

MILAN VUKAŠINOVIĆ, *Subjects and Space in Roman and Serbian Lands: Ideology and Worldmaking in the Thirteenth Century* (Edinburgh Byzantine Studies). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2026. 284 pp. – ISBN 978-1-3995-0720-2

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Here is a complex and innovative book which demands careful reading. Its underlying premise seems to be that written records constitute, in and of themselves, the past which scholars study.¹ This does away with the customary pairing of ‘representation’ and ‘reality’: what one used to call ‘primary sources’ are quite simply the actual stuff of history. The opposition between socio-economic ‘base’ and ideological ‘superstructure’ is likewise cancelled: political dominance is maintained not by economic means but through verbal discourse. Discourse grants or denies individuals their capacity to feel, reason, and act (subjecthood) and assigns a hierarchically marked place to each of them.²

VUKAŠINOVIĆ sets out to examine certain ‘discursive remains of the past’ (p. 249), both ‘literature’ and ‘documents’, written in Greek and Slavonic between the years 1204 and 1261. The historic significance of these two dates is obvious, but the book does not explain how ‘ideology and world-making’ at that particular time differed from those in, say, the twelfth or fourteenth centuries. Even synchronic comparisons are rare.³ The author elegantly moves from one text to another, sometimes coming to the same item twice in order to examine it, in turn, from the perspectives of subject formation and space constitution. His book’s episodic structure is intentional: ‘The goal of my study was to put forward a methodological proposal, rather than (re)create a coherent narrative of the period’ (p. 250). ‘Perhaps,

1. E.g., ‘Such a group of Roman soldiers... might have well existed. But the patriarch’s narrative, as a rare trace of their existence, is what allows us to assume they existed in the first place. They cannot be separated from the narrative form that this text accords them’ (p. 35).

2. E.g., ‘This document makes a political intervention by turning a great number of individuals into subjects, by bestowing on them a specific subject position’ (p. 35).

3. E.g., ‘These oscillations between the plural and the singular [in a Serbian *vita* of St Simeon Nemanja] are reminiscent of the ones employed by the members of ideological state apparatuses in Nicaea and Epiros’ (p. 136).

then, writing in fragments – or writing in the middle, without conclusions – could make us sit with the horror’ of current events in Palestine (p. x).

Analysis is carried out with admirable competence⁴ and great sensitivity to linguistic features such as impersonal vs. personal narrative, the choice of pronouns, varying forms of address, and shifts in verbal tense or mood. Here, for instance, is how a verse epitaph (of uncertain authorship) for Irene, deceased wife of Emperor John Vatatzes, is seen to subtly legitimise imperial power:

Ἐμὸν βλέπων ἐνταῦθα τάφον, ὦ ξένε,
μὴ παροδεύσης τοῦτον ὡς κοινὸν τάφον·
κρύπτει γὰρ ἔνδον οὐκ ἀνώνυμον νέκυν...
Ἐγὼ βασιλὶς Ῥωμαΐδος τῆς νέας
προπατορικὸν εὐτυχοῦσα τὸ κράτος...
ἐκ μητρικῆς δὲ νηδύος καὶ τοῦ τόκου
ἔλαχον εὐθὺς τοῦ κράτους τὰς ἐγγύας
καὶ βασιλικοῖς ἐστολίσθην συμβόλοις
καὶ τοῦ στέφους κληροῦχος ὡς καὶ τοῦ κράτους
ἐκ τῶν βρεφικῶν ἐγκατέστην σπαργάνων...

Historians have to live with the fact that out of four subjects needed to tell the story of the empress’s life and death, two (the author and the stranger/narratee) remain completely indeterminable and impossible to pin down to human bodies, while that of the narrator is ‘fictional’ in at least two ways. The narrator was dead at the time of writing and perpetually present in a potential inscription. As such, her voice could serve as an undying link between the power that she was born to (her father) and the one that she married (her husband). It is through her perpetual absence that the emperor/focalizer was established as imperial, beautiful, loving, victorious and sad, while any literate stranger could potentially and unwittingly participate in his legitimation (p. 54).

A great weakness of VUKAŠINOVIĆ’s method is that it ‘flattens’ the past and ultimately dehumanises it. I do not see how this can be reconciled with his personal belief in ‘a world of liberation and justice for all’ (p. x).⁵ On

4. The single mis-translation I spotted was ‘when the clock struck midnight’ for *полунощи же бывшу* (p. 131). The latter is dative absolute meaning ‘when it was midnight’ or simply ‘at midnight’; there were no mechanical clocks in thirteenth-century Serbia.

5. ‘Especially for those of us who have only been able to read of such a world in stories’,

the subject of justice, John Apocaucus, Metropolitan of Naupactus in the early thirteenth century, relates:

Αὐριλιόνης τις, Ῥωμαίων ἄποικος, ὄνομα Κωνσταντῖνος... κατὰ χρόνον τὸν πέρις, Βλασίαν... παρθένον οὖσαν καὶ νέαν, ἀπερχομένην ὑδρεύσασθαι ἀπὸ τῆς ἑγγιστά που πηγῆς, κατασχὼν καὶ περὶ τινὰ ῥαγάδα γῆς ἀγαγὼν, ἔνθα βοήθειαν ἔσεσθαι ποθεν τῇ Βλασίᾳ ὁ Κωνσταντῖνος οὐκ ᾔετο, ἀλλ' οὐδὲ φωνούσης ἀκουσθῆναι ὑπὸ τινος, τὴν παρθενικὴν ἐκεῖσε πυλίδα τῆς Βλασίας ἀνέωξε· ἐξ ἐκείνου δὲ ὡς αὐτῇ περιέτυχεν, ἐπάγων βίαν ἐμίγνυτο, ἕως ποιήσας ἐγκύμονα καὶ παῖδα ταύτης ἀπέτεκε.⁶

Upon reading this, one cannot but feel terribly sorry for the victim – which is what Apocaucus and his suffragan bishop felt, too (καὶ περιωδύνως μὲν διετέθημεν ἄμφω). Unable to sit with the horror or deal with the thug themselves, the two churchmen wrote a letter referring the girl's (presumably illiterate) father to the secular authorities (πρὸς τὸν πανευκλεέστατον πρωτοβιστιάριον καὶ πανουκειότατον τῷ κραταιῷ Κομνηνῷ). This letter is the actual text which has come down to us and upon which VUKAŠINOVIĆ puts the following interpretation: 'Apokaukos instituted intersubjective solidarity, by diminishing the agency and accountability of the perpetrator and by relegating the case of excessive violence to the part of the legal system that could respond to it' (p. 108).

Another cleric featured in the book is Jacob, Archbishop of Bulgaria, a younger contemporary of Apocaucus. A short biographical sketch (pp. 54–55)⁷ is followed by a survey of his small literary output comprising oratory and occasional verse. Remarkably, these are dedicated to the Emperor of Thessalonica, to his arch-rival the Emperor of Nicea, and to the father of Michael VIII, future liberator of Constantinople. It is unlikely that the archbishop expected some kind of direct material reward for his writings. In a general way, however, they solicited the benevolence of secular authorities toward him and his Church. By demonstrating his skill with words, they also marked him as a member of the cultured upper class, worthy of occupying a position of authority. In this, Jacob was not all that different from us modern academics: we, too, depend on the sponsorship of the state

VUKAŠINOVIĆ adds. If I understand it correctly, this must refer to his grandparents who experienced the real thing under the enlightened rule of Marshal Tito.

6. The text goes on to describe in detail the grievous bodily harm inflicted by the rapist and his associates upon the girl's father and brother-in-law.

7. VUKAŠINOVIĆ does not believe in 'the death of the author'.

and of enlightened capitalists, and we aspire to being, if not bishops, then tenured university professors. VUKAŠINOVIĆ's monograph amply demonstrates that he is a very competent scholar deserving a successful academic career.

Keywords

historical methodology; discourse analysis; Byzantine literature; Serbian hagiography