
MAROULA PERISANIDI, *Masculinity in Byzantium, c. 1000–1200: Scholars, Clerics and Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2024. 206 pp. – ISBN 978-1-00949979-8

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MAROULA PERISANIDI's latest book is a welcome and much needed addition to the growing number of studies about Byzantine gender. That its publication coincided with the appearance of a major volume edited by MATI MEYER and CHARIS MESSIS, *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and Sexuality in Byzantium* (2024), shows that research on Byzantine gender is flourishing – an important development within Byzantine Studies, shedding light on essential aspects of Byzantine society and culture that have for long remained hidden.

PERISANIDI's well-written, engaging and thought-provoking book focuses on the masculinity of two types of medieval male roles, the scholar and the cleric, in eleventh- and twelfth-century Byzantium. Specifically Byzantine clerics are compared with their Western counterpart, a shrewd decision that expands the scope and enriches the book's insights and conclusions. Employing theories of gender, posthumanism and disability, the author examines how learning, violence and animals shaped the identity of the men undertaking these male roles. As PERISANIDI convincingly shows, through their learning (which for Byzantines was, by definition, masculine) scholars could exhibit traditionally female characteristics, such as emotionality, while at the same time they could reject the male activities of hunting and fighting without compromising their maleness. Clerics, meanwhile, did not always behave as peacefully as expected. Some participated in hunting and fighting while others deserted their ecclesiastical offices to take part in battle. Intriguingly – and this is a brilliant insight of the book – in their attempt to shape their distinct masculinities both scholars and clerics looked to animals. For example, some preferred riding mules rather than horses and avoided killing and consuming animals.

PERISANIDI's case studies include three scholars – Michael Psellos (11th c.), John Tzetzes (12th c.) and Gregory Antiochos (12th c.). While a whole chapter is devoted to each of the three scholars, the clerics are bundled together in the last two chapters. In contrast to the scholars, half of the

four eponymous clerics briefly discussed in the final chapters – Eusebios of Nikomedia (8th c.), Patriarch Theophylaktos (10th), the Metropolitan Konstantinos Pantechnes (12th c.) and the eunuch bishop Niketas of Chonai (12th c.) – flourished in earlier periods. Given this chronological focus, it feels an omission not having in it a discussion of Patriarch Photios, an important scholar and cleric of the ninth century. It would have been, for example, interesting to see how the same individual performs the scholar's and the cleric's masculinities at once, and how his performances compare with those of the scholars and clerics investigated in the book.

The five chapters of *Masculinity in Byzantium* are framed by an Introduction and Conclusions, with a Bibliography and (general) Index appended. The Introduction is made up of four parts. The first briefly presents the aims of the book, its case studies and methods. The second considers the two types of masculinities investigated in the book: first clerical and then scholarly masculinity. This feels a little jarring; given that the first chapters of the book concern scholars, one would expect first the discussion of scholarly masculinity and then that of its clerical counterpart. The third part introduces the importance of animals to the formation of masculinity and, finally, the fourth section provides an outline of the book's five chapters.

The first chapter entitled 'Michael Psellos: Writing like a Man, "Throwing like a Girl"' opens with some information about this important scholar's life and education. The same practice is followed also in the next two chapters ('Who Was Psellos?', p. 18–21; 'Who Was Tzetzes?', p. 43–45; 'Who Was Antiochos?', p. 74–75). Using mainly Psellos's *encomia*, but also his *Chronographia* and letters, PERISANIDI then investigates how learning determined his self-presentation and understanding of others. She persuasively shows how the 'masculine capital' acquired through his work, education and learning, allowed Psellos to exhibit a less masculine behaviour in other aspects of male life, a fact deliciously reflected in his descriptions of hunting, warfare and emotional life. PERISANIDI's section on 'Hegemonic Masculinity and Masculine Capital' in the same chapter could be part of the Introduction, since it applies also to the other intellectuals examined in the book.

The next chapter ('Ioannes Tzetzes: A Scholar and His Animals') examines Tzetzes in relation to Psellos. As PERISANIDI shows, the two men do not differ much in their fashioning of the scholarly self. However, the focus here is on the role of animals in the scholar's self-formation. PERISANIDI rightly argues that Tzetzes's emphasis on animals and his empathy with the

natural world, as presented in his letters and *Chiliades*, challenged Byzantine 'hegemonic masculinity'. However, this reviewer is not entirely convinced that the male partridge which Tzetzes had as a pet supporting him during his illness 'effeminised our scholar' (p. 57). Concerning the composition of monodies on dead pets, this is not, as implied by PERISANIDI, a literary experiment invented by twelfth-century Byzantine authors such as Constantine Manasses and Michael Italikos (p. 58) but it's a practice stretching back to early Byzantium. Two cases in point are the epigrammes of Agathias Scholastikos on his dead partridge included in the Greek Anthology (Anth. Pal. 7, 204 and 205).

As its title suggests ('Gregorios Antiochos: Disabled Bodies and Desired Becomings'), the third chapter, my favourite of the first three, concerns Antiochos and the scholar's relation to his (disabled) body. Comparing Antiochos to the two scholars examined earlier (Psellos and Tzetzes), PERISANIDI shows him a 'much less confident scholar' (p. 73), an insecurity to a large degree connected to his poor health, which he often discusses in his writings. Antiochos questions the ideal of martial maleness by juxtaposing the scholar's weak body with the strong body of the soldier. In so doing, he puts forward the notion of the first body with which he identifies. Apart from bodily frailty, Antiochos defines the scholar also through the objects he employs for his readings and writings: the books and furniture that function in a prosthetic way allowing him to lead an independent and meaningful life.

At the center of chapter four ('Hunting Churchmen') lies the question of whether Byzantine clerics were allowed to hunt. To answer this question, PERISANIDI turns to different episodes and stories as documented in a variety of sources: chronicles, hagiographical texts, *ekphraseis* and polemical treatises. Her investigation also aims at establishing whether hunting 'created meaningful differences in the ways that laymen, clerics and monks expressed and experienced their manhood and how such differences were reflected and reinforced in different genres of sources' (p. 103). Even though the first of her two aims is fully achieved – as she shows, Byzantine clerics, in contrast to monks, did not differ from laymen as far as hunting is concerned – the second aim is not entirely fulfilled. The undertaken analysis does not sufficiently show how lay, clerical and monastic differences concerning hunting were reflected and supported through the generic conventions of a chronicle, hagiographical text or *ekphrasis*.

Based on a variety of sources – canonical, historical and hagiographical –

the last chapter ('Fighting the Good Fight') investigates clerical violence against human beings. In contrast to clerics who went hunting, clerics who killed other people were deposed. To avoid the humiliation of deposition, several clerics intending to participate in war abandoned their offices beforehand. A comparison between Western and Byzantine sources suggests that the first highlighted bloodshed, while the latter were more preoccupied with the cleric's state of mind. In general, clerics were summoned to engage in spiritual and not in physical battles. Military discourse and rhetoric, however, were often used in religious texts to present devout men's spiritual and ascetic lives. Of course, military rhetoric is employed in Byzantine hagiographical texts to describe also religious women's spirituality.

Finally, the book's Conclusions bring together in an exemplary way the book's major topics and discussions. The concluding part offers wider and comparative view points on scholarly and clerical masculinities, summarises animals' role to the construction of different Byzantine masculinities, and highlights the usefulness of posthuman approaches to Byzantine culture. PERISANIDI's conclusion that Psellos' gender expression is not as unusual as described by previous scholarship but rather part of a Byzantine understanding of scholarly masculinity is particularly illuminating.

The Bibliography is quite comprehensive. One wonders, however, why in some cases the Primary Sources include only the modern English translations and not the critical editions of the respective Byzantine texts discussed in the book (e.g. trans. of the *Life of Simeon Stylites*, the *Evergetis Typikon* and *George Akropolites' History*) – equally why the critical editions are not used in the main analysis/or whereas the critical editions are used in the main body of the text (e.g. pp. 134 and 141). Another omission is the most recent critical edition of Psellos' *Chronographia* published by DIETER RODERICH REINSCH in 2014. PERISANIDI uses ÉMILE RE-NAULD's outdated editions of 1926 and 1928 instead. The list of bibliographical sources would have profited from a more thorough proofreading. For example, there are many cases in studies by the same author that are ordered arbitrarily as opposed to the correct chronological order. To the author's and the press's credit, however, the book as a whole has very few typos.

Lastly, it is explained in 'A Note on Transliteration and Names' (p. ix) that the author has chosen to replace the terms 'Byzantium' and 'Byzantines' with 'Romanía' and 'Eastern Romans'. At the same time, the decision was taken to retain the term 'Byzantine' when referring to the historiographical

approaches to Romanía and its people throughout time. Yet it seems odd – at least to this reviewer – to find both ‘Romanía’ and ‘Byzantine’ in the same sentence (e.g. ‘Michael Psellos, one of Romanía’s most well-known scholars as well as one of few figures from the Middle Byzantine period’, p. 18).

Despite the few drawbacks, this is an important book. It contributes greatly to our understanding of Byzantine masculinities – particularly those of the scholar and the cleric, whose gendered identities constituted noteworthy alternatives to the dominant military masculinity. It is expected that this book will encourage more studies that will further improve our understanding not only of middle Byzantine male roles and identities but also of those of earlier and later periods.

Keywords

Byzantine gender; masculinity