

# Radić, Radivoj. 2014. **DRUGO LICE VIZANTIJE.**

Book Review

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OVER THE LAST DECADES, SOME OF THE BASIC premises of Byzantine studies have been reexamined. With a little push of transdisciplinarity, a significant number of researchers developed an interest in problems of social history, such as identity, gender or otherness. Moving in that direction, Serbian scholarship is richer for a publication that emphasizes one different “face” of Byzantine history, using similarity, rather than dissimilarity as a starting point for the study of a *homo Byzantinus*. The author, Radivoj Radić, professor of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, has written several books and numerous papers on late Byzantine history and society, as well as Serbian relations with the Empire. This book is a product of years of research and teaching, collecting and examining various sources on common Byzantines or distinguished members of the society in ordinary situations. In a certain sense, we might regard it as complementary with his study *Fear in late Byzantium 1180-1453*, I-II, published in 2002.

The monograph has six major thematic units, each one introduced with necessary theoretical clarifications. This structural arrangement sets a contemporary outlook on basic notions dealt with in the book against the medieval discourse so that the reader gets a clear and vivid picture of the time and its phenomena. Such a method, with a variety of images and exemplary sketches, makes *The Other Face of Byzantium* appropriate for a wider audience while remaining scholarly relevant.

Subjects that made their way into this study vary: from laughter (I), medicine (II), prosopographical notes on ordinary people (III), to agriculture (IV), understanding of time (V) and, finally, some of the fairly popular and interesting dreambooks (VI). The majority of chapters are oriented around one elaborate source which can best represent the examined topic (for example, the collection of jokes with the title *Philogelos*, the medicinal treatise from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, agricultural

encyclopedia *Geoponica* from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, or the Dreambook of Manuel II Paleologos), accompanied with numerous different bits and pieces from other Byzantine writings. All subjects are examined across genre boundaries and centuries, so the precedence is inevitably given to phenomena over in depth study of chronological or literary divergence. However, the perception of those phenomena in different social, cultural, regional or gender groups is underlined if necessary. Giving his readers a glance of Byzantine society, Radić challenges the stereotypical illusion – particularly present in Serbian scholarship, burdened with the solemnity of Orthodox heritage – in which Byzantines are limited by severe moral or religious restraints. With short reviews of the development of the discussed notions and topics, we can find the accumulation of knowledge Byzantines had about laughter, time or agriculture, and this allows us to understand to what extent their tradition matched the antiquity and where it became “originally” Byzantine. Writing a study on micro-history of the Empire is quite demanding, verging on impossible, due to the scarcity of sources after the Ottoman invasion. Having that in mind, although far less picturesque than Ladurie’s *Montaillou*, this monograph gives a quite sufficient description of details about everyday life (i.e. neighborly relations, marriage, counting of time, dream interpretation, or pregnancy maintenance).

Though social history is finding its way into Byzantine studies, for some of the problems, we have only scratched the surface – like in the case of dream interpretation and dreambooks – while the others have barely been studied at all (such as laughter in Byzantium). Serving as a step forward in this direction, and away from political history, *The Other Face of Byzantium* can be beneficial for Serbian scholarship in more than one way, pointing out the needs for future research, and, at the same time, making Byzantium more appealing to a wider audience.

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