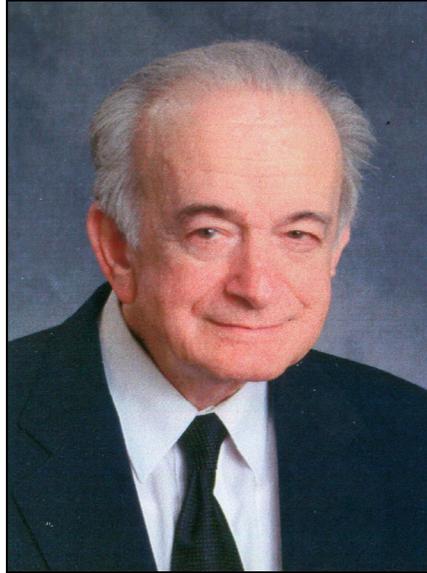


In Memoriam



REMEMBERING SPEROS VRYONIS, JR. (1928–2019)

On March 11, 2019, Speros Vryonis, Jr., a towering figure in Byzantine history, Hellenic studies in general, and related Islamica, passed away in Sacramento, California. In anticipation of many tributes to him and commentaries on his astonishing scholarly legacy, I will limit my remarks here to a sketch of his life and some personal recollections.

Vryonis was born in Memphis, Tennessee, on July 18, 1928. It was then a semi-rustic urban center on the Mississippi in the segregated South. He always spoke with a slight Southern accent. His parents were immigrants from the island of Cephalonia (various spellings) off the west coast of Greece. His father established a large bakery and meat processing plant

in Memphis, and as a boy Vryonis worked in both. He had fond memories of his childhood. He and his father frequently went fishing in the lakes and streams around the city.

He grew up bilingual in Greek and English. From early in his life, his parents impressed upon him the delights of Greek culture and civilization from Homer to the present. He would sit enraptured, listening to relatives and members of the Greek community in Memphis discuss the glories and tragedies of Hellenism. He learned of the Greco-Turkish war of 1919–21 and began to wonder how Anatolia had become Turkish.

In 1937, a few months before his tenth birthday and having just participated in a

State of Tennessee piano competition in Nashville, his parents took him from school to visit relatives in Cephallonia. They sailed on the *Queen Mary* to Southampton and then crossed Europe to Venice, where he had his first introduction to Byzantine art. From there they continued to Athens, where his parents took him to visit the Acropolis and Parthenon, a site that left an indelible impression on him. This visit was instrumental in determining his future professional and emotional life. Later, when he was a student for a year at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, he visited the site at least five to ten times a month. Later still, when he taught at the University of Athens, he continued to visit it repeatedly. It was his intellectual and spiritual lodestone.

Vryonis spent three delightful months in Cephallonia, thoroughly immersed in the life and language of the island and exploring every square meter of it. A year after he returned to America, his parents separated. At the age of ten, he was sent to Castle Heights Military Academy, a private school in Lebanon, Tennessee, which closed in 1986. There he excelled in athletics, especially basketball and boxing, but he was cut off from Greek life and culture. At the age of sixteen he returned to Memphis and attended Southern Law University for a year (he once thought of becoming a patent attorney) before enrolling at nearby Southwestern College, now Rhodes College. He had high praise for his teachers there and graduated in 1950 with an honors thesis entitled “The History of Cephallonia from 3000 BC to 313 AD.” After graduation he spent a year on a Fulbright Scholarship at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens and completed a project entitled “A Historical

and Archaeological Survey of Cephallonia” (1951), which is held in the library of that institution.

Afterward Vryonis entered Harvard, earning an MA in 1952 and a PhD in 1956 with a dissertation entitled “The Internal History of Byzantium during the Time of Troubles, 1057–81.” In 1960, after doing postdoctoral work at Dumbarton Oaks and teaching at Harvard, he became professor of Byzantine history at UCLA, where he remained for twenty-eight years. In 1972, following the death of Gustave E. von Grunebaum, who had founded the Center for Near Eastern Studies at UCLA, he replaced von Grunebaum as director, serving twice until 1982. Between 1976 and 1984 he also held the chair of Medieval and Modern History at the University of Athens. In 1985 he founded the Speros Basil Vryonis Center for the Study of Hellenism, which housed much of his library, in Los Angeles and served as its director until 1988. In that year he left UCLA to become Alexander S. Onassis Professor of Hellenic Culture and Civilization at NYU and the director of the Onassis Center for Hellenic Studies (1988–1993). In 1995 he left NYU and returned to the Vryonis Center, which had meanwhile been relocated to Rancho Cordova south of Sacramento. Between 1996 and 2000 he again directed the Center until he retired to his home in El Dorado Hills, California, east of Sacramento. Upon his retirement the Vryonis Center was closed, and in 2002 its library was transferred to California State University Sacramento, where it became the Tsakopoulos Hellenic Collection.

Vryonis’s scholarship was of extraordinary breadth and depth. A testament to this was the two-volume Festschrift in his honor, *TO ΕΛΛΗΚΙΚΟΝ*:

Studies in Honor of Speros Vryonis, Jr. (New Rochelle, NY: Caratzas, 1993), presented to him on his sixty-fifth birthday. In reflection of his own work, the contributions ranged over Hellenic Antiquity, Byzantium, Byzantinoslavica, Armeniaca, Islamica, the Balkans, and modern Greece. The first volume contains a twenty-page bibliography of his publications. But the Festschrift by no means marked the end of his scholarly career. Indeed, he continued to publish on many subjects for another twenty-five years. An updated bibliography would probably reach forty pages.

Vryonis is most renowned, of course, for his unprecedented work *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971). The question of how Asia Minor had been transformed from a Christian Byzantine region into a Muslim Turkish one had long intrigued him. In 1959 he mentioned to Helmut Ritter in Istanbul that he wanted to write a history of this transformation, but Ritter discouraged him, saying it would be impossible. Vryonis took this response as a challenge. The result was a work that revolutionized the study of medieval Asia Minor. By a thorough analysis of both Greek and Muslim sources, he reached a series of conclusions about the causes and consequences of the transformation. His arguments have proven fundamental to our understanding of medieval Asia Minor. In the introduction to the second revised edition (New York: Greekworks.com, 2011), he reviewed scholarship by others on the subject after the first appearance of his book and noted that its basic theses had not been challenged.

Decline was translated into Greek and two attempts have been made to translate it into Turkish, but the task has proven too daunting. *Decline* won the Haskins Medal of the Medieval Academy of America for the most outstanding book in medieval studies in 1975. Vryonis would go on to receive many other prestigious awards and honors during his career, including fellowships (grants), honorary doctorates, election to learned societies, and decorations.

Vryonis adhered to the highest scholarly standards. He had no tolerance for academics who did poor work or, above all, did not have command of the languages required for their research. This attitude was epitomized by his critique of the first volume of Stanford Shaw's *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). Shaw was a colleague at UCLA, but when his work was published Vryonis considered it an affront to scholarly excellence, academic freedom, and the integrity of UCLA's evaluative process and standards. He did not feel free to discuss it until after giving up the directorship of UCLA's Near East Center, which he had renamed in honor of von Grunebaum, for whom he had the highest respect. He then published an exhaustive and devastating dissection of Shaw's book in *Balkan Studies* 24 (1983): 163–286. He demonstrated in painful detail that, apart from its countless mistakes, it was not an original work based on research in primary sources, as was claimed, but largely plagiarized from or based on secondary publications. Before Vryonis's critique, Shaw's book had already been harshly reviewed by Rifaat Abou al-Haj (*AHR* 82 [1977]), V. L. Menage (*BSOAS* 41 [1978]), and Colin Imber (*EHR* 93 [1978]). In Turkey, Aydoğan Demir (*Tarih*

Incelemeleri Dergisi 1 [1983]) considered the book worthless. I once asked Vryonis what Halil Inalcik thought of his criticism of Shaw's work. He replied that Inalcik had agreed with him but said, "We need him"—meaning that Shaw would help promote Ottoman studies.

I first met Vryonis in 1985, when I passed through Philadelphia while he was attending a conference at the University of Pennsylvania. I introduced myself and gave him a box of pistachios from Gaziantep, which greatly pleased him. In 1989 my wife and I moved from Ankara to Vacaville, California, which turned out to be only about forty-five minutes from the Vryonis Center in Rancho Cordova. I frequently visited the Center to use its remarkable library, and Vryonis and I soon became good friends. He was kind and helpful and always encouraged me in my work. Eventually we began to meet monthly for lunch. I always looked forward to these lunches because each time was like a tutorial on Byzantine or Turkish history, or on the state of the art of Middle Eastern studies in the United States. He was candid in his criticism of certain academics, including a few at UCLA in addition to Shaw. He felt they were frauds because they published little or mediocre work or had a poor command of the necessary languages. As director of the Center at UCLA and privy to the quality of the publications of its members, he was in a good position to judge. Vryonis could do research in more than a dozen languages. For him, competence in the necessary languages was the *sine qua non* of solid scholarship. This he found lacking even at Harvard in the early 1950s. He would recall that his professor of Byzantine history

would ask him to translate Greek for him and that instruction there in Middle Eastern languages was terrible. This was before H. A. R. Gibb arrived in 1955 and established the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard.

In the course of his life, Vryonis had to face a number of physical challenges. He suffered from seizures as a boy. He overcame two bouts of cancer, and near the end of his life, several vertebrae in his neck fused so that he could not raise his head. But the worst thing to befall him was the loss of the oldest of his three sons, Basil, who suffered from schizophrenia and took his own life while in his twenties. Vryonis never got over his son's death and named the Center in Rancho Cordova after him. Our older son suffers from a similar condition, and Vryonis always offered a sympathetic ear to our dilemmas.

Vryonis was not religious, nor were his parents in any strict or deep sense, although they were a family of fourteen generations of priests. The Greek Orthodox Church was simply a part of their cultural upbringing. Its festivals were markers of the seasons and bonds of community.

Vryonis had a wicked sense of humor. I once asked him to recommend a Greek restaurant in Sacramento for lunch. He replied that the Greek restaurants in Sacramento ranked among the minor Greek tragedies. He was the only person I know who had met M. F. Köprülü. This meeting occurred when the Turkish scholar and politician came to Harvard in 1956. Vryonis found Köprülü arrogant and described him as someone who "could see around corners." Certain graduate students, including Shaw, served as his "*ghulāms*". Curiously, when Vryonis was

Remembering Speros Vryonis, Jr.

teaching at the University of Athens, he said certain people there accused him of being a Turkish spy.

Like that of any scholar, his home was full of books. Numbering, he guessed, around nine thousand, they were stacked from floor to ceiling in every room. His garage contained forty file cabinets stuffed with papers. They included correspondence, files from his time at

UCLA, research notes, and even a rare set of court records of the Menderes's trial at Yassıada in Turkey (1960–61). He also left behind a completed manuscript on the Greek sources for the Battle of Manzikert. One hopes that it will see its way to press as the final contribution to his remarkable legacy. As a great scholar, Vryonis was indeed *sui generis*. But more than that, he was a good teacher and friend.

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