

INTRODUCTION: Why Byzantium?¹

Review scientific paper
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THE PRESENT VOLUME IS COINCIDENTALLY published in the year of the 23rd International Congress of Byzantine studies which took place in Belgrade in August 2016.² International congresses held once every five years are for byzantinists a sort of a checkpoint of progress and current development of the scholarship in the field. This issue of *Limes Plus*, the first one dedicated to Byzantium, on a smaller scale, points to several important and more recent directions the field has been taking, particularly in terms of social history, discourse theory, and political thought.

A few months ago we were given the opportunity to prepare one issue of *Journal for Social sciences and Humanities Limes Plus* that would be dedicated to Byzantium. It was not an easy task. We had to think of an insightful contextual basis that would provide our readers with current topics discussed within the field of Byzantine studies. Also, we had to keep in mind the audience of the journal that mainly covers subjects from modern and contemporary history with strong emphasis on public policies, institutional development, and economy. Some, or even many, would pose a question – how does Byzantium fit in the context of progressive interdisciplinary studies in the field of social sciences and humanities? This peculiar friendship is not so extravagant when one takes into account the latest bibliography in the field of Byzantine studies which opened its doors to literary criticism, narratology, gender studies, and feminism. We have intentionally started with literary criticism since Byzantinists, even when they choose to deal with topics pertinent to social sciences, cannot use the same methodology, precisely be-

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2 The plenary papers from the Congress are published in: Marjanović-Dušanić ed. 2016. larisa.orlov@f.bg.ac.rs; milena.repajic@f.bg.ac.rs

cause of the source basis they have at their disposal (Kaldellis 2010, 61). This is mainly what makes us more of “literary deconstructionists” than “sociologists” but it still does not prevent us from reading our sources through the lenses of various familiar social disciplines that deal with people in diverse surroundings, whether such diversities derive from chronological, ethnic, gender or any other similar discursive frame that scholars choose in order to set their research within a particular context. For a non-byzantinist reader of this volume, a short introduction about the reasons the field only recently opened its doors to not-so-recent theoretical frameworks might be needed. It will maybe further illustrate the importance of a Byzantine issue of a journal for social studies and humanities.

Byzantine studies are, in a way, a younger and neglected sibling of both classical and medieval studies. This fact is due to the still extant prejudices towards Byzantium as a static, retrograde and isolated society, falling short to its classical Graeco-Roman antecedents when it comes to intellectual and artistic achievements, while also lacking the freshness brought about by new barbarian settlements in the medieval West. That tradition had started with Edward Gibbon in the late 18th century (Gibbon 1776–1789), and it was reinforced during the 19th and 20th centuries when the otherness of Eastern Europe, mirrored in its “despotism” (particularly Russian) and “backwardness” (the Ottoman Empire and modern states and nations emanating from it), was invented³ and its origins sought for in its medieval, Byzantine past. One of the most acknowledged medievalists and post-modernists, Aaron Gurevich, a Soviet dissident even wrote an article explaining why he was not a byzantinist from this very standpoint, in a volume of *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* in honor of his friend and one of the most highly esteemed Soviet byzantinists, Alexander Kazhdan (Gurevich 1992). Eastern European scholars, on their hand, readily adopted this basis of their otherness, or exclusivity, which found its best expression in the influential study of Dimitri Obolensky named indicatively *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500–1453*. (Obolensky 1971), particularly popular among historians in Russia and in the Balkans.

Political background notwithstanding, byzantinists themselves contributed in no small part to the peripheral position of the field and its virtual invisibility in broader scholarly discourse. Somewhat ironically, the very traits commonly associated with Byzantine society – isolationism, resistance to change, traditionalism

6 | 3 A brilliant and groundbreaking study about inventing Eastern Europe: Wolf 1994.

and obedience to intellectual authorities – characterized the Byzantine studies in the past century (and to some extent persevere even today). Therefore modern tendencies in social sciences and humanities have almost completely bypassed the field until recently, and a positivist and historicist outlook on Byzantine history is still prevalent in peripheral environments.

It is at the crossroads of these two problems – the underlying political and culturological frame and the development of the Byzantine studies – that the *why* of this Byzantine issue of *Limes Plus* lies. We find that it is beneficial, if not necessary, to express the issues pertinent to modern Byzantine studies in a journal unusually conceived from a perspective of classic Byzantine studies, to present them to a wider and more diverse audience, and to regard them as an integral part of the scholarly discussion in social sciences and humanities. A similar attempt was made several years ago with one Byzantine issue of the *Journal of Social History* (*Godišnjak za društvenu istoriju* XVIII/2, 2011), a journal dealing primarily with 20th-century topics, and it proved to be a success. This time around, however, the issue is in English, and more accessible. It comprises contributions from both Serbian (Marjanović, Repajić) and foreign scholars, as well as book reviews of recent titles published abroad (Labuk on Miller–Nesbitt 2014) and in Serbia (Anđelković on Radić 2014), thus placing contemporary Serbian scholarship within a broader horizon of modern Byzantine studies. This is particularly important since conservatism is still largely present in the Byzantine studies in Serbia, carrying the heavy burden of George Ostrogorsky's legacy both as a blessing and as a "curse". On the one hand, Ostrogorsky established Serbian scholarship more firmly on the world map of Byzantine studies, opening important and diverse research topics. On the other hand, while leaving some big shoes to fill, he had incidentally set a research pattern, a sort of a comfort zone for his students and successors, in both topics (late Byzantium and Serbian-Byzantine relations from 13th to 15th century in particular), and methodology.⁴ The "national" or Slavic perspective on Byzantine history carries a specific set of preconceptions of the Byzantine heritage as a given in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, mainly reflected through Orthodoxy and political conservatism. Therefore, it perpetuates the idea of Byzantium as the solemn, traditional society that is defined through its despotic ruler and the authority

⁴ That is not to say, of course, that Serbian scholars in the field have not made significant contributions to Byzantine studies. For an overview see Pirivatrić 2010.

of Christianity, while using it as a “melting-pot” for extracting Serbian “national history”,⁵ and focusing on “history proper”, defined in factual terms.

For all the aforementioned reasons, we decided to take up the uneasy task of editing an issue of a journal. First of all, although many might find it a *locus communis* of the editorial register, we did lack the necessary time that this kind of project requires. However, we did not lack methodological freshness or thematic diversity. The range of topics goes from more traditional political, diplomatic history (Lau), through political thought (Repajić) and literary transmission (Marjanović), to sociological subjects such as threat discourse (Raum) and conjugal violence (Messis–Kaldellis)

We are fortunate to have in our volume the first study on conjugal violence in Byzantium that will, hopefully, open up a new field of scholarly discussion (Messis and Kaldellis). Apart from being a completely new research topic, the methodology that arises from this exploration necessitates a brief overview. As already mentioned, sociological topics are rather problematic when applied to Byzantium since we do not operate with a wide range of statistical data that would enable us in our search for “authentic experience” of the Byzantines (cf. Kaldellis 2011). In greatest part, we are faced with literary constructions that serve specific discursive agendas. Byzantine women in literature (mainly in hagiographies and histories) actually represent symbols of specific patterns of behavior that function as a rhetorical tool for transmitting peculiar messages.⁶ They are not reflections of social “reality” at large. Therefore, our knowledge of women and their lives in Byzantium appears rather vague and based on questionable methodological ap-

5 Similar development can be traced in historiographies in most of the states and nations emanating from Byzantium, see Kaldellis 2006.

6 For instance, a brilliant analysis of Robin Cormack on women that are featured as symbols in the age of iconoclasm, shows how the story of the outburst of iconoclasm changed throughout time, and how characters of that story changed its attire (mob – Maria the Patrician – Theodosia the Nun) depending on the author’s discourse. (Cormack 1997) More recently, Kaldellis has analysed a case of famous widow Danelis that lived in the Peloponnese in the 9th century, and helped Basil’s rise to power, in a way that this particular relationship was actually modeled on relationship between king Solomon and the queen of Sheeba, and all for purposes of addressing the issue of Basil’s legitimacy, Kaldellis 2010, 63; also, Anagnostakis and Kaldellis 2014; Kaldellis 2016, 298. Leonora Neville has shown how patterns of the same cultural logic that operates in Prokopios History of Wars concerning women’s speeches and their rhetorical role were applied by later writers of the XI and XIIth centuries, namely Psellos and Bryennios (Neville 2010).

proaches, since we do not face women's experience but read mainly about men's perceptions of women.⁷ On the other hand, as Kaldellis has pointed out in his analysis of methodological challenges concerning the study of women and children in Byzantium (Kaldellis 2010), the most coherent social category of which we read from Byzantine sources are saints and nuns, which presents a problem *per se*: "it is unfortunate that we know more about those who were the least representative of Byzantine life" (Kaldellis 2010, 61). Yet, he admits that the texts that provide us with many information on saints and nuns, that is, hagiographies, are actually a rich source for seeing the women and children in their everyday life, since all these stories, when deprived of miracle narrative, were placed in specific scenery that unintentionally reveals the lives of women and children (Kaldellis 2010, 65–66). Therefore, apart from approaching our sources with a different mindset,⁸ it is necessary to understand that what we have in front of us are literary constructions of the past, and that sensationalism inside those stories should not lead us astray to think that this is what Byzantine society actually looked like, but to understand that characters functioned as symbols (cf. Kaldellis 2010). We should put our efforts into searching for the recurring motives present in the stories that deal with women, children or any other 'marginal' groups, although designation of women as the "other" appears problematic to some extent, since women were, after all, "active agents of social change and eventually, our sources do not document the entire story" (Smythe 1997, 149).

Apart from the problem of effectively applying sociological terms in order to reconstruct social "reality" of Byzantium, another challenge lies in understanding

7 This can be considered a recurrent problem of the gender studies approach toward Byzantium, see James 1997. However Kaldellis has suggested moving toward the study of the "construction of motherhood in Byzantium" that dwells on a solid source basis, but it has not been touched upon yet. (Kaldellis 2010, 67). This could be a fresh outlook on the issue defined and discussed by Barbara Hill in her several articles on the Komnenian women (Hill 1996; Eadem 1997). Hill's attention was focused on the 'ideology of widowed mother', as a prominent category in which women could exercise power. However, problematic notion of 'ideology' with regard to its epistemological implications should be replaced by 'social construction of motherhood' for example, since our source material gives us chance to analyze the role and influence of Byzantine mothers and their relations to their children in the broader context of social relations, aristocratic power struggles, transmission of property and exertion of authority within the family nucleus. Cf. also Haldon 2009; Laiou 2009.

8 Trying to overcome the ossified attitude that we cannot reach the "women's experience" since all we have is a man's voice.

the relation between the sources and the data extracted from them. The article on conjugal violence in this volume meticulously analyzes two main normative corpora that regulated social relations in Byzantium – the State and the Church. A diverse source material was presented concisely in order to show the potential of this new field of investigation, to pinpoint several issues when approaching imperial laws and their application – the inevitable incongruity of theory and praxis. In addition, hagiographies were introduced as a narrative landscape in which literary constructions of violence featured as patterns of recurrent cultural logic.⁹ This study gives an insightful reading of many issues of greatest concern to us today – what was considered conjugal violence by law – what was tolerable and what was sanctioned? Were men and women subjected to the same fines, and was their violence subjected to different sanctions on the basis of the gender of the perpetrator? How were these social *realia* transmitted into fiction for didactic purposes, and adapted as new Christian rhetorical tropes for women’s place in the Christian *oikos*? What are the patterns of the violent men and violent women presented in the Byzantine literature?

We are still on the path of modern sociological theory with the second paper in this volume, Theresia Raum’s work on the threat discourse in the reign of Herakleios. It is a thought-provoking study by a young scholar that offers a different point of view on the “make it or break it” moment for the Eastern Roman Empire that is the early 7th century. Herakleios’ reign is commonly regarded as the starting point of “Byzantium proper”, i. e. medieval Byzantium, and the end of Late Antiquity.¹⁰ The territorial losses, administrative restructuring through the installment of the thematic system, the virtual disappearance of Latin from the public administration, all constitute for a “time of epoch-making changes”, as Raum put it. She uses modern sociological theories about threat discourse and “crisis management” (particularly the work of Frie and Meier 2014) as a framework for investigating the ways in which Herakleios’ regime communicated and overcame the crisis brought about by foreign invasions and internal strife. Raum comes to a somewhat provocative, but plausible conclusion that one of the main reasons for Herakleios’

9 Charis Messis has made significant contribution to the subject, and is working on a wide scope of questions regarding hagiography and sexuality. See for instance Messis 2012. on a particularly interesting subject of the so-called *Laws of the Homerites*; see also Messis 2014b on erotic dreams in Byzantine literature, particularly hagiography, as well as his seminal study on eunuchs in Byzantium (Messis 2014a).

10 For the period see Haldon 1990, Louth 2008.

success, as opposed to the failure of his predecessor Maurikios at the turn of the 7th century, was the establishment of the threat discourse which created a “bond of trust” between the emperor and the people and a common consent on the course of action that was to be taken.

In addition to its relevance for the research of Herakleios’ reign, this paper is an important contribution to the study of Byzantine rhetoric and goes along the road that has recently been mapped. Rather than dismissing rhetoric as mere “imperial propaganda”, Raum approaches it as a way of communicating politics and gaining popular consent for potentially risky and unpopular measures.¹¹ Since *epideictic* (display) oratory was essentially only of the three kinds of rhetoric (display, judicial, political) surviving the end of Late Antiquity, the persuasive aim of Byzantine rhetoric and its political relevance have been downplayed.¹² Scholarship on Byzantine rhetoric thus mainly focuses on its stylistic features and the importance of rhetorical tools in shaping texts.¹³ Addressing the immediate social and political impact of rhetorical texts (a fluctuant category itself) is all the more important in the context of the current debate about the allocation and exercise of power in Byzantium, the character of imperial authority and the nature of emperor-subjects (or citizens) relationship.¹⁴ Raum convincingly argues that the emperor had to communicate his policies to the people and win their support in order not only to achieve his goals but to maintain his power. This case-study, while not addressing the current scholarly discussion directly, further challenges the already broached idea of Byzantine “imperial autocracy”

Another issue that arises from the recent reconsideration of the very basis of the Byzantine society is the severely understudied question of political thought in the Eastern Roman Empire, a sort of “gray area” of Byzantine studies. Thus we

11 For a similar view of immediacy of Byzantine oratory and its political relevance see an old but indispensable analysis of three speeches of John Mauropous in the 1040s by Lefort 1976.

12 See Hunger 1981, 37; Kennedy 1983, 1–27; *Ibid* 1994, 61–62 as most notable and explicit examples, but this view permeates studies of Byzantine rhetoric in general. For the challenging of this view and the insistence on the persuasive character of epideictic rhetoric in Byzantium and in general, see Pernot 1993, Webb 2003.

13 Extraordinary progress has been made in this regard in the last couple of decades. The bibliography is vast, we will only point to the important volume on rhetoric in Byzantium here (Jeffreys ed. 2003).

14 Recently triggered by Kaldellis’ study named tentatively *The Byzantine Republic* (Kaldellis 2015, with references to older scholarship).

move from sociology to political theory and the astute study of the political philosophy of the greatest Byzantine thinker, Michael Psellos (Milena Repajić). Repajić makes an attempt at exploring Psellos' political views in his programmatic work, the *Chronographia*, as a comprehensive expression of political philosophy, rather than a reflection of his social and political "biases", particularly of his alleged Constantinopolitan and "civilian" bias. Scholarship on Psellos is vast, particularly in the last four decades, the fact reflected in a round table dedicated to various aspects of Psellos studies on this year's Congress.¹⁵ Within the last few years, two studies on Psellos saw the light of day: Papaioannou's seminal work on his rhetorical persona (Papaioannou 2013), and Lauritzen's book on his depiction of characters in the *Chronographia* (Lauritzen 2013). His political philosophy, however, received virtually no scholarly attention, apart from the groundbreaking study by Kaldellis more than 15 years ago (Kaldellis 1999). Although it is cited in every work dedicated to Psellos, the ideas presented in Kaldellis' book were not widely accepted nor further developed in scholarship. Part of the reason for that lies in the provocativeness of his conclusions, but the more important issue is the unwillingness of the field to dwell on the topic of Byzantine political thought.

The scarcity of research on the political theory of the Byzantines is mostly due to the still predominant (although no longer openly expressed) opinion that the thinkers of New Rome did not really develop comprehensive political theories, given that they were living in an autocratic and theocratic regime that was not to be questioned. If they did express some ideas on the way of governance and the functioning of the political system, those are dismissed either as a reflection of immutable "imperial ideology", or as reiterating their classical models and "anti-quarianism" without any real contemporary relevance. However, Byzantines could and, in fact, they did think (and write) about their political system, its faults and its advantages, and the ways in which it could have been improved. Some progress has recently been made in recognizing the Byzantines' political thought as original and relevant, mostly by the students of the 11th and 12th centuries.¹⁶

Exploring Psellos' political thought, and regarding him as a serious thinker is especially important given that he consistently insisted on the duty of an intellectual, a philosopher that he was, to act as a political man, and perceived his two-fold

15 Moore 2005. makes an overview of both Psellos' works and scholarship on Psellos by the beginning of the 21st century.

12 | 16 See for instance Magdalino 1983, Krallis 2006, Matheou 2016, to name only few.

education of a philosopher and a rhetor primarily as relevant to the political life. Following the argument set in Kaldellis' *The Argument of Psellos "Chronographia"* (Kaldellis 1999), Repajić stresses the importance of the political (not merely daily political) discourse in his *Chronographia* as the cornerstone of the metanarrative he weaves. She further develops a literary reading of Psellos' characters, since many of his deeper political views are refracted through character descriptions and types of personalities he creates in this literary masterpiece – the wise counselor, the clever general, the people – or the mob.¹⁷ It is, therefore a small contribution to the history of Byzantine political thought and a step towards reexamining Byzantine writers as thinkers on their own merits, and as more than representatives of political alliances or social groups they belonged to.

For the readers more comfortable with the traditional history we offer a retrospect of a turbulent third decade of the XII century and first part of John II Komnenos' rule with valuable consideration of non-Byzantine sources and non-Anglo-Saxon historiography. It is important to note that this year was marked by a crucial publication on the reign of John II Komnenos in a form of volume of collected essays that deal with various aspects of John's reign (Bucossi and Rodriguez Suarez, eds. 2016). The title of the volume perfectly describes the state of contemporary historiography on John's reign: *In the shadow of father and son*. It seems that the time is ripe for a genuine reevaluation of John II Komnenos' reign, although important progress on this issue has already been made a decade ago.¹⁸ Unfortunately, English-speaking scholarly environment has not been conversant with the reach of Stanković's study, wherefore the Komenian epoch, and mainly the image of John II Komnenos still remains in the shadow of his father and son. The present paper suitably summarizes the sources that were used for the reconstruction of John's reign and their agendas and draws attention to "non-Byzantine, non-Constantinopolitan and not-Emperor focused views on events". The use and the value of "other" sources in our reconstruction of the past, has been recently pointed to by Kaldellis: "not do their narratives flesh out areas overlooked in the Greek sources, they often independently confirm or refute them" (Kaldellis 2016, 305). Of course, all these sources are also replete with their own discursive agen-

17 For her PhD thesis Repajić studied the characters of Psellos' *Chronographia*, their literary representation and the personal and political implications of Psellos' accounts of his contemporaries (Repajić 2016)

18 Pathbreaking study on the Komnenoi by Stankovic 2006.

das, but they still present an indispensable source for us, and in particular, as Lau aims to show, concerning the chronology of the turbulent first decade of John II Komnenos rule.

Taking mid-1120s as a subject for his case study, Lau emphasizes the importance of the holistic approach to John Komnenos' policies in favor of particularism in researching Byzantine bilateral relations with different foreign nations or rulers, in order to fully grasp the imperial policies and challenges that the emperor faced. Particularly important in the context of this volume's geographical setting, he makes some important notes on the place of Serbian polities (Raška and Duklja) in the Byzantine, or rather a Komnenian system of power in the Balkans and the Mediterranean. Investigating medieval Serbian history within its Byzantine context, particularly in the 12th and 13th centuries has been the axis of research endeavors of a group of byzantinists in Serbia in the last couple of years.¹⁹ Medieval studies in Serbia have long suffered from isolationism, searching for distinctly and originally Serbian, "national" specificities, burdened with national, even nationalistic discourse. This quest for the authentic and autarchic (reflected mainly in the glorious event of Stefan Nemanja's gaining of "independence" from Byzantium, a misleading and anachronistic concept) has set Serbian medieval history in a sort of spatial and temporal vacuum and left it on the sidelines of Byzantine and Medieval studies.

An entirely new approach to the study of the medieval Balkans is needed, focusing on the ways in which Byzantine emperors exerted their power in the peninsula, as well as the means local rulers had at their disposal to negotiate their place in the complex diplomatic game for which the Byzantines set the rules. "National histories" are in this regard an outdated and limiting concept which inevitably leads to decontextualizing and misunderstanding of the driving forces of the political, social, and cultural development of the region. Significant progress has recently been made in rethinking the place of Serbia within the wider Byzantine and Mediterranean framework, with regard to politics, political ideas, literature, and art.²⁰

19 Historians, art historians, classicists and philologists gathered around the project *Christian Culture in the Balkans in the Middle Ages: Byzantine Empire, Serbs and Bulgarians from the 9th to the 15th century*. See also Stanković, ed. 2016.

20 Politics: Stanković 2013, Ibid 2015; art: Erdeljan 2011, Ibid 2013, Stevović 2010, Ibid 2011; literature and political ideas: Orlov–Repajić 2013.

One of such contributions is the last paper in this volume, Dragoljub Marjanović's work on the use of the term "thrice-accursed" in Byzantine and Serbian medieval literature. Through the study of just one term, Marjanović offers a glimpse into the long and rich literary tradition that Byzantines inherited, its adaptability, and finally, the immense influence those layers of thought and meaning had on Serbian medieval literature. Exploring the semantic range of the term *triskataratos*, its usage from Demosthenes to Constantine Manasses, its appropriation by the Christian writers and finally translation and transmission of the meanings it conveyed into Slavic languages and literature, he demonstrated the complexity of cultural and linguistic exchange in the Byzantine world. Furthermore, he dwells on the new significance the term gained in Serbian medieval hagiography, highly political in its essence. This study shows just how important it is to observe medieval Serbia through Byzantine lenses and how thorough the impact of Byzantine culture, and its religious and ideological discourse was. Further study of the transmission and appropriation of discursive patterns and the ways of communicating ideas is a path to take in examining medieval Serbian literature, and society in general, instead of speaking in terms of the loose notion of Byzantine "influence". Rather than mapping Biblical and patristic quotes and explicating their atemporal Christian meanings (a necessary but already quite exhausted subject, most extensively dealt with in Marjanović-Dušanić 1997), we ought to put Serbian literature (and art) in the proper socio-cultural setting. Over the last few decades, we dragged the Byzantines out of the celestial sphere and placed them into their own earthly world. It is the time we did the same for their contemporaries in Serbia, and in the Balkans in general.

In the spirit of creating a volume that would serve as a window into modern Byzantine studies for non-Byzantinists, an insight into the "making and re-making of Byzantium", we deemed it useful to include two book reviews (Labuk, Anđelković). The reviewed studies illustrate the new paths Byzantine studies are taking, in general, and in Serbia particularly. *The Walking Corpses* (Miller and Nesbitt 2014) is a thorough study of leprosy in the Middle Ages, both in Byzantium and in the West, thus representing an attempt at including Byzantine history in the wider medieval framework, while *The Other Face of Byzantium* (Radić 2014) presents one of the first attempts in Byzantine studies in Serbia to show that other, not-so-solemn face of Byzantium to both the scholarly and the general audience.

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