

Which Interdisciplinarity? Reinvigorating Theory and Practice as an Opportunity for Byzantine Studies

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Abstract Examinations of the methods and goals of knowledge production at its core are crucial for future scientific developments and challenging for the academic status quo. Interdisciplinarity is a central aspect: at its best, it represents innovation, making knowledge more relevant, balancing integration and specialisation, and raising questions on the viability of expertise. These issues are discussed within the context of Byzantine studies in respect to the latter's particular traditions, practices, and interests. Ways of bridging interdisciplinary gaps are proposed, together with a paradigmatic study based on the concept of space.

Keywords Byzantine studies. Interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplines. Knowledge production. Education. Academic practices. Methodology. Theory. Space. Concepts.

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1 Interdisciplinarity and Byzantine Studies

“What is it that we do? Do we do archaeology, history, or philology?...” an old friend, prehistoric archaeologist, protested during our collaboration on a comparative study of prehistoric and historical cavernous spaces around the Aegean Sea. As understandable as the complaint is from my friend’s point of view, so inconceivable it is from mine, although we are both trained as archaeologists and have parallel academic interests. In my head, how could I ever claim to understand ways, in which Byzantine people used caves, if I overlooked the ways in which those people saw and thought about caves, as expressed by their own words?

Byzantinists have this privilege, in comparison to other scholars in historical studies, to have access to their object of study through extensive, diverse, material and immaterial remains. This privilege potentially allows them a profound comprehension of their subject, i.e. the Byzantine society and culture. This privilege also supports my main argument in this paper: interdisciplinarity is not a free choice in Byzantine studies – it is fundamentally inherent in them, simply because a big variety of cultural expressions constitutes the footprint of the Byzantine people’s lives in the Eastern Mediterranean. Towards their potential grasp of those lives, Byzantinists – like classicists and other medievalists – are able to consider traces of historical landscapes, material remains of art, architecture, technology and material culture, as well as people’s languages and written communications. Thus, Byzantine studies are a multidisciplinary field. Therein, it would be hard to imagine any scientific work conducted amidst strictly impermeable disciplinary boundaries, to turn out adequately meaningful in our contemporary scientific context.

But then, why do we need to fragment this broad-ranged consideration into different sections of understanding during our academic practice? Why do we have to ‘discipline’ knowledge by breaking it down to pieces that we must, then, re-articulate so as to comprehend the big picture composed of ‘Byzantine experiences’ of human life on earth? It is because, in *our* modern world, “disciplines discipline disciples” (Barry, Born 2013, 1). In Andrew Barry’s and Georgina Born’s words:

A commitment to a discipline is a way of ensuring that certain disciplinary methods and concepts are used rigorously and that undisciplined and undisciplinary objects, methods and concepts are ruled out. By contrast, ideas of interdisciplinarity imply a variety of boundary transgressions, in which the disciplinary and disciplining rules, trainings and subjectivities given by existing knowledge corpuses are put aside. (Barry, Born 2013, 1)

As a result of that inevitable contrast, boundaries among social and natural sciences are being reconfigured and new scientific fields constantly emerge. The ubiquity of the term ‘interdisciplinary’ in current academic and educational writing suggests that it is rapidly becoming the dominant form of scholarly work. Interdisciplinarity has emerged as a key political preoccupation albeit an ambiguous one. More often than not both scholars and commentators disagree about what they mean by ‘interdisciplinary’. According to Harvey Graff (2015, 1) “the term tends to obscure as much as illuminate the diverse practices gathered under its rubric”.

What is, therefore, important in this case, is a ‘historicised’ perspective: it is much more productive to consider our contemporary formations of interdisciplinarity – not the concept per se. This perspective elucidates ways in which interdisciplinarity has come to be seen as a solution to a series of current social problems: in particular, the relations between science and society, the development of accountability, and the need to foster innovation in knowledge economy (Barry, Born 2013). Through this perspective the present situation can be understood as a problematisation: the question of whether a given knowledge practice is too disciplinary, or interdisciplinary, or not disciplinary enough becomes an issue and an object of enquiry for governments, funding agencies and researchers (Barry, Born 2013). In what follows, I specify this situation’s implications for Byzantine studies in respect to the latter’s particular traditions, practices, and interests, and I propose some ways of bridging interdisciplinary gaps within this context.

2 Interdisciplinary Concerns Around Theory and Practice, Methodology and Interpretation, Across Byzantine Studies

At different times and in different contexts, interdisciplinarity takes recognisably different terms, forms, and locations and faces distinctively different chances of success or failure. Byzantine studies, in specific, are constantly obliged to deal with division debates: Byzantinists must distinguish between general (non-specialised) and advanced (specialised) work and they must make respective judgments about privileging disciplinary borders to integrational perspectives or vice versa. Harvey Graff (2016) explains that such judgments are important factors, almost a signature, and they have also become forms of authority nowadays. He has an interesting insight on one fundamental divide:

By far the greatest amount of interdisciplinary research and teaching lies in specialized and advanced studies. Also claiming the

mantle of interdisciplinarity, general or so-called integrative work emphasizes teaching. Yet both can be integrative. Our conceptions of interdisciplinarity, including specialized research and teaching, should encompass distinct forms of integration, indeed interrelationships. (Graff 2016, 775)

Graff's argument is valid and effective in Byzantine studies, since the need for integration is already here imposed by the subject and objects of study - only additionally is this need further emphasised by contemporary central and academic politics, and by established and influential academic practices. The question is how advanced this integration is, when it comes to interfering with disciplinary boundaries. What red lines are - officially or unofficially- drawn by Byzantinists, in relation to their collaborations with other scholars and their enrichment of scientific scope, vocabulary and tools with the help of the repository of natural and social sciences? Also, are Byzantinists equally eager to extend beyond their disciplinary boundaries in both practice (methodology) and theory (approach and interpretation)?

Furthermore, under the general term of interdisciplinarity, literature distinguishes among several alternative ways in which Byzantinists may collaborate (among themselves and with non-Byzantinists): interdisciplinary or pluridisciplinary, cross-disciplinary or multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary, intradisciplinary. The underlying goal of these terms is to distinguish among low, moderate, and high levels of interconnectedness or intellectual integration (Jacobs, Frickel 2009, 45). The concept of interdisciplinarity, for example, involves the combination of two or more academic disciplines into one activity (e.g. a research project) so as to allow creating new meanings by thinking across boundaries (Nissani 1995). The concept of transdisciplinarity responds to somewhat different needs: it connotes a research strategy which crosses many disciplinary boundaries to create a holistic approach and may also include non-scientific stakeholders. Transdisciplinary research is defined as research efforts conducted by an investigator trained in different fields (or by investigators from different disciplines working jointly) so as to create new conceptual, theoretical, methodological and translational innovations that integrate and move beyond discipline-specific approaches to address a common problem (Nicolescu 2002). Last but not least, intradisciplinarity means the collaboration which occurs within the scope of a scholarly or academic discipline or between the people active in such a discipline, whether working in the same field of studies or in different ones. There is also considerable terminological ambiguity in literature. Some scholars draw clear distinctions between research that is cross-disciplinary or multidisciplinary (contributions from two or more fields to a research problem), interdisciplinary or pluridisciplinary (integration of knowledge originating in two or more fields),

or trans-disciplinary (knowledge produced jointly by disciplinary experts) (Jacobs, Frickel 2009, 45-6; Thompson Klein 2010).

In the next pages, I offer some insights on the aforementioned issues, by distinguishing among inter-, intra-, cross- and trans-disciplinary scientific practices in theory and methodology (as defined above) within Byzantine studies. As paradigmatic study I consider the multiple approaches towards the concept of space, which invites interdisciplinary work in both theory and practice (see § 3). I conclude my discussion by proposing a set of interdisciplinary practices that I consider constructive towards imminent developments in our field (see § 4).

2.1 Methodology. Inter-, Intra-, Trans-, and Cross-Disciplinary Scientific Practices

To begin with methodology, the emphasis on interdisciplinarity therein is often linked to contemporary concerns and to pressures in the 'real world'.¹ A certain 'convergence' across humanities and sciences exemplifies this orientation in Byzantine studies during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. This orientation has generated a major tendency for interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary team work reflected in abundant research projects and joint publications in archaeology, history, art history, philology, and literary studies. The list is too long to cite in this context, yet, among the most regular examples seem to be collaboration networks in archaeology and environmental history (for indicative discussions: Turner et al. 2021; Haldon et al. 2018). Interdisciplinarity usually offers solutions in practical terms, since, as a multidisciplinary field, Byzantine studies require a greater command of methodologies than scholars may individually possess.² Working out eventual tensions proves very rewarding (e.g. Izdebski et al. 2016).

Cross-disciplinary approaches are common in large projects and thematic research networks. An example may be seen in the new joint investigation of interrelationships between medieval arts – visual, performing, and literary – and rituals, by means of combined method-

1 The term 'real world' is introduced in the discussion of interdisciplinarity by Harvey Graff (2015, 6-7). It refers to life conditions and necessities outside academia and to the ways in which they relate with – and negotiate – the use of scientific knowledge. On similar issues see Cirella, Russo 2020.

2 Amongst classic patterns within Byzantine studies are, for example, various methodological combinations from archaeology, history, sciences, historical geography, material culture, art and literary studies. Find indicative discussions in Izdebski et al. 2016; Ladstätter 2016; Ladstätter, Magdalino 2019; Kontogiannis, Skartsis 2020; Vroom 2016a; 2016b; Gwynne, Hodges, Vroom 2014.

ologies from the humanities.³ Cross-disciplinarity in big publication projects, especially if ensured a priori by principle, may lead to new research ideas and fields of study (e.g. Bauden et al. forthcoming).

Transdisciplinarity has commonly been embraced and pursued by Byzantinists during the last two decades by means of several successive graduate specialisations. It is currently an established trend within the field as evident in the big number of scholars who seek to expand their research in new directions by acquiring additional skills in related fields within the humanities and social sciences.⁴ Vice versa, scholars educated in other fields or disciplines occasionally embrace Byzantine studies hence contributing new perspectives and ideas (della Dora 2016; Maddrell et al. 2015).

Combinative approaches are rarer yet present. A combination of inter-, intra- and transdisciplinary work is conducted within a new international research programme.⁵ The latter involves a series of investigations of the production of cultural and literary landscapes in Byzantium and its neighbouring lands, by means of creating a bridge among philology, history, narratology, literary-, manuscript- and translation-studies, as well as computational linguistics.

2.2 Theorisation. Transdisciplinary Interpretations

While an emphasis on interdisciplinary methodologies is justified by ‘real world’ necessities and concerns, as explained above (§ 2.1), this is not the case in theory. When it comes to theorising Byzantium, there is a bigger tendency, as a rule, to simply and easily assume differences between disciplines and interdisciplines rather than relationships and connections. Oppositional dichotomies contribute to a sense of distance and disconnection between disciplines and interdisciplines, blurring their connections.

As discussed below (§§ 4.1-4.2), this aspect is related to Byzantinists’ education and formation through successive stages and filters which seem still attached to modernist academic traditions. But the meaning of current developments in interdisciplinarity is a response to those modern traditions. Harvey Graff, in fact, argues that a clearer understanding of interdisciplinarity’s development is root-

³ See the *Research Network for Medieval Arts and Rituals* (NetMAR) in collaboration by the University of Cyprus, the University of Southern Denmark and the University of Bamberg: <https://netmar.cy>.

⁴ Indicatively: Goldwyn 2018; 2021; Messis, Mullett, Nilsson 2018; Veikou 2022.

⁵ Research programme *Retracing Connections. Byzantine Storyworlds in Greek, Arabic, Georgian, and Old Slavonic (c. 950–c. 1100)* in collaboration by Uppsala University, the University of Southern Denmark, the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, and the Swedish Institute at Athens: <https://retracingconnections.org>.

ed in looking backward, to at least the nineteenth-century origins of modern disciplines in the developing research university (Graff 2016; Jacobs, Frickel 2009, 54-7).

In the article “Byzantium after 2000. Post-Millennial, but not Post-Modern?” John F. Haldon sketched the landscape of Byzantine centuries at the beginning of this century, as follows:

Byzantine Studies is a small field compared to many others, and outside Greece and the Balkan countries always potentially threatened by what outsiders perceive as its lack of immediate relevance. It is about to enter the next millennium: if it is to maintain its intellectual credibility and respectability among its sister disciplines, its exponents might also consider familiarising themselves with such debates, the better to participate with scholars in other fields in debates relevant to all intellectual discourse. (Haldon 2002, 11)

Two decades later, perhaps Haldon would not exactly complain. While mainstream Byzantine Studies are far from postmodern as a whole, there has been a considerable number of fresh and novel alternative perspectives as a result of Byzantinists’ interdisciplinary concerns. Their discussion unfortunately cannot be pursued in the context of this paper but a few indicative examples are mentioned below.

The first example is Byzantine landscape studies, a study area which has displayed outstanding development during the last three decades. From considerations of landscapes’ purely physical change to reflections upon of their sensorial experience and assessments of their ideological and symbolic significance in Byzantine culture, an extremely broad range of diverse approaches has dealt with the roles of landscapes within political, social and cultural phenomena.⁶

The second one is the study area of Byzantine identities and social division, which has flourished in more recent years. The Byzantine paradigm has been commissioned in urgent contemporary discussions of social issues such as collective identities, social segregation, intersectionality, marginalisation, migration.⁷ In these socially sensitive research topics, the onlookers’ theoretical standpoints turn out critical for the authenticity of their final interpretations (Vukašinović 2020).

More diverse and interesting insights upon the Byzantine paradigm as a ‘methodology’ in modern and contemporary societies are

⁶ Indicatively: Brooks Hedstrom 2017; Caraher 2008; della Dora 2016; Crow, Hill 2018; James 2004; 2011; 2013; Kardulias 2008; Külzer, Popović 2017; Maddrell et al. 2015; Roussos 2017; Turner, Crow 2010; Varinliojlu 2008; Yasin 2009; 2017.

⁷ Indicatively: Ariantzi, Kislinger, forthcoming; Betancourt 2020; Constantinou, Meyer 2019; Goldwyn 2021; Kaldellis 2019; Messis 2011; 2016; Messis, Kaldellis 2016; Preiser-Kapeller, Reinhardt, Stouraitis 2020; Stouraitis 2014.

found in recent cross-disciplinary works. Some of them address this issue directly (Betancourt, Taroutina 2015) while others draw links and invite to reflection by focusing on a specific topic (Høgel 2018; Jevtić, Nilsson 2021).

The aforementioned research rings a bell for uprooting paradigm shifts in the field. It clearly demonstrates that Byzantine culture is currently being reflected upon by a broad range of interdisciplinary perspectives in theoretically up-to-date terms.

3 Byzantine Spatialities Used as Bridges Among Disciplines in Humanities, Natural and Social Sciences

Spatial studies - historical and contemporary - constitute a typical area of interdisciplinary research. As such it largely remains academically 'homeless', being conducted under the umbrella of numerous, diverse, academic faculties and other institutions. The concept of space certainly invites for interdisciplinary research, because it can be approached through a diversity of scientific categories depending upon onlookers' particular interests and perceptions. This diversity is the theme of an upcoming collection of Byzantine studies, engaged in the promotion of a holistic approach (Veikou, Nilsson 2022). In the following brief discussion, I borrow examples from this collection as well as from literature of the latest two decades, so as to argue for the value of holistic approaches towards bridging interdisciplinary gaps in Byzantine studies.

3.1 Space as Physical Dimension

The analysis of physical aspects of natural space is a meeting point of several disciplines within the natural sciences and the humanities (e.g. numerous branches of contemporary physical geography, space science, physics, while past developments are investigated in archaeology, historical geography, environmental history and its subfields). Reconstructions of the natural environment in Byzantine territories of the Eastern Mediterranean have been proposed by extensive recent research; this demonstrates that this area of studies receives active and imaginative attention. An overview of respective developments is offered by Adam Izdebski (2021).

3.2 Space as Social Parameter

Critical issues for modern sciences, social sciences and humanities are the spatial organisation of human (economic, social, and politi-

cal) activities across the environmental backdrops. Social space is investigated by the numerous branches of contemporary human geography, urban studies, literary studies, while past developments are investigated in history of architecture, archaeology of space, social history, historical geography and topography. The interaction between humans and natural environment in Byzantium has been investigated, since the 1990s, by Archie Dunn in a series of articles.⁸ Through this work, Dunn has introduced, established and refined a particular combination of methodologies from geography, archaeology and history, adopted by numerous later scholars. The research on the Historical Geography of the Byzantine Empire at the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna, conducted by the *Tabula Imperii Byzantini (TIB)*, remains the main resource for investigators of Byzantine social space. The project is expanding (five new volumes are currently in progress) while additional publications by *TIB*-project members demonstrate interdisciplinary concerns related to digital humanities.⁹ In archaeology, the term 'landscape' commonly focuses upon natural and social features of historical environments (landscape archaeology) and that is usually the case also in Byzantine studies (Gerstel 2015, 10). Amongst current surveys, the international Small Cycladic Islands Project is perhaps the most impressive in terms of interdisciplinary methodological scope as it allows contextualising Byzantine human spaces within the diachronic transformation of the Aegean landscape, by means of investigating some 100 insular sites from prehistory to the present day.¹⁰ A recent volume presents a combination of inter- and cross-disciplinary considerations of historical landscapes as a comment on the earlier concept of central place theory (Papantoniou, Vionis 2019).

3.3 Space as Cultural Component

Cultural dimensions of space are scrutinised in both social sciences and humanities. Contemporary aspects are considered within cultural geography (a branch of human geography), art and literary studies, while past developments are investigated in archaeology, archaeology of space, art history, cultural history, historical cultural geography. Sharon Gerstel's study of the Byzantine village landscape of

⁸ See Dunn 1994; 1996; 1997; 2000; 2004; 2005; 2006a; 2006b; 2007; 2009; forthcoming.

⁹ See *The Long-Term Project Tabula Imperii Byzantini (TIB). Current Status*: https://tib.oeaw.ac.at/current_status; Külzer 2010; 2018; Külzer, Polloczek, Popović 2020; Popović 2019; Popović et al. 2019.

¹⁰ *Small Cycladic Islands Project (SCIP)*: <https://smallcycladicislandsproject.org/the-project>.

fers a good example of transdisciplinary consideration of the topic through archaeology, history, art studies, ethnography and social anthropology (Gerstel 2015). An example of similar approach in literary studies can be found in Ingela Nilsson's recent discussion of authoritative voice as outcome of an occasion and as cultural expression of particular Byzantine spatial contexts (Nilsson 2020). Two more works, by Christodoulos Papavarnavas (2021) and Buket Kitapçı Bayrı (2020), display a combination of methodologies from literary studies and cultural geography (as well as narratology and history, respectively) towards cultural considerations of Byzantine texts.

3.4 Space as Physical Dimension, Social Parameter and Cultural Component

The holistic approach towards space's different dimensions is an older conception which has long remained – and still does – at the front stage of spatial studies due to its actuality and its value.¹¹ This perspective allows creating an area of spatial studies within Byzantine studies (Veikou 2016). This area may serve as host of combined methodologies from different disciplines and interdisciplines, which come to dialogue and collaboration in order to create new meaning and a better comprehension of Byzantine culture. A recent scientific meeting (2017)¹² was an experiment in that direction and it generated a series of Byzantine spatial studies which work together towards promoting such a holistic approach (Veikou, Nilsson 2022). This approach suggests that the concept of space constitutes an exemplary lens through which Byzantine culture can be viewed. Byzantium offers an example of a medieval culture which was deeply aware of nature and very closely related to it. Its populations had a strong sense of belonging to their land, which in turn determined their personal and collective identities. These residents were very sensitive in producing their own appropriated space specifically designed to be of human-friendly scale; the translation of space to place. Accordingly, Byzantine spaces, whose abundant traces have come down to us either as material, artistic, or literary remains, constitute a re-

¹¹ This approach is articulated in Henri Lefebvre's theory of spatial trialectics, Michel de Certeau's theories of spatial practices, and Michel Foucault's theories of connectivity among space, power and social order: Lefebvre 1974; de Certeau 1984; Foucault 1975; 1994. Later elaborations (indicatively) in Elden 2004; Massey 1995; 1999; 2005; Soja 1989; 1996; 1999; Thrift 2007.

¹² The international conference *From the Human Body to the Universe - Spatialities of Byzantine Culture* was organised in Uppsala University by the Author and Professor Ingela Nilsson, on 17-21 May, 2017, with the kind support by Riksbankens Jubileumfond of Sweden.

markable kaleidoscope of late antique and medieval cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, this raw data of Byzantine space constantly increases, through surveys, excavations, and archival research. The analysis and interpretation of these manifold spatial vestiges open a large window towards our understanding of medieval people. All that is needed is a mindful and determined chain of efforts to bridge the gap between spatial analysis and spatial interpretation as well as an 'open' disposition towards imaginary theoretical reconsiderations and shifts of attention proposed by other fields (Veikou, Nilsson, James 2022, 2).

This volume exemplifies interdisciplinarity and diversity as a response to the fact that many cultural aspects speak for the crucial importance of spatialities for the Byzantines. Their bodies and minds have been performed as their most personal spaces - their places - of social identity and control. Byzantine people interacted with their natural environments in their struggle to survive and create, thus producing their spatial experiences. In that way they have constructed their own culturally appropriated spaces, producing Byzantine landscapes. These landscapes have been dominated by power relations, which divided them into territories, and they have been performed by cultural practices. Passing from the body to the mind, imaginary spaces have hosted moments of a universe of heaven and human passions. These are the spatial aspects of Byzantine cultures dealt with by each of the six sections in the volume: the space of the body; the body in its natural environment; the dialectic natural and human landscape; the territories of Byzantium; the spatial practices; the spatial imaginaries. As a whole, the book aspires to provide various answers to the question: how are all these Byzantine spaces relevant to us, today, and in what ways can we grasp them? To ensure pluralism, this question has been addressed by numerous scholars working in most fields of Byzantine studies: philology and literary studies, history, art history, archaeology, historical geography, historical topography, epigraphy. There has also been a conscious effort to embrace interdisciplinarity and intradisciplinarity in a more specific manner. In this way, the concept of space has been established as a platform on which many different conceptualisations and developments offer a fruitful intradisciplinary dialogue on theory and method in contemporary Byzantine studies (Veikou, Nilsson, James 2022, 4).

4 Inter Those Disciplines! An Opportunity for Byzantine Studies

4.1 Re-Theorising Byzantine Studies. An Educational Challenge

The preceding discussion aimed to show that interdisciplinarity, with the broad sense of the term, is a contemporary trend in Byzantine studies. This condition generates a set of current challenges which spring from the situation described by Haldon (2001, 10) as follows: “The historical past does possess a meaning of significance itself (although other significances can be imposed upon it), and the historian both discovers as well as creates significance”.

How can Byzantinists distinguish whether a meaning of significance is deriving – at least to a certain degree if not entirely – from the Byzantine past itself, or if it is barely imposed on this past by themselves? The accomplishment of such distinction requires from Byzantinists a set of advanced interdisciplinary skills: knowledge about human societies and cultures, and the human mind, as well as overview of historiographical theories.

While several Byzantinists are self-instructed in relevant fields (sociology, social anthropology, philosophy and epistemology, cognitive studies etc.) in order to advance their research, no systematic education is offered to apprentices. Such topics escape many graduate and doctoral Programmes of Byzantine Studies: they are (almost) entirely absent from respective curricula of European universities and they are very limited within those of American universities. In almost all Programmes worldwide, emphasis is, instead, laid upon the instruction of languages and of methodologies related to individual disciplinary and auxiliary fields (i.e. history, archaeology, philology, art history, epigraphy, palaeography, sigillography, numismatics etc.).¹³

As a result, in research, theoretical terms are randomly used. But even in these cases, that does not mean that the particular research is theorised or even theoretically aware.¹⁴ Without the existence of proper relevant education, the crucial aspect of historical interpretation of the Byzantine past is pretty much left to the hands of fate.

¹³ A report is discussed during the oral presentation since it exceeds the size limits of this paper.

¹⁴ See Ingela Nilsson’s chapter in this volume.

4.2 Advantageous Academic Practices for Flexibility and Growth

Strangely enough, the cause of interdisciplinarity is simultaneously advanced and retarded by the cultural and political associations of interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinary research, for instance, has been reported to be “experiencing growing pains” because of countervailing institutional pressures (Graff 2015, 2). Conventional departmental hiring, review, tenure, and promotion practices can slow or block careers; developing new procedures to evaluate the work of interdisciplinary scholars represents a real challenge (Graff 2015, 2; Pfirman et al. 2005; Huutoniemi 2010).

In Byzantine studies, as a rule, new academic positions at lower levels (e.g. postdoctoral researchers) are announced with an interdisciplinary orientation due to their common connection with big research projects; research projects, as a rule, owe their funding to their wide range of interdisciplinary concerns. On the contrary, academic positions at the next (higher) levels (lectureships, tenure-track associate and full professorships) are announced within the traditional and bulky disciplinary boundaries which are outdated as such by contemporary research and education.

So, against the main trend in other fields, the great majority of academic staff departments involved in Byzantine studies seems to be interested in interdisciplinary research but, at the same time, holding on to a disciplinary academic system which is not equally inclusive of interdisciplinary scholars.¹⁵ Institutional responsibilities are incontestable but it is high-time for academics to step in (Miller 2010; Pfirman, Martin 2010). A provision for interdisciplinarity being integrated at the advanced level of research and education would produce much better learning of interdisciplinary practices and greater scientific advance for the next generation of junior researchers.¹⁶

4.3 Historicising as ‘Undisciplining’ Knowledge. A New Perspective

How useful, adequate, and indispensable are disciplines? Disciplinarity, on one hand, has been seriously questioned within theory of knowledge (Krohn 2010). There have been voices such as that of the philosopher of science, Steve Fuller, suggesting that disciplines are artificial “holding patterns” of inquiry whose metaphysical sig-

¹⁵ For an assessment of trends in historical and literary sciences, against other disciplinary fields, see Jacobs, Frickel 2009.

¹⁶ For the challenges and possible gains of such intervention see DeZure 2010.

nificance should not be overestimated. Fuller suggests that inquiry needs a social space where it can roam freely and finds its natural home in the university; he even characterises disciplinarity as “a necessary evil of knowledge production [...] and a function of institutionalization” in the existing academic system (Fuller 2003). He, in fact, argues (2016) that a big problem, for which interdisciplinarity is the solution, is the “epistemic rent-seeking”, namely, the tendency for disciplines to become increasingly proprietary in their relationship to organised inquiry. In his opinion, a “proactive reading across disciplines” is our way to “exploit undiscovered public knowledge” (Fuller 2016, 83). Robert Frodeman (2010, xxxii-xxxiii) sees the same problem:

disciplinary knowledge has tacitly functioned as an abdication. By focusing on standards of excellence internal to a discipline academics have been able to avoid larger responsibilities of how knowledge contributes to the creation of a good and just society.

Interdisciplinary work, on the other hand, inevitably engages with implicit tensions between applied research and fundamental problems of knowledge or theory as well as between existing disciplines and emerging interdisciplines (Graff 2015, 1). The complexity in the relationships is shown in a pilot study by Carlos Andrés Charry Joya (2017), considering relations and interdependencies between sociology and history, and the consolidation of the field of historical sociology. Charry Joya demonstrates that each of the two disciplines has been erected in relation and in opposition to the other. He argues that the development of a new practice of the new interdiscipline requires overcoming the conventional idea that it is a combination of the two older disciplines. And, yet, this development is inseparable from the framework evolution of the older disciplines, in which theorisation plays a crucial role in the construction of knowledge. Obviously, then, professional knowledge of both older disciplines is an absolute prerequisite for the production of solid research within the interdiscipline.

As a solution to the aforementioned tensions and conflicts, Graff proposed a conception of interdisciplinarity as a process of “undisciplining knowledge” which potentially sets scientific research free from unnecessary and avoidable disciplinary constraints (Graff 2015). He explains:

Undisciplining Knowledge begins with the understanding that interdisciplinarity is part of the historical making and ongoing reshaping of modern disciplines. It is inseparable from them, not oppositional to them. (Graff 2015, 5)

His argument is very relevant to the necessity of interdisciplinarity, which Byzantinists experience as imposed by their own subject of studies (see §§ 1-2). He suggests that interdisciplinarity can be better understood when it is situated within a longer chronological span of intellectual and sociocultural development and he historicises it in a non-progressive narrative and a non-linear path (Graff 2015, 12-13).

As interdisciplinarity is historicised, disciplines and disciplinary clusters, their relationships, and their university bases are recognised as active elements (Graff 2015, 13-14). Historisation removes tensions and conflicts; in his own words:

Interdisciplinarity is neither a dream nor a nightmare; a romantic, nostalgic golden age of integrated, unified knowledge did not exist before the triumph of modern disciplines; there was no golden age of interdisciplinarity before the late nineteenth century. (Graff 2015, 14)

It is a contemporary need, a response to overspecialisation and knowledge fragmentation; as Graff puts it (2015, 16) “all interdisciplinary efforts reflect external factors” – hence pretty much agrees with Frodeman (2010) and Fuller (2003; 2016). In this particular context, the legitimisation of “undisciplining knowledge” can help reverse these conditions. Through an ‘un-disciplinary’ scientific perspective, our efforts to understand the past can potentially be unreserved from existing disciplinary constraints established by nineteenth century conceptions of knowledge. This perspective pays justice to our very subject of studies, a historical society and culture which chronologically precedes modernity and whose expressions more often than not call for interdisciplinary considerations.¹⁷

4.4 ‘Travelling Concepts’. A Ground for Future Collaboration

How can we – conceptually and programmatically – reapproach scientific research and this time detached from the predominance of the disciplinary organisational pattern? Mieke Bal, in her challenging work *Travelling Concepts* (2002), intended as a guidebook for interdisciplinary cultural analysis in the humanities, argues that interdisciplinarity must seek its heuristic and methodological basis in concepts rather than in methods. She analyses a variety of concepts – such as meaning, metaphor, narrative, and myth – which ‘travel’ from one discipline to another and she illustrates the possibilities of these concepts with the help of examples drawn from several disciplines.

¹⁷ For discussions of affinities and conflicts between Byzantium and modernity see Betancourt, Taroutina 2015.

A recent archaeological study used the concepts of ‘cave’, ‘travel’, and ‘ritual’ as a basis for comparative consideration of prehistoric and Byzantine historical contexts in the Aegean Sea (Veikou, Miina forthcoming). This study, meant as an intradisciplinary comment on current epistemological concerns, argues precisely that archaeology necessitates a common vocabulary and intradisciplinary comprehension, which would also transfer through archaeologists’ interdisciplinary concerns, even in cases of methodological diversion. New research projects also make use of a number of concepts in order to form collaboration platforms among researchers with different specialisations.¹⁸

Concepts serve as an efficient tool for communication and collaboration in Byzantine Studies: among Byzantinists and other researchers within the same discipline; among Byzantinists from distinct disciplines; among Byzantinists and other researchers in humanities, sciences and social sciences. After all, concepts are what we all share and contemplate, inside and outside academia.

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¹⁸ See the projects mentioned above (nos. 3, 5), and the historical-archaeological project *Medieval Smyrna / İzmir: The Transformation of a City and its Hinterland from Byzantine to Ottoman Times* (MESMY) of the Austrian Academy of Sciences: <https://tib.oeaw.ac.at/index.php?seite=sub&submenu=mesmy>.

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