

KRYSTINA KUBINA – ALEXANDER RIEHLE (eds), *Epistolary Poetry in Byzantium and Beyond: An Anthology with Critical Essays*. New York – London: Routledge 2021. 452 pp. – ISBN 978-0-367-75997-1

MARIA-LUCIA GOIANA – KRYSTINA KUBINA (eds), *Cult, Devotion, and Aesthetics in Later Byzantine Poetry*. Turnhout: Brepols 2024. 249 pp. – ISBN 978-2-503-61172-3

KRYSTINA KUBINA (ed.), *Poetry in Late Byzantium*. Leiden: Brill 2024. 488 pp. – ISBN 978-9-004-69967-0

• YAN ZARIPOV (zaripovyan@gmail.com)

To fully understand the last centuries of the Byzantine Empire, one must read its poetry. Three recent publications can be helpful in achieving this goal. The titles under review complement each other.

KUBINA – RIEHLE studies poems that take form of letters. The volume has a tripartite structure: introduction that gives a brief overview of writing verse letters in Byzantium and sets the stage for further research; essays that offer critical readings of individual letters as well as collections thereof; anthology that illustrates the development of epistolary poetry from Palladas to John Clajus. The contributors make a strong case for approaching verse letters as a genre in its own right. It is argued that verse letters have pragmatic function but still retain the glamour of *belles-lettres*.

GOIANA – KUBINA animates the discussion about devotional and liturgical poetry. Most chapters come with a critical edition of a neglected text that is carefully placed within the spiritual and cultural milieu. While some of the texts were intended for personal use, the majority of them were produced for the collective consumption in a church setting. Therein, centre stage is taken by hymns. Focusing on this genre, the contributors place particular emphasis on musical notation as well as metrical patterns (and irregularities). The volume is rich in prosopographic material: it details the activity of poets, scribes, and book owners.

KUBINA gives a synoptic view of poetry in the last centuries of Byzantium. The book addresses the problems of authorship, patronage and transmission of learning. It takes stock of the declining Empire's literary production through uncovering the neglected texts that were produced in Constantinople as well as in the distant corners of the Byzantine world. The authors' *instrumenta studiorum* originate largely in philology: all pay close attention

to manuscripts, meter, and imagery. At the same time, the book belongs to the genre of social history since it provides ample evidence on the life of different classes including teachers, lawyers, and prostitutes.

These are collective volumes featuring twenty-eight contributions by individual scholars or small research teams. Chapters vary in agenda, style, and ambitions, and the editors respect these differences. The main takeaway from reading the texts alongside each other is that our discipline has now adopted the concept of Late Byzantine poetry. Placed in a period between the 13th and 15th centuries, it marks a sharp departure from Komnenian literature. After 1204, the Byzantine *oikoumene* became irreversibly fragmented. This change in the political landscape calls for new approaches to literary texts. The contributors have risen to the occasion.

Each of the publications paves the way for exciting encounters with literature produced outside of Constantinople. Leaving the capital in search for literary pearls scattered across the Mediterranean is not just a leap of faith. As a bare minimum, anyone writing on poetry from the provinces needs to conduct painstaking research on the manuscript tradition and, given the uneven pace of digitalisation across libraries and archives, often travel to consult witnesses directly. Such journeys never disappoint. Consider the codicological undertaking of SKREKAS, who acknowledges the regrettable (albeit partial) disappearance of the autographs of a Macedonian bishop but produces an edition of a hymn transmitted by manuscripts now kept in Moscow and Paris.¹

The increased interest in the margins has by no means only geographical dimensions. Manuscripts, too, have their own peripheries. If one pays attention to evidence surrounding the main text, one can see that the potential for discoveries is virtually unlimited. Book epigrams, for example, can serve as credits that showcase the contribution of local elites to the propagation of learning.² In a similar manner, subheadings do not just summarise scenes but amount to narrative *oikonomia*, preparing readers for a story that is about to unfold.³ Crucially, extratextual notes provide a clue about the performative setting. The latter can take on different forms as long as the text is copied. Once intended for less formal recitals in the refectory, a set

1. DIMITRIOS SKREKAS, Neophytos, Bishop of Grevenou, a Lesser Known Fifteenth-Century Author and His Hymnographic Activity. In: GOIANA – KUBINA, pp. 185–211.

2. JULIÁN BÉRTOLA, Rewriting History in Verse in Late Byzantium: Towards a Reassessment of Ephraim of Ainos. In: KUBINA, p. 254.

3. ALBERTO RAVANI, Singing Heroes in the Time of Knights: Constantine Hermoniakos and His Iliad. In: KUBINA, pp. 278–284.

of miracle stories could be transplanted into liturgy *stricto sensu*.⁴

The greatest rewards of studying Late Byzantine poetry come with the libertinism of its language. The fusion of different registers suggests that social norms went maqloubah (upside-down). This state of affairs will excite many a researcher. There is a caveat: purporting to voiceover everyday life, an author crafts a reality that remains literary. The empirical data is there, but one often needs to reserve judgment on time, location, and identity. LAUXTERMANN's take on a collection of paraenetic poems strikes a balance between descriptive thinking and venturesome conjectures.⁵ Sifting through the lowbrow linguistic elements, LAUXTERMANN spots a reference to a nautical compass that allows him to date the collection to the early Palaiologan period. Interestingly, this crucial evidence comes as part of a periphrastic construction that occupies two lines. The self-assertion of vernacular forms the agenda of other studies, too. HINTERBERGER demonstrates that Manuel Philes' avoidance of non-classical language in the main body of his poems does not prevent vernacular words from creeping into the headings.⁶ This breach of literary etiquette opens a window into the worlds of dining, medicine, and fashion.

Appreciation for the vernacular goes hand in hand with willingness to incorporate other traditions within the Byzantine scholarly domain. Comparative research highlights common patterns of historical development of competing societies and provides insights into Byzantium's ultimate surrender to the Ottoman Turks. The Palaiologan period gives a fascinating opportunity to celebrate individuals who stood at the crossroads of civilizations and shaped the world we inhabit today. In a discussion of the poem conventionally known as the *Chronicle of the Tocco*, OSSWALD identifies the numerous features of French literature and argues that the focus on a ruler rather than his family makes this text an example of *biographie chevaleresque*.⁷ The seeping of continental elements occurs against the background of graecophone literature looking back to the very archaic

4. MARIA-LUCIA GOIANA – KRYSTINA KUBINA, *Worshipping Verse: Liturgy as Occasion in Nikephoros Kallistou Xanthopoulos's Poetry*. In: GOIANA – KUBINA, pp. 73–81.

5. MARC D. LAUXTERMANN, *Verses of Great Beauty: An Early Palaiologan Collection of Paraenetic Poems*. In: KUBINA, pp. 390–432.

6. MARTIN HINTERBERGER, *Worlds Apart? Theodore Metochites, Manuel Philes, and Stephanos Sachlikes Compared*. In: KUBINA, pp. 40–43.

7. BRENDAN OSSWALD, *Chronicle of the Tocco or Life of Carlo Tocco? A Greek Case of Biographie Chevaleresque*. In: KUBINA, pp. 306–357.

stage of its history. It is remarkable that the cultural mission of recovering ancient roots fell on shoulders of humanists whose origins were primarily Italian. The upbringing outside the Empire allowed the newly Byzantine authors to refresh the *logoi* notwithstanding the purported desire to sound old-fashioned. This paradox of twisted cultural identity is nicely explicated in RHOBY's study of verse letters of Francesco Filelfo who – through mediation of Horace – reintroduced the Sapphic stanza to address his fellow intellectuals, the Pope and the Ottoman sultan.⁸

Like many modern publications, the volumes under review aim at making their subject matter accessible to the general readership. For this reason, texts are not only critically studied but also translated in English. The standards of rendering are very high: poems remain poems. Recognizing the disobliging nature of μικρολογία, I shall indulge, however, in challenging some of the translation decisions. Let us consider a passage from a poem by Manuel Philes. Having declared hardship, Philes pleads with his addressee for help:

αὐτὸς δὲ συγγνοῦς τῷ περὶ ταῦτα θράσει –
τὴν γὰρ ἀπαράμιλλον ἐξάγεις δίκην
ἐν τοῖς καθ' ἡμᾶς ὁ κριτὴς τῶν πραγμάτων –
τὴν ψῆφον αὐτοῖς εὐπρεπῇ καθιστάνων
τὴν χρηστότητα δεῖξον ἀκτῖνος δίκην,
ρίγοῦντα Φιλῆν ζωπυροῦσαν ὀξέως.⁹

In KUBINA's translation, the passage reads as follows:

But you will excuse my insolence in this respect –
for you bring forth unrivalled justice
as a judge of our affairs –
and pronounce a fitting judgment concerning these [affairs]
by showing your kindness like a ray
that warms bitterly shivering Philes.¹⁰

Using the future tense, KUBINA presents the patron's consent to support Philes as a *fait accompli*. No matter how confident Philes was about the positive outcome of his petition, he opted for the phrasing that calls for

8. ANDREAS RHOBY, Francesco Filelfo's Verse Letters: Form, Content, and Function. In: KUBINA – RIEHLE, pp. 91–103.

9. Manuel Philes, E191. To the Marvellous Deceased Prōtostratōr. In: KUBINA – RIEHLE, p. 220, vv. 84–89.

10. Ibid., p. 221.

action (δεῖξον) rather than describes one. Trading the aorist imperative for the future indicative, KUBINA portrays Philes as more cocky than he actually was. KUBINA's disregard for αὐτός is questionable, too. The context suggests that in seeking sympathy Philes relies on the addressee's good judgment and profound understanding of human nature: the rendering of αὐτός, therefore, could be more emphatic. The last question mark to put has to do with the agreement of ὀξέως. KUBINA takes this adverb together with ῥιγοῦντα, which makes sense and aligns with poetic predilection for anastrophe. However, given that ὀξύς has the semantics of sharpness and swiftness and often qualifies the power of light, it is likely that Philes uses ὀξέως *apo koinou*. My rendering of the passage would read:

Having been privy to my insolent position in this respect –
for you deliver supreme justice
in your capacity of judge of earthly matters –
pass judgment, please, that is appropriate in this case,
and show you kindness like a ray
that will warm the shivering Philes in no time.

Some points in the commentary are debatable, too. Picking up the scene of the wine consumption during a boat party in the bucolic poem by the so-called Anonymous of Sola, BERNARD observes that it constitutes 'a very rare positive account of drinking alcohol in Byzantine poetry'.¹¹ While it is the case that the excessive drinking alongside gluttony often became the subject for satire and censure, many a poet favoured wine as one of the subtlest pleasures. In the Komnenian novels, for example, flirting over cups of wine developed into a motif that spiced up banqueting scenes and propelled the plot.¹² In this respect, wine served as an attribute of Eros, albeit a controversial one.¹³

Byzantinists are extremely fortunate in seeing these volumes published. All three provide new source material that is elucidated with clarity and elegance. Every academic library should have them.

Keywords

late Byzantine literature

11. FLORIS BERNARD, Anonymous of Sola. In: KUBINA – RIEHLE, p. 294.

12. ELIZABETH JEFFREYS, *Four Byzantine Novels*. Liverpool 2012, p. 40.

13. Cf. Christopher of Mitylene's discussion of the pros and cons of wine in a poetic diptych studied by EMILIE VAN OPSTALL. In: KUBINA – RIEHLE, pp. 138–141, 300–302.