Michael Grünbart

The Letters of Michael Psellos and their Function in Byzantine Epistolary Culture

Abstract: The transmission of Byzantine letters still lacks a new interpretative approach, leaving aside the idea of an archetypus. Michael Psellos' letters (eleventh century) may serve as an example to demonstrate how the process of rhetorical recycling and re-using of letters worked. His letters are preserved in a large number of manuscripts, but none of them contains a complete collection. Similarly to the late-antique epistolographer Libanios, Psellos became a model of letter writing for later generations and parts of his texts have been adapted in new contexts. The Psellian letter collection therefore offers an excellent case-study to analyse how his manuscripts and texts were used again and again in the course of history.

1 Byzantine letters and their transmission

Classical Greek and Byzantine letters are preserved in various arrangements and contexts: their forms of transmission range from single texts to coherent selections or larger collections in manuscripts.¹ Modern editors mostly follow the canonical approach of text editing techniques that try to establish an *archetypus*.² Such presentations often create the impression of a definitive and

1 Letters from Classical Antiquity and the Byzantine period have to be investigated together, since the earliest manuscripts containing classical Greek letters can be dated to the tenth century (with the exception of classical letters preserved on papyrus). The reconstruction of ancient letter collections is hampered by the strategies and intentions of selection developed by Byzantine scribes and scholars. However, a project at the University of Manchester focuses on 'Ancient letter collections' (see <<https://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/cahae/research/projects/>>). An inventory on the (literary) letter production provides the updated version of my *Epistularum Byzantinarum Initia* (2001); it includes all Greek letters (before the fourth century), that are normally handed down together with Byzantine letters, see Grünbart 2020. Byzantine epistolography has been treated systematically in Riehle 2020 (ed.); see the review by Margaret Mullett in *The Byzantine Review* 02.2020.027 <<https://doi.org/10.17879/byzrev-2020-3101>> (accessed on 15 March 2021). A variety of approaches on how to deal with letters is offered in Mullett 2007.

2 See Roelli 2020, 112 (archetypus) and 212–214 (stemma codicum), manuals for editions are Maas 1960 (see Thomamüller 2007), West 1973.

complete collection or *corpus epistularum* initiated by a single letter writer;³ excerpts of letters, omissions of passages and variants in the wording are relegated to the apparatus criticus (and buried there).

In contrast to Byzantine research studies, medieval Latin epistolography gradually took into account such textual variants that lead to a better understanding of transmission, medieval letter writing skills and arrangements of collections.⁴

Letters normally have been written in a certain moment in order to transport and exchange information. Letters appear in various forms, from simple messages on papyrus to precious imperial letters. But they have one thing in common: communication. Even ‘fictional’ letters imitate that basic human need. Letters also transformed from written exchange into literature step by step; after being selected, copied and kept by a learned audience they started a second life as tokens of learned appreciation and rhetorical refinement. Their existence did not necessarily end on a shelf or in a miscellany manuscript: sometimes they became model letters or were reused with slight modifications. Reuse represents an essential creative element in these texts and therefore letters belong to the most fluid artefacts of Byzantine written culture.⁵ That aspect has to be kept in mind when looking at the manuscript tradition of any letter.

In recent years, the composition of collections, the nature of florilegia and their importance in Byzantine learned culture have been discussed.⁶ New philology and digital edition techniques put special emphasis on textual variants

³ Almost no letter exchanges between two persons have been preserved – normally they form loose ends; however, a telling example is the correspondence between the bishop Theodoros of Kyzikos and the emperor Constantine VII (tenth century). Sometimes single letters found their way into ‘collections’, see the list of letter writers in Grünbart 2020 (e.g. Athanasios Lepentrenos, Kyritzes, Stephanos of Nikomedeia). Cf. also Grünbart 2001 (including the *allelographia* [ἀλληλογραφία = correspondence] between Leon of Synada and Stephanos of Nikomedeia, tenth century); Tinnefeld 2005 (corresponding letters in the corpus of Demetrios Kydones, fourteenth century).

⁴ See the methodological approach by Ysebaert 2009 and 2010, and Constable 1976 (updated version: Constable 2015). Collections of letters were the subject of several recent publications, see Neil and Allen 2015, De Sogno, Storin and Watts 2019 (dealing with epistolographers’ collection[s] and their manuscript tradition).

⁵ Grünbart 2015. See also Sykutris 1932, the classical study highlighting the potential of Byzantine epistolography.

⁶ See in general Van Deun and Macé 2011; on florilegia of letters, see Grünbart 2011. On the idea of collection (*sylloge*) see Odorico 1990. According to Riehle 2020, 481, letter collections normally are not marked by terms such as ‘collection’ (*sylloge*, συλλογή), but in many cases simply as ‘letters’ (*epistolai*, ἐπιστολαί) in the headings or margins.

and multi-faceted transmission. Scribes are no longer being seen as mechanically copying a text, but as actively ‘reworking’ and ‘recycling’ it.⁷ Variance forms an inherent characteristic of medieval literature.⁸ Each manuscript witness (‘Textzeuge’) has to be treated as an equally important manifestation of medieval writing, as it also reflects the usage of a text (or parts of texts)⁹ in a specific context.¹⁰

Variants in Byzantine letters may become indicators of remodelling and second-hand usage. As mentioned before such differences wander into the apparatus criticus and so an originally independent document disappears. Digital edition techniques offering sufficient space for simultaneous display of texts put more emphasis on the term ‘document’ than ‘work’,¹¹ a premise that can be perfectly adapted to Byzantine epistolography. Every single letter forms a unique document and it is necessary to consider its context in the manuscript.¹²

In a project dealing with the Byzantine epistolary tradition *in toto*, the ways of arranging collections and organizing letters in a single manuscript will be investigated.¹³ It should lead to a better understanding of Byzantine epistolary culture and the place of letter writing in the educational system. All extant material has to be re-examined in order to clarify the function of each text: is a letter just a copy in order to preserve the original or does it form a new version remodelling or ‘recycling’ a suitable prototype? That leads to further questions:

7 See Nichols 1990, 8; Cerquiglini 1999. For a discussion of their suggestions see e.g. Gleßgen and Lebsaft 1997, and Trovato 2017 (I have to thank Caroline Macé for these bibliographical additions). See also the recent volume by Roelli (2020) on all aspects dealing with stemmata and issues of transmission.

8 Nichols 1990, 8–9.

9 Examples of recycling parts of letters are found in Grünbart 2003, 38–39; see also Grünbart 2016b (and see below, n. 41).

10 For Byzantine literature see Reinsch 2010; for the importance and peculiarities of punctuation in manuscripts and consequences for editing texts see the volume by Giannouli and Schiffer 2011; Thraede 1970 suggested to print letters according to their colometric structure. On Byzantine epistolography and the implementation of methods of new philology see Riehle 2020.

11 Robinson 2013, 107.

12 That concept is the basis for the ongoing project *Census Epistularum Graecarum*. A database will be set up collecting all available testimonies of letters in manuscripts (up to 1800).

13 Only a few comprehensive investigations of the transmission of collections have been undertaken, see Muratore 2006: that study describes all extant manuscripts including the arrangement of letters. For Psellos’ written heritage see the monumental publication by Moore 2005.

How are letters arranged in sections of manuscripts? Did the scribes use numbers? Are there patterns of arrangements of letter texts in collections?¹⁴

2 Michael Psellos' letters and their afterlife

Problems concerning the genesis of collections and their transmission become obvious in various cases of epistolary corpora. A prominent and intriguing example is the correspondence of Michael Psellos who is one of the most prolific Byzantine letter writers.¹⁵ Psellos' letters are preserved in a considerable number of manuscripts, the history of Psellian letter editions reflecting that scattered transmission. The new extensive edition by Stratis Papaioannou has been expected eagerly.¹⁶ He accompanied his editorial work with a sample of articles. In an instructive contribution he discussed the transmission of Byzantine letters in general (asking both how many manuscripts include letters of a certain letter writer and how many writers are known by just a single manuscript), but put special emphasis on the collections of Michael Psellos.¹⁷

In his recent edition Stratis Papaioannou presents a compendium of 584 letter-texts being attributed to the scholar and politician (copied in 19 principal manuscripts containing large letter clusters and another 25 manuscripts with individual pieces).¹⁸ The oeuvre of Psellos turned into a classic some decades after his death.¹⁹ This can be proven by 'theoretical' statements of Byzantine grammarians and scholars and by examples of reception or mimesis in the

¹⁴ Wahlgren-Smith 2020 provides useful insights concerning the choice and arrangement of medieval Latin letters.

¹⁵ Jeffreys and Lauxtermann 2017. That volume includes a couple of translations and summaries of all letters. Further translations can be found in Kaldellis 2006; Kaldellis and Polemis 2015.

¹⁶ Papaioannou 1998 (includes a list of all manuscripts containing letters ascribed to Psellos); the life and rhetoric work of Psellos are studied in Papaioannou 2013 and see also Papaioannou 2017. On Psellos' oeuvre see Bernard 2020. After 20 years, the new edition has been published in the series *Bibliotheca Teubneriana*: Papaioannou 2019; see reviews by Dmitrij Chernoglazov in *The Byzantine Review* 02.2020.005 (doi: 10.17879/byzrev-2020-274) and Anthony Kaldellis in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (BMCR 2020.10.64).

¹⁷ Papaioannou 2012, 291–295.

¹⁸ Papaioannou 2012, 301; Papaioannou 2019, XXXIV–XXXV (485 genuine, 23 doubtful letters, 4 letters written by others, 7 variations, 23 excerpts, 21 most probably or definitely spurious letters and 21 pieces considered 'letters' by Psellos).

¹⁹ For Psellos' *Wirkungsgeschichte* see Kriaras 1968, 1176–1179.

oeuvre of certain epistolographers. The grammarian Gregory of Corinth (twelfth century), for example, recommends a couple of authors as models of letter writing: besides the canon of epistolographers flourishing in late antiquity, he advises Michael Psellos.²⁰ Gregory's statement (echoed by Joseph Rhakendytes) is confirmed by John Tzetzes²¹ or by Michael Choniates' praise, who casts Psellos' name together with Cato, Cicero, Arrian and Themistios.²²

The works of the *hypatos tōn philosophōn* were not only venerated, they were also actively engaged with, as they were both copied and reused. It goes without saying that Psellos' works also left traces outside of epistolography. The anonymous excerpts and adaptations of Psellos' *Omnifaria doctrina* in the famous manuscript Barocci gr. 131 of the Bodleian Library, forms a good example of such active engagement with Psellos' text.²³

But the focus of this contribution is on letters and a couple of examples may illustrate Psellos' influence. In the epistolographic corpus of the bishop Euthymios Malakes, who belonged to the learned circle of Eustathios of Thessalonica (twelfth century), several letters taken from collections of other letter writers are preserved.²⁴ Letter four in the same edition can be identified either as an original Psellian or a Pseudo-Psellian composition. Malakes seems to appropriate textual material for his own use.²⁵ The letter provides a classification in its heading: Δεητική. οἴκτου δεόμενος ('a letter of petition; a person who requires compassion'). Such descriptions may indicate that a text has been kept in order

²⁰ Komines 1960, 128–129. Briefly mentioned by Bernard 2020, 127.

²¹ Duffy 1998; Agiotis 2013 (see the reaction by Cullhed 2015).

²² Michael Choniates, ed. Kolovou 2001, 38, 6–12 (no. 28): καὶ σὺ μὲν τὰς τῆς φιλοσοφίας ἐκμετρήσας κλίμακας, οὐδὲ τὰς πολιτευτικὰς θέμιδας περιδεῖν ἐδικαίωσας, ἀποβλέπων, οἶμαι, πρὸς τοὺς Κάτωνα καὶ Κικέρωνα, Ἀρριανούς τε καὶ Θεμιστίους καὶ τοὺς πρὸ μικροῦ Ψελλούς, οἱ τὰ ἄκρα φιλοσοφίας πατήσαντες καὶ τὰς κοσμοῦσας τὰ ἀνθρώπινα θέμιδας ἐμελέτησαν, οὐκ ἐν τῇ γνῶσει μόνῃ τῶν ὄντων τὸ θεοείκελον ὀριζόμενοι, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τῷ τῶν δευτέρων ἐπιστράφθαι καὶ κοσμεῖν ὡς οἶόν τε· 'And you measured out the steps of philosophy, but you did not want to avoid political customs, looking to the Catos, I think, Ciceros, *Arrianoi*, *Themistioi* and almost *Pselloi*, who walked on the heights of philosophy and exercised the regulations adorning human things, who defined the godlike not only in the perception of the being world, but also drew their attention to the (perception) of the second things [i.e. what is behind the visible world] and adorned it as possible' (my translation, italics are mine).

²³ Pontikos 1992.

²⁴ Bones 1937. The second letter in Bones's edition is in fact a text by Synesios of Cyrene (fourth century) with some minor changes; nevertheless, the editor included it in the collection.

²⁵ Gautier 1977, 105 n. 13.

to be used again (it turned into a model for a letter of request).²⁶ It seems that Malakes' version of the letter is in fact a reworked version of the original (written by Psellos). Forms of address, the wording and syntax have been altered, but the common material is striking.²⁷ Paul Gautier noted the similarity between those two letters, but he refuted Psellos' authorship.²⁸

Echoes of Psellian letters can be detected in later collections of ἐπιστολαί as well.²⁹ A striking example has been uncovered by Robert Volk in a manuscript from Mount Athos (dated to the sixteenth century).³⁰ The text preserved in manuscript Athos, Dionysiou, 274 (Diktyon 20242), fols 10^v–12^r is a compilation of four Psellian letters.³¹ The 'author' of that cento-like letter is unknown, but it once again reflects the steady use and re-use of epistolographic 'material'.

3 Imitating Psellos, again

Another example can be found in the rhetorical collections of Michael Choniates (second half of twelfth century). Twenty-one *prooimia* of letters (letter-prologues or first paragraphs) have been published at the end of the edition of his epistles.³² The most efficient way to find and identify letters is by their beginnings (*archai*, ἀρχαί). Even in Byzantine times the *archai* proved to be a useful tool.³³ The first words of a letter also give an idea of what is to follow: signal words evoke friendship, opposition, consolation etc. The composition of the priamel or preamble belonged to the most sophisticated challenges of an epistolographer.³⁴ Most of these pieces preserved in a Florentine manuscript,

²⁶ On classification of letters and manuals of letter writing see the forthcoming study by Chernoglazov 2021.

²⁷ Grünbart 2003, 31–41, 36–37.

²⁸ Gautier 1977, 100.

²⁹ Grünbart 2000, 307–308, the collections of model letters by Athanasios Chatzikes (thirteenth century) includes a Psellian piece.

³⁰ Volk 2002.

³¹ Papaioannou 2019, epp. 117 (Kurtz and Drexel 1941, no. 31), 269 (Kurtz and Drexel 1941, no. 44) and 274 (Kurtz and Drexel 1941, no. 32) and Littlewood 1985, or. 13 (that piece is a letter according to the inventory of Papaioannou 1998 and the interpretation of Volk 2002).

³² Michael Choniates, ed. Kolovou 2001, 288–291.

³³ Letters are normally provided with numbers on the margins of manuscripts reflecting the need of organizing activities by premodern scribes (and sometimes modern cataloguers). See Grünbart 2016c, 45 n. 29.

³⁴ Fatouros 1999.

Biblioteca Laurenziana, Pluteus 59,12 (Diktyon 16463) (thirteenth century), are borrowed from John Chrysostom, but one seems to have its roots in a Psellian original (no notification of the similarity to a predecessor or provenance of the passage has been made in the edition).³⁵ It is a lengthy text comprising more than the extent of a *prooimion* of a letter. But careful reading shows small differences between the two versions found in Pluteus 59,12 and in Vatican City, BAV, Vat. gr. 712 (Diktyon 67343), while a third manuscript (no. 508 of the Romanian Academy of Sciences in Bucharest [Diktyon 10581] dated to the thirteenth century), not used by the editors Eduard Kurtz and Franz Drexel, reflects a multiplex transmission that needs an explanation.³⁶ Stratis Papaioannou used the Romanian manuscript in his recent edition. It contains unpublished material, such as the collection of the monk Hierotheos, and has to be taken into consideration.³⁷ The three documents are presented here in columns (different passages or changes have been underlined):

1. Michael Psellos, <i>Ep.</i> 447a, ed. Papaioannou 2020 (= Kurtz and Drexel 1941, no. 2)	2. Michael Choniates, <i>Epist. Init.</i> , ed. Kolovou 2001, 289.35–45	3. Michael Psellos, <i>Ep.</i> 447b, ed. Papaioannou 2020 = Hierotheos, <i>Ep.</i> 106, ed. Grünbart in preparation (= Darrouzès 1972, no. 125)
<p>Ἐδεξάμην εἰς χεῖρας, <u>λαμπρότατε ἡ καὶ ὑπέρλαμπρε</u>, τὴν γλυκεῖαν ἐμοὶ καὶ ποθεινὴν σου γραφὴν.</p> <p>Ἐδεξάμην, καὶ αὐτὰς ἐνόμισα τὰς Μούσας εἰληφέναι ἢ τὰς Χάριτας δι' αὐτῆς, δι' ὧν αὐτὴν κατεκόσμησας καὶ θαυμασίαν οἶον ἀπειργάσω καὶ ἡδονῆς γέμουσαν.</p> <p>Τί γὰρ οὐκ εἶχεν ἐπαγωγὸν καὶ θελκτήριον; μᾶλλον δέ, τίς τὸν ἀναγινώσκοντα</p>	<p>Ἐδεξάμην εἰς χεῖρας, <u>αὐθέντα μου</u>, τὴν γλυκεῖαν καὶ ἐμοὶ ποθεινοτάτην σου γραφὴν καὶ αὐτὰς ἐνόμισα τὰς Μούσας εἰληφέναι ἢ τὰς Χάριτας, δι' ὧν αὐτὴν κατεκόσμησας καὶ θαυμασίαν οἶαν εἰργάσω καὶ ἡδονῆς γέμουσαν.</p> <p>τί γὰρ οὐκ εἶχεν ἐπαγωγὸν καὶ θελκτήριον, μᾶλλον δὲ τίς οὐκ ἐφείλκετο τὸν ἀναγινώσκοντα</p>	<p>Ἐδεξάμην εἰς χεῖρας, <u>λαμπρότατέ μοι αὐθέντα</u>, τὴν γλυκεῖαν καὶ ἐμοὶ ποθεινοτάτην σου γραφὴν καὶ αὐτὰς ἐνόμισα τὰς Μούσας εἰληφέναι ἢ τὰς χάριτας, δι' ὧν αὐτὴν κατεκόσμησας καὶ θαυμασίαν οἶαν εἰργάσω καὶ ἡδονῆς γέμουσαν.</p> <p>τί γὰρ οὐκ εἶχεν ἐπαγωγὸν καὶ θελκτήριον; μᾶλλον δὲ τίς οὐκ ἐφείλκετο τὸν ἀναγινώσκοντα</p>

³⁵ Michael Choniates, ed. Kolovou 2001, 289, l. 35–45.

³⁶ Kurtz and Drexel 1941.

³⁷ Darrouzès 1972; the Romanian manuscript contains letters of Euthymios Tornikes, Phalaris, Firmus of Caesarea, Constantine VII, Theodore of Cyzicus and Michael Psellos. See Grünbart 2007 and 2016a.

1. Michael Psellos, Ep. 447a

ὥσπερ μάγος τις ἐφέλκομένη
τοὺς ἀναγινώσκοντας, τοῦτο
μὲν τῇ γλυκύτητι τῶν λέξεων,
τοῦτο δὲ τῇ συνθήκῃ τῶν
συλλαβῶν;

Πλέον δὲ μάλλον ἔτερπεν, ὅτι
τὴν σὴν ὑγίαν εὐηγγελίζετο,
ἦν ἐγὼ προτιμότεραν τοῦ
παντὸς τίθεμαι καὶ ἥς προκρι-
τικώτερον οὐδὲ τοὺς Κροίσου
θησαυροὺς ἐκείνους (οἷτινές
ποτε ἦσαν) τίθεμαι.

Ἄλλ' ὑγιαίνεις, ὦ θεία καὶ
θαυμασία κεφαλὴ, φωτὸς
δὼτως ἀξία καὶ θαύματος.
Ὑγιαίνεις καὶ στέλλοις
γράμματα, καὶ λαμβάνεις
παρ' ἡμῶν τὰ αὐτά· τί γὰρ ἡμῖν
ἄλλο τερπνόν, ἢ σὰς συλλα-
βὰς ἀναγινώσκειν καὶ
δέχεσθαι καὶ διὰ τῶν αὐτῶν
δεξιοῦσθαί σε; ἔρρωσο ἐν
μέσῳ πολλῶν πραγμάτων
ἀτάραχος καὶ ἀκύμαντος ἄμα
περιφυλαττόμενος.

2. Michael Choniates, Epist. Init.

ὥσπερ μαγνήτις σίδηρον. λει-
μῶν γὰρ ἦν σχεδὸν ὠραιότατος,
παντοίοις ἀγαθοῖς βρίθουσά τε
καὶ θάλλουσα, ἄλλοτε ἄλλῳ
ἐφέλκομένη τὸν ἀναγινώσ-
κοντα. τοῦτο μὲν τῇ γλυκύτητι
τῶν λέξεων, τοῦτο δὲ τῇ
συνθέσει τῶν συλλαβῶν,

πλέον δὲ μάλλον ἔτερπεν
ὅτι τὴν σὴν ὑγίαν εὐηγγελί-
ζετο, ἦν ἐγὼ προτιμότεραν τοῦ
παντὸς τίθεμαι καὶ ἥς οὐδὲ
τοὺς Κροίσου θησαυροὺς
ἐκείνους, οἷτινές ποτε ἦσαν
τίθεμαι.

ἄλλ' ὑγιαίνεις καὶ στέλλοις.

3. Michael Psellos, Ep. 447b

ὥσπερ μαγνήτις τὸν σίδηρον;
λειμῶν γὰρ ἦν ἀντικρυς
ὠραιότητος παντοίοις ἀγαθοῖς
βρίθουσά τε καὶ θάλλουσα καὶ
ἄλλοτε ἄλλου ἐφέλκομένη τὸν
ἀναγινώσκοντα. τοῦτο μὲν τῇ
γλυκύτητι τῶν λέξεων, τοῦτο δὲ
τῇ συνθέσει τῶν συλλαβῶν.

πλέον δὲ μάλλον ἔτερπεν, ὅτι
τὴν σὴν ὑγίαν εὐηγγελίζετο,
ἦν ἐγὼ προτιμότεραν τοῦ
παντὸς τίθεμαι καὶ ἥς προκρι-
τικώτερον οὐδὲ τοὺς Κροίσου
θησαυροὺς ἐκείνους, οἷτινές
ποτε ἦσαν, τίθεμαι.

ἄλλ' ὑγιαίνεις, ὦ θεία κεφαλὴ
φωτὸς δὼτως ἀξία καὶ θαύ-
ματος. ὑγιαίνεις καὶ στέλλοις
γράμματα καὶ λαμβάνεις παρ'
ἡμῶν τὰ αὐτά. τί γὰρ ἡμῖν ἄλλο
τερπνόν ἢ σὰς συλλαβὰς ἀνα-
γινώσκειν καὶ δέχεσθαι καὶ διὰ
τῶν αὐτῶν δεξιοῦσθαι σε;
ἔρρωσο ἐν μέσῳ πολλῶν πραγ-
μάτων ἀτάραχος καὶ ἀκίνδυνος
ἄμα καὶ ἀπερίτρεπτος.

Translation of text no. 1:

I received, most magnificent and splendid (person), the delightful and longed for letter of yours in my hands. I received it and I thought to grasp through it the Muses themselves or the Charites, with whom you arranged it and completed it to such a wonderful (piece) full of pleasure. Wasn't it an attractive and enchanting (item), then?

Or even more, by what did it attract the reader as a sorcerer attracts the readers, that is on the one side by the sweetness of its words and on the other by the composition of the syllables? But it offered even more delight, because it announced your health, which I regard as worthier than all things, and I do not regard the treasures of Croesus (whatever they have been) as a larger cause for preference than it (health).

But you may remain in a healthy condition, divine and admirable head, really worthy of light and wonder. You may stay healthy and send letters, and get the same from us. What

other pleasure do we have than reading and receiving your syllables, and to greet you with them? Farewell, (remain) calm and not washed away in the midst of many occupations and at the same time guarded all around. (my translation)

In text no. 2 the form of address has been changed to ‘master/Sir’; the epistolographer replaced the seductive sorcerer by ‘a magnet that attracts iron’ and added the passage ‘the meadow was most beautiful, it (the letter) burst with all kinds of goods and flourished, pulling the reader here and there!’

Text no. 3 is closer to the Psellian piece than no. 2; it reduces the forms of address to ‘most magnificent’ and ‘divine head’. At the end the composer replaced the words of no. 1 by similar expressions (‘free from danger and immutable’).

From this comparison it becomes apparent that Psellos’ letter served as an applicable model: it was copied and slightly revised by two epistolographers from the twelfth century (Michael Choniates and Hierotheos); it was re-animated in a rhetorical (learned) setting (Choniates) and in a monastic context (Hierotheos).³⁸ Psellos’ letter was kept as a prototype in the collection of *prooimia* attributed to Michael Choniates (the last paragraph of the ‘original’ Psellian letter is missing).³⁹ And it seems that the monk Hierotheos (third quarter of the twelfth century) re-used the Psellian piece with minor alterations. The simplest change in the process of recycling letters and adjusting them can be seen in the replacement of forms of address (λαμπρότατε ἢ καὶ ὑπέρλαμπρε – αὐθέντα μου – λαμπρότατέ μοι αὐθέντα), that reflect nuances of relations between two individuals.⁴⁰ Texts 1 and 3 end with different wordings, but the meaning is almost the same, evoking safety.

4 Concluding Remarks

Byzantine epistolary culture was a vivid process of copying, remodelling and adapting predecessors’ letters into a new context. Traces of that mimetic and

³⁸ Commenting on *Ep.* 447a, Papaioannou 2019, LXXIV states: ‘we cannot be absolutely certain about their Psellian origins’.

³⁹ Cf. Papaioannou 2019, LXXXVII. Papaioannou classifies the piece in Vat. gr. 712 as *versio prima* (= 447a), the text in Acad. Rum. 508 (= 447b) is labelled *versio altera* [*retractatio?*] in *collectione epistolarum Hierothei monachi*.

⁴⁰ Grünbart 2005; forms of address indicate closeness, distance, friendship, hierarchy etc.

creative habit can be found in the oeuvre of almost every Byzantine epistolographer, and the finesse and quality of variation was discussed and evaluated even in Byzantine times.⁴¹

If we treat letters as documents designed for a certain occasion at a certain moment (that can be repeated) and do not search exclusively for the original and first appearance of a message, that process of recycling can be visualized in an impressive manner. The concept of a fixed text ('fester Text') or even an original collection should be reconsidered. The fluidity of such letters' transmission has to be taken into consideration, since it reflects various levels of their (repeated) usage. In addition, it has to be kept in mind that collecting, copying and storing letters led to the creation of florilegia or (in a more technical sense) a stock of rhetorical spare parts. That is the case in Michael Choniates' compilation of letter *prooimia*. The engagement with the epistolographic tradition also reveals the versatility, the erudition, the creativity of Byzantine letter writers, but also their challenging situation to meet the expectations of their learned recipients. Hierotheos' reusing and reworking of the Psellian prototype reflect that procedure. Again, Michael Psellos' letters served as a prominent model, creating such a remarkable process of rhetorical afterlife.

In general, interpreters of Byzantine letters have to take into consideration that imitating rhetorical role models and elaborate tampering with predecessors' texts formed a usual pattern of composition.⁴² A systematic re-evaluation of the (fluid) epistolographic transmission may show how alive and malleable letters were.

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⁴¹ Grünbart 2010, 129–137. The monk Iakobos (twelfth century) reused letters of Basil the Great in a rather simple manner, see Jeffreys 2012. Another platitudinous example of *mimesis* can be found in a document from Cyprus: the scribe used a letter of Eustathios of Thessalonica *in extenso* and added a few lines (Grünbart 2016b).

⁴² Grünbart 2003. See also Op de Coul 2006 presenting texts imitating Theodore Prodromos (twelfth century).

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