The publications by Leonora Alice Neville (*1970) of the University of Wisconsin-Madison mostly deal with the Byzantine Empire under the Komnenos dynasty. The period in question saw the rise of a number of crucial historical works that enabled later generations to understand not only the political situation, but also the cultural background against which the writers created their oeuvres. Neville bases her analysis of the work by Nikephoros Bryennios (1062–1137) on Paul Gautier’s 1975 critical edition. Neville’s study on Bryennios’s writings consists of three main parts, further divided into 16 chapters. The entire work is preceded by two condensed genealogical charts of the Komnenos and Doukas dynasties as well as an Introduction, in which the author clarifies the origin and the turbulent history of the Bryennios family. In the first part of the book, entitled Contexts (p. 13–59, spanning four chapters), Neville provides an outline of the Komnenoi’s politics, while also sketching out the practical aspects of historical writings in 12th-century Byzantium. Important fragments of this part are devoted to the sources utilized by Bryennios in his Material for History. Neville is of the opinion that Bryennios was a thoroughly educated man, as is apparent from his being well-versed in the Bible as well as his imitating ancient authors, such as Homer, Xenophon, Sophocles, Euripides, Polybius, or Plutarch. Furthermore, according to Neville (as well as other scholars), Bryennios’s erudition was influenced by a number of authors less distant from him in space and time, such as Michael Psellos or John Skylitzes. Finally, Bryennios also had access to the imperial archives, which no doubt enhanced the value of his narrative. In the second part of the book, entitled Readings in the Material for History (p. 63–170, chapters 5–13), we find a painstakingly detailed analysis of the main object of the study, i.e. the Material for History itself. Bryennios’s work covers the years 1070–1079, far from an easy time for the Empire in terms of political and military matters. The chronicler himself views that time as the Empire’s all-time low, substantiating this claim with a wealth of examples, all of them most painful for Byzantium: the Seljuk invasion and the defeat in the Battle of Manzikert, the death of emperor Romanos, civil war, problems with the Slavs in Thrace, and issues involving mercenaries. According to Neville, Bryennios realized that the civil war and the dangers coming from the “uncontrollable” mercenaries had led to the Empire abruptly losing much of its capacities in the 1070s. As regards Alexios I Komnenos, Bryennios thought – and tried to demonstrate – that he possessed imperial strength. In a sense, the chronicler thought that in view of the Empire’s previous decline, Alexios I and the Komnenoi were the right people to lead the country. Neville emphasizes that it was in the interest of Bryennios himself – as well as the political fraction he belonged to – that Alexios I be emperor. In chapter 7 of this part, where the author ponders the question of who was viewed as an enemy of the Byzantines (Romans), she discusses the issue of how Bryennios approaches the Romans and the Empire; she comes to the conclusion that he tends to focus on the people rather than the state. Thus, he calls other nations (such as Turks or Franks) “barbarians”, invoking the relevant ethnonyms. A descendant of military commanders, the chronicler pays attention to issues of Military virtue, to which topic Neville devotes chapter 8 of her work. She analyzes Bryennios’s judgments on these matters...


Leonora Neville’s thought-provoking study of Bryennios’s testimony is certainly an important contribution to the scholarly debate on the matter. To be sure, the author only rarely alludes to earlier historiographical discussions, but this does not seem to have been her objective; on the other hand, she makes ample use of primarily sources, which she quotes in the original as well as in English translation. Neville is confident in the importance of gender studies, as seen in chapter 12 and 15. The publication is closed by two *Appendices*, a selective bibliography and an index. Neville claims that Bryennios’s effort has not been fully appreciated in the historiography, not least because of the towering status of the work by his wife Anna, i.e. the *Alexiad*. The scholar also points out that Bryennios exults the figure of his grandfather – a usurper, but also a man of honor. Accordingly, the narrative revolves around the notion of honor, alluding to the traditional understanding of this concept in Roman times. Well-written and testifying to the author’s erudition and imaginativeness, Neville’s publication is a must-read for all Byzantinists, particularly those studying the age of the Komnenoi. It provides important insight into the Byzantines’ understanding of the notion of honor – not only in Bryennios’s times.

### Bibliography

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary literature**


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