements of the Byzantine culture. From his writings we can understand that he disliked the Byzantines and the Byzantine way of living. The description of his visit to the emperor is quoted from Squatriti, 2007, 197–198.
16. Today, for example, we speak about radical and incremental (Dewar & Dutton 1986), systemic and autonomous innovations (Chesbrough & Teece, 2002).

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