

INGELA NILSSON, *Writer and Occasion in Twelfth-century Byzantium: the Authorial Voice of Constantine Manasses*. Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press 2020. X, 222 pp. – ISBN: 978-1-108-84335-5 (hardback).

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INGELA NILSSON’S new book is the result of her multi-year engagement with the texts of Constantine Manasses and, more broadly, with the literary output of Byzantine scholars of the twelfth century. The Swedish Byzantinist combines the ever-growing scholarship on the literature of the Komnenian era with theories of narratology, theoretical approaches on the relationship between author and audience, and the process of creating every kind of art and its reception by audiences and readers in pre-modern societies. As a result, the book is intended not only for scholars of this particular Byzantine writer, but also for everybody interested in European medieval literature. NILSSON argues for a comprehensive reading of Constantine Manasses’s literary production, which she treats as occasional – or potentially occasional – and performative, functioning bidirectionally for both its creator and its recipients, who are often the writer’s patrons and commissioners.

The book consists of seven chapters, six of which contain analyses of specific texts by Manasses, categorized into groups based on NILSSON’S interpretative models. It includes a rich and up-to-date bibliography and offers two indexes (an *index locorum* and a general index of persons, as well as of things). Readers will benefit from the translations of all quoted passages from works by Manasses and other authors. Although some of them are extensive, they are always accompanied by the original Greek text.

In the first chapter, entitled “The Authorial Voice of Occasional Literature”, NILSSON outlines her arguments as well as the methodological framework with which she approaches the texts by Manasses. Given that “the position of the reader conditions the analysis of any given text”, she emphasizes that her study, both in terms of choices and structure, arose from her personal theoretical attitude as a 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader of Byzantine literature. Her

interpretative approach and her grouping of texts do not follow a chronological order or genre, but they are based on contextual, functional and thematic correlations. Biographical matters pertaining to the real/empirical author hardly interest her. Her main concern is Manasses's narrative technique, particularly in relation to how he uses Greco-Roman and biblical material, how and why he recycles parts and themes from his own works, how he presents himself as a writer, how he presents and manages his relationship with patrons and colleagues in imperial and aristocratic circles. In my opinion, NILSSON demonstrates convincingly that by composing the *Description of the catching of siskins and chaffinches*, Manasses formed his own distinct and recognizable voice and style, which he adapted to a variety of occasions, regardless of literary genre, poetry or prose, and social contexts. He created his own "author brand" in style and narrative technique, which he used to promote successfully both himself and his literary output. In other words, he constructed his own authorial portrait to achieve various and diverse personal goals. That process seems to be typical for twelfth-century scholars, and NILSSON chose Manasses as case study. Other researchers may be able to verify her arguments.

In the second chapter, NILSSON investigates seven texts by Manasses on Constantinople: *Encomion of Emperor Manuel Komnenos*, *Description of a crane hunt*, *Itinerary*, *Description of the catching of siskins and chaffinches*, *Description of the Earth*, *Description of the Cyclops* and the *Description of a little man*. All these texts underscore the importance of Constantinople as a symbol, which, along with all its aspects – morphology, buildings, palaces, churches, gardens – is inextricably linked to and identified with the Byzantine emperor. Though the texts belong to different literary genres, in NILSSON's opinion, they all praise imperial Constantinople and can be considered as different forms of panegyric. The analysis of the *Description of a crane hunt* is particularly astute, and NILSSON's interpretation of it as an imperial encomium under the pretext of *ekphrasis*, in which the falcon is the emperor's *alter ego*, is very convincing. In my view, however, all the individual elements of this text suggest that it is an allegory, that is, an allegorical description of a typical battle scene conducted by an ideal marshal, the Byzantine emperor.

Moreover, in the analysis of the *Itinerary*, NILSSON correctly notes that it is a part of Manasses's output related to the court of Manuel, the praise of his reign, and the experience of Constantinople. Her view that in "describing the terror of the exterior, one praises the interior" and that, in the poem, the emigration and temporary exile of the narrator were an occasion to praise

the virtues of the capital and the emperor largely agrees with the analysis in the recent edition of the *Itinerary* by KONSTANTINOS CHRYSOGELOS.<sup>1</sup>

The third chapter focuses on four texts on the subject of death (*Monody on the death of Theodora*, *Consolation for John Kontostephanos*, *Funerary oration on the death of Nikephoros Komnenos*,<sup>2</sup> *Monody on the death of his goldfinch*). NILSSON investigates the themes of patronage, artistic composition, and performance/*theatron*. She is interested in how Manasses constructs his and the addressee's literary personae in these texts; and in how the rhetorical work exemplifies the social status of the person or institution that commissioned it, because the text itself and its performance demonstrate the artistic sensitivity and knowledge of the subject matter by the recipient/patron, in other words, the patron's education. Depending on the occasion, sometimes a relationship of similarity of the author with the patron/recipient emerges; other times we see a relationship of "contiguity" (relevance/closeness). Especially in the case of Nikephoros Komnenos, the text presents the image of a relationship of similarity between the author and patron that is based on their earlier teacher-student connection. The reference to the struggles of schedography using bird hunting terminology is a typical example of recognition of the "author's voice". In like manner, NILSSON interprets cleverly and imaginatively the '*Monody on the goldfinch*', while recognizing it as likely belonging to the author's teaching creations. The bird is an *alter ego* of Manasses, or his muse, or even his patron.

Closely connected are the subjects of friendship, friendly relations, and patronage,<sup>3</sup> as well as mutual support networks between scholars and pa-

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1. KONSTANTINOS CHRYSOGELOS, Κωνσταντίνου Μανασσή Οδοιπορικών, Κριτική Έκδοση – Μετάφραση – Σχόλια. Athens 2017, pp. 39–45.

2. Although for this study it is not significant when exactly Nikephoros Komnenos died, and whether Manasses wrote this Epitaph before the two other orations for Theodora and her husband John Kontostephanos (see NILSSON, p. 72), I believe that dating his death to 1173–1175 has to be re-considered. All scholars repeat the dating suggested by EDUARD KURTZ (Evstafija Fessalonikijskago i Konstantina Manassii monodii na konchiny Niki-fora Komnina. VV 17 (1910) p. 285), for which he presumably estimates the 'ante quem' (largely 'ex silentio'), based on elements of the biography of Eustathios of Thessaloniki, which in the meantime has been revised.

3. NILSSON correctly highlights the importance of MARGARET MULLETT's "seminal" article in 1988 (Byzantium: a friendly society? Past and Present 118, pp. 3–24) on the concept of friendship and the emphasis on a more "practical" approach to friendship of the Byzantines. However, we ought to mention the precursory study of FRANZ TINNEFELD in 1973: "Freundschaft" in den Briefen des Michael Psellos. Theorie und Wirklichkeit.

trons/commissioners that emerge from texts of Manasses and are discussed in the fourth chapter. The texts are the passage “*About Friends*” from the so-called *Moral poem*, attributed with some uncertainty to Manasses; the *Encomion of Michael Hagiotheodorites*;<sup>4</sup> four letters by Manasses; and the Address by the way (*Enodion prosphonema*). NILSSON, using the theoretical models of self-presentation of the model-author and the author’s voice that she had previously defined in detail, seeks affinities with other works of the author, such as the *Verse Chronicle* and the *Novel*. She underlines that this does not mean that they depict the real-life experiences of the real writer. However, she concludes that a writer who undertakes commissions, when he finds himself in a difficult position, he will mobilize his entire social network and will get help from his friends, but he will be mainly assisted by his literary abilities.

In the fifth chapter, NILSSON deals with questions and texts in connection to the teaching activity of Manasses. Specifically mentioned in the *Astrological poem*, *Origins of Oppian*, five *schede*, and the so-called *Sketches of the mouse*, which in her opinion probably belongs not to Theodoros Prodromos, but to Manasses. She correctly points out that the writers of the time combine their activities as rhetors, teachers and officials, and agrees with NIKOS ZAGKLAS,<sup>5</sup> who, referring to Theodoros Prodromos, notes that the environments of presentation of the texts may vary and therefore the same texts can have different functions in different environments. She concludes that the “voice” of the creator Manasses is also present in educational contexts, which should not be separated from other social or textual environments in which he presented his works.

The self-quotation and the recycling of material at a linguistic, narrative, and stylistic level that help identify the voice of the creator are the issues that concern NILSSON in the sixth chapter. She focuses on three works: the *Verse chronicle*, the *Aristandros and Kallithea* novel, and the so-called *Moral Poem*, even though the latter may not be his composition. She at-

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JöByz 22, pp. 151–168.

4. In my opinion, the kinship ties that connect John Doukas and his son Nikephoros Komnenos with the *logothetes tou dromou* Michael Hagiotheodorites, are not irrelevant. If the proposition of KONSTANTINOS BARZOS is accurate (Η Γενεαλογία των Κομνηνών, I. Thessaloniki 1984, p. 319), John Doukas, in his second marriage, married the daughter of Michael Hagiotheodorites, and mother of Nikephoros, whose death Manasses mourns. (see note 2)

5. NIKOLAOS ZAGKLAS, *Theodore Prodromos: The Neglected Poems and Epigrams* (Edition, Translation, and Commentary). Diss. Vienna. 2014, p. 76.

tempts to show the importance of the author's choices in the recycling of his own or other material, and how this same material breaks the conventions of the genre and contributes to the creation of Manasses's style.

In the seventh and final chapter, NILSSON recaps and discusses the "Occasional Writing as Creative Craft" in a more comprehensive way. She argues that the ways in which Manasses uses his texts to illustrate himself, the recipients and the object of his praise, even his enemies, by means of fictional strategies, show the connection of the real world, which is the motive for the creation of these occasional works, with the literary imaginary of the author. He is inspired by his knowledge of the Greco-Roman and biblical heritage, and creates individual compositions, with the characteristics of his own "voice". In occasional literature, fiction and reality are an intertwining game. Finally, NILSSON concludes that, overall, the literary production of Manasses can be divided into two periods: the first, late 1130 – early 1140 to 1150, and the second, 1160 until the 1170s. Accordingly, she assigns his works to one or the other of these periods.

INGELA NILSSON's approach to Manasses's world is unquestionably interesting. Scholars and readers of Medieval literature will benefit from reading this book carefully.<sup>6</sup>

#### Keywords

Byzantine literature; Constantine Manasses

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6. The editor of *The Byzantine Review* thanks Vasileios Marinis for revising the English text.