

**EMOZIONI DEL SACRO  
ESPERIENZE E LINGUAGGI RELIGIOSI A BISANZIO**

**EMOTIONS OF THE SACRED  
RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES AND LANGUAGES IN BYZANTIUM**

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INTRODUCTION

Attention to the emotional aspect and history of emotions is nothing new: passions and emotions are seen in ancient and medieval literature as a source of restlessness, agitation, temptation, and sin. Johan Huizinga, in his famous *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919), had offered the picture of a “hyper-emotive” Middle Ages and Lucien Febvre in 1941 invited us to reconstruct the emotional life of the past. At the end of the 1990s, what Barbara Rosenwein calls the “emotional turn”<sup>1</sup> indicated the proliferation of studies on the topic of emotions, which became very popular, but which in Italy did not attract the attention it received in international contexts.

As textual communities exist, so do emotional communities<sup>2</sup>, which share the important norms related to emotions appreciated or despised by the community, whatever they may be, and the ways of expressing them. If societies welcome more than one emotional community, it is called an “emotional arena”<sup>3</sup>.

With regard to the Byzantine world, the study of emotions has emerged over the last two decades as a interdisciplinary field, intersecting history, theology, philology, anthropology and cognitive studies. Emotions research has shifted attention toward how Byzantines experienced, interpreted, represented and regulated affective life.

The “turn to emotions” in Byzantine studies parallels similar developments in medieval and early modern European studies: scholars began asking how feelings functioned culturally, non just personally. Recent studies looked at affective narratology, a branch of narratology on how texts gener-

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Generazioni di sentimenti. Una storia delle emozioni, 600-1700*, traduzione a cura di Riccardo Cristiani, Viella, Roma 2016 (ed. or. *Generations of Feeling. A History of Emotions, 600-1700*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2016), p. 17; Neumann, polemical about this perspective, in the essay that opens the section: p. 218, n. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*. About the emotional communities in Byzantium, cf. Floris Bernard, *Emotional communities in the eleventh century: bodily practices and emotional scripts*, in Matteo Zaccarini - Douglas Cairns, *Emotions through Time: from Antiquity to Byzantium*, Mohr, Tübingen 2022, pp. 157-177.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

ate emotional responses. The goal is broad: to trace emotional expression and narrative strategies across a wide range of genres and periods from archaic epic to late antiquity and beyond<sup>4</sup>.

Emotions played a central and visible role in the religious history of Byzantium, shaping theology, worships, politics and everyday life. Byzantine Christianity did not treat emotions as merely private feelings, but they were understood as spiritual forces that could lead either to holiness or to sin.

In the context of religious studies, much research analyses how emotions are represented and normatively shaped in hagiographies, sermons and homilies, theological discourses. Key concerns include how emotional language conveys moral categories and how emotions mediate human-divin relationship. Other research analyses liturgical practices, fasting and feasts, public ceremonies and imperial rituals, iconography, sacred spaces, liturgical objects<sup>5</sup>. Scholars continue refining how to avoid anachronistic emotional categories while still making emotions intelligible to modern readers.

While older scholarship assumed universality of emotions, contemporary work emphasizes cultural shaping of how emotions are named, valued, expressed. Current research focuses are: studies on emotions in late antiquity and Byzantine religion; work on passion theory in Byzantine ascetic literature; research on liturgical affect and sensory experience; art historical studies of emotional expression in icons and mosaics.

Current frontiers include: digital humanities approaches to emotional language pattern; comparative studies with Islamic, Latin Christian and Jewish emotional cultures; embodied experience in ritual and devotional practice; gender and emotions in Byzantine texts

Byzantinists entered the study of emotion with Henry Maguire's ground-breaking article on sorrow, published in 1977<sup>6</sup>. Since then, classicists and western medievalists have developed new ways of understanding how emotional communities work and where the ancients' concepts of emotion differ, and Byzantinists have begun to consider emotions other than sorrow.

Emotions in Byzantium were deeply intertwined with religious, social, and political life. The Byzantines inherited and transformed Greco-Roman concepts of emotions, integrating them with Christian theology, which emphasized the control of passions (*pathé*) and the cultivation of virtues.

Theological and Philosophical Views on Emotions Byzantine thinkers, influenced by both classical philosophy (especially Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics) and Christian teachings, categorized emotions into positive and negative:

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Mathieu P. de Bakker - Baukje van den Berg - Jacqueline Klooster (eds.), *Emotions and narrative in ancient literature and beyond. Studied in Honour of Irene de Jong*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Liz James, *Senses and Sensibility in Byzantium*, in «Art History» xxvii, 4(2004). The scholar discusses sensory and emotive engagement with art objects and sacred spaces.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Maguire, *The Depiction of Sorrow in Middle Byzantine Art*, in «Dumbarton Oaks Papers» 31 (1977), pp. 1-94.

- Virtuous emotions (*agapé* - love, *charis* - grace, *eleos* - mercy) were encouraged.
- Passions (*pathé*), such as anger (*orgé*), desire (*epithymia*), and sorrow (*lype*), were seen as needing control.

The role of Paul in the semantics of emotions does not seem to have been sufficiently investigated.

About the Emotions in Religious Life, religious art, especially icons, conveyed deep emotions, often depicting Christ, the Virgin Mary, and saints with expressions of sorrow, compassion, or divine serenity. The Orthodox liturgy was highly emotional, using music, incense, and rituals to evoke reverence and repentance. From this very original perspective, this is an essay by Mellas<sup>7</sup>, in which attention is dedicated above all to *κατάνυξις*, to compunction, with a focus on the connection between emotional experience and liturgical practices through sacred music, sacred epic and ascetics. The central point of the book is the idea that the Byzantine liturgy functions as an emotional technology, capable of shaping the Christian subject through repeated practices of singing, listening, and bodily participation. The liturgy produces emotions and forms the Christian subject through repeated practices.

The ascetic tradition, especially in monasticism, sought to achieve *apatheia* (freedom from passions), a state of spiritual calm. Tears were considered a sign of true repentance and divine grace. Saints and monks were often described as shedding tears prayer. Saints' lives (hagiographies) were filled with emotional narratives of suffering, martyrdom, and divine encounters, meant to inspire devotion and compassion. Hymns by figures like Romanos the Melodist were deeply affective, designed to stir the soul.

Looking at the main projects and publications on emotions in the field of Byzantine studies, he conducted an interdisciplinary research at the University of Edinburgh, analyzing literary, iconographic, and liturgical sources, as well as architectural spaces and other artifacts, exploring Byzantine emotionality not only in texts but also in cultural practices<sup>8</sup>. A collection of essays edited by Margaret Mullett and Susan Ashbrook Harvey addresses individual emotions or affective clusters such as compassion, envy, joy, etc., in different sociocultural contexts, with a focus not only on emotions in the cognitive sense, but also on performativity, communication, and the linguistically and culturally determined boundaries of emotion in the Byzantine world<sup>9</sup>.

Large-scale religious gatherings created collective emotional experiences. Processions with icons or relics, especially during times of crisis, reinforced communal faith and hope.

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Mellas, *Liturgy and the Emotions in Byzantium: Compunction and Hymnody*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2022.

<sup>8</sup> M. Zaccarini - D. Cairns, *Emotions through Time*.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Mullett - Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Managing Emotion in Byzantium Passions – Affects and Imagining*, Routledge-Taylor & Francis Ltd, London 2024.

Emotional outpourings were common at sites of miracles, where believers experienced relief, gratitude, or ecstatic joy upon healing or divine intervention.

Byzantine sermons often interpreted plagues, wars, and natural disasters as divine warnings, urging emotional and moral renewal and, last but not least, the Last Judgment and the end times were frequent themes in Byzantine thought, shaping emotions of anxiety, hope, and ultimate trust in God's mercy.

It's possible also to examine the gendered dimensions of emotions and the emotional aspects of gender within Byzantine culture. A collective work edited by Constantinou and Meyer examines emotions from a gender perspective, with a focus on themes of sexuality, affectivity, and social relationships<sup>10</sup>. Since it is impossible to dwell on all those works that dedicate specific chapters to the theme, the entry Emotions, edited by Kazhdan and Cutler in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (I, pp. 693-694), is useful. It identifies the main Greek terms relating to emotions, highlights the relationship between passions, Christian morality and patristic anthropology, but reflects, since the 1991 ODB, that is, before the emotional turn, the classical Byzantine approach. Regardless of the individual terms that connote specific emotions, we have some terms that can be useful for thinking about and classifying emotions: πάθος, κίνησις τῆς ψυχῆς, διάθεσις, ἐνέργεια. The first, of Aristotelian and Stoic origin, often takes on a negative connotation in the Christian context; the second expression describes emotions as internal dynamics, the third term indicates a stable moral disposition, therefore distinct from momentary emotion, and the last term indicates emotion as an act of the soul. In general, sources do not distinguish between emotions, moral dispositions, passions and spiritual states and terms can have different meanings depending on the genre, for this reason it is preferable to speak of an emotional lexicon and not of a coherent emotional system (but is it right to ask for coherence in emotions?).

The subject, as we can see, is now very debated in European and US studies, in Italy is rather neglected<sup>11</sup>. Emotional language in these studies becomes a privileged way to understand the mindsets, values, and relational structures of ancient societies. Emotions, in fact, are not universal and immutable psychological data, but culturally and historically shaped experiences, which change in the way they are named, interpreted, judged, and expressed in texts. They are cultural places where language, society, religion and the vision of man meet, a way in which the human being thinks of himself. They also have a history: what in one age is virtue, in another can be vice, and emotions can emerge as moral indicators, signs of identity, narrative tools, as well as means of building authority and holiness.

The hope is that this section will illustrate what are the main contributions of research to the theme contextualized in Byzantium. The *ratio* of the

<sup>10</sup> Stavroula Constantinou - Mati Meyer (eds.), *Emotions and Gender in Byzantine Culture*, Palgrave, London 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Carmelo Crimi - Renata Gentile (eds.), *Spazi e tempi delle emozioni. Dai primi secoli all'età bizantina*, Bonanno, Acireale (CT) 2018.

section is to explore a range of “domains”, that is, religious themes in which the emotional dimension is present and open to investigation, yet not extensively studied. In this perspective, Neumann’s long article offers the conceptual and terminological framework of the great Byzantine codex, the NT. The overview from *Agapê to Zêlos* has shown that the affects touch and shape substantial texts and topics of the New Testament indeed. At certain points, they play a crucial role in the development and texture of Early Christian thought, shaping the notions of God and Jesus as well as Christian community and practical ethics. One basic insight cannot be denied: Affects represent a major aspect of Early Christian reality and stand in close connection to the most central topics of Christian theology. Thus, once again, although less evidently than for example key concepts such as that of consciousness, which has an important semantic shift in the Pauline letters<sup>12</sup>, the biblical texts, especially the New Testament, offer subsequent religious literature the basic vocabulary of a new semantics of emotions.

Fabrizio Vecoli address the theme of monastic communities as emotional communities: the passions heard in the pejorative sense of the term represent only a perverted form of internal movements that were originally positive, directed according to nature. Beyond what is covered by the term passion (*πάθος*), the larger set of emotions is also under the effect of an amphibology which is characteristic of primitive monastic theory. Not only is there a positive version of passions/emotions, but it is not desirable to drive them out of the inner world of the ascetic. The analysis of a number of texts drawn from the ascetic literature of early monasticism seeks to demonstrate that emotions constitute an essential component of what may be termed the ascetic’s introspection. Although at first glance they appear to represent a negative element of the monks’ inner world – one from which they must free themselves – a non-superficial examination of the sources reveals the full ambivalence of this notion. This ambivalence should be understood as evidence of a profound reflection on the part of the monks, rather than as an inconsistency resulting from the diversity of the authors’ backgrounds.

Şükran Ünser, with her focus about the cult of Julitta and Kerykos, shows a breaking point in Byzantine martyrological emotion: how could a mother witness her three-year-old child’s violent death and respond with joy rather than grief? The study traces the textual evolution from the earliest (now condemned) narratives, where the child miraculously strengthens his wavering mother’s faith, to Theodoros of Iconium’s sixth-century reformed version, where maternal teaching replaces filial spiritual superiority. Yet even this revision demands an impossible emotional transformation: Julitta must rejoice at her son’s martyrdom. The article argues that maternal grief, in its raw human reality, persistently resisted the emotional prescriptions that Byzantine martyrological theology required.

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<sup>12</sup> *Coscienza e direzione spirituale. Ruolo e funzioni della syneidesis nel monachesimo palestinese*, in G. Filoramo (ed.), *Maestro e discepolo. Temi e problemi della direzione spirituale tra VI secolo a.C. e VII secolo d.C.*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2002, pp. 275-316.

Byzantine Christianity ultimately could not choose between theological prescription and human truth. The suffering mother remains suspended between what theology demanded and what humanity required, her grief neither fully suppressed nor fully expressed, her sanctity never quite secured on the same terms as other martyrs.

Valentina Cantone analyzes the theme of shaving hair as an example of gender-based violence in Byzantine art. In fact, shaving hair, as well as a monastic practice, is often among the tortures inflicted on martyrs, not martyrs. However, on an iconographic level, the holy martyrs are transfigured in the body through the visual strategies of the painters not to resemble men, but Christ on the cross, impassive, already projected into an otherworldly dimension: from this point of view, the shaving of the hair is absolutely in line with the theme of *imitatio Christi*.

The article of Rosa Maria Parrinello focuses on the theme of emotions in the mystical writing of Simeon the New Theologian, charismatic spiritual master of 11th century Byzantium: For the New Theologian, emotions have a decisive function in the process of *theosis*: they are not relegated to the psychological sphere, but integrated into a unitary anthropology that sees the heart as the place of divine epiphany. In the form in which a *discretio spirituum* exists, there is likewise *discretio passionum*, with her techniques and praxis.

In conclusion, with a view to the future, greater theoretical refinement is needed. Future studies can benefit from a more explicit engagement with emotion theory, including affect theory, cognitive approaches, and the concepts of “emotional communities”. Then, there is a strong potential for expanding the source base. Beyond normative texts such as theological treatises, sermons, and legal codes, scholars can further explore letters, hagiography, historiography (for example the emotions linked to relief of the iconophiles after the end of the iconoclastic persecutions), medical writings... Material and visual sources, such as icons, manuscripts, architecture, ritual spaces, also offer promising ways to investigate emotional experience and communication beyond written languages. Third, future research may focus more closely on social differentiation. Emotions were not experienced or valued uniformly across Byzantine society. Gender, age, social status, profession, monastic versus lay life all shaped emotional norms and expectations. Finally, a broader comparative and connected perspective would be fruitful. Placing Byzantine emotional cultures in dialogue with those of medieval latin west, the Islamic world, and the Christian East can illuminate both shared traditions and distinctive developments. Digital humanities, collaborative projects may further enable such cross-cultural and diachronic analyses.

Thus, perhaps it will also be possible to speak of emotional arenas also in the case of Byzantium, with emotions at the center of an history of feelings with a methodological pluralism, a source diversification, a comparative inquiry, allowing for a richer understanding of how Byzantines felt, interpreted and managed them.