

DEREK KRUEGER, *Monastic Desires: Homoeroticism, Homophobia, and the Love of God in Medieval Constantinople*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2026. 338 pp. – ISBN 978-1-009-64833-2

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In medieval Arabic poetry, monasteries are said to be packed with good looking boys. In one of his more famous poems, Abū Nuwās (d. 814) professes his love for a novice:

By the baptistery of the Old Monastery
the catholicos and the bishops,
By Simeon, John, and Jesus,
by St Sergius and the merciful priest,
(...)
By St Mary and the Resurrection,
and the host and the aged wine,
(...)
In veneration of you I journey to St Sergius
at al-Nūhabār monastery, then to Fīq monastery.
(...)
Though you scorn and disobey me,
you grace every convent and every feast,
And all those Muslims who love you
proclaim gratitude to Christians as their creed.¹

The monastery as a cloud cuckoo land of free wine and lovely boys tells more about Abū Nuwās and his audience than it does about what actually went on in Byzantine monasteries, but as the book under review makes clear, same-sex relations of some sort naturally occur in all-male (or all-female, for that matter) environments.

Let me begin by saying that this is a marvellous book. It centers on the divine erotics of Symeon the New Theologian, but also discusses the homophobia of George the Monk, the obsession with gay sex in tenth-century

1. This translation combines the readings of two recent renderings into English: DANA SAJDI, *From Diyārāt to Ziyārāt*. *Journal of Arabic Literature* 53 (2022) pp. 216–245, at 216–217 and HILARY KILPATRICK (ed.), *Al-Shābushtī: The Book of Monasteries*. New York 2023, pp. 271–273.

hagiography and the confessions of a ‘sodomite’ in the *Life of Nephon* (BHG 1371z), as well as the seriously understudied ascetic chapters of Niketas Stethatos, Symeon’s self-declared pupil and biographer. As convincingly argued and exemplified by KRUEGER, a sense of queerness pervaded monastic experience and tinged monastic discourse despite the strictures on gay sex. Symeon’s truly magnificent hymns, which celebrate his rapturous encounters with God, are probably the best example of this. If I am allowed to quote myself, ‘the concept of eros (...) stands for the fullness of God’s grace, the divine light that reveals itself to Symeon’s sinful self and fills his body with infinite love. This love is reciprocal; the street-car named desire runs full-steam in both directions. He loves and is loved. Although this passionate love affair involves two males, it is mostly presented in innocuous heteroerotic terms: Symeon or Symeon’s soul (ψυχή – feminine in Greek) is the bride and God is the groom. But there are more daring passages in which Symeon retains his masculinity while still casting himself in the role of God’s loved one’ (such as, for instance, the incredibly beautiful Hymn 16).² Central to Symeon’s theology of queerness is *theosis*, deification, which makes the sanctified body the locus of beauty and desire.

Symeon’s religious love poetry is without parallel in Byzantium. The great PAUL MAAS once said about Hymn 10: ‘Die Schlußzeilen sind unter den fast 150000 byzantinischen Versen, die ich gelesen habe, für mein Gefühl die schönsten’.³ These are the lines he thought were superb:

νύξ μ’ ἐχώρισεν ἀδελφοῦ γλυκυτάτου
τὸ ἄτμητον φῶς τῆς ἀγάπης τεμοῦσα,

‘Night has parted me from my beloved brother, separating the inseparable light of love.’ The poetry is indeed sublime, deeply moving, evoking the mystery of love and loss in two lines of great beauty, but as so often with Symeon, it raises the question whether such an attachment between two males does not run counter to the rules of monastic life. Is love ever purely ‘spiritual’? KRUEGER’s study does not offer a straightforward answer, but greatly helps in teasing out the ambiguities of divine eros in Symeon’s writ-

2. MARC D. LAUXTERMANN, *Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres: Texts and Contexts*, II. Vienna 2019, pp. 197–202.

3. PAUL MAAS, *Aus der Poesie des Mystikers Symeon*. In: ALBERT M. KOENIGER (ed.), *Beiträge zur Geschichte des christlichen Altertums und der byzantinischen Literatur*: Festgabe Albert Ehrhard. Bonn 1922, pp. 328–341, at 341.

ings, the tensions between spirit and flesh, love of God and earthly desire, the deified body and this mortal coil of ours.

As KRUEGER rightly emphasizes throughout the book, Symeon the Pious (Symeon's spiritual father), Symeon himself, and Niketas Stethatos are of the opinion that the process of deification affects more than the soul alone: to become like Christ, who was wholly man, also involves the body. This is why the sinful self needs to be purified through tears of repentance, a bodily fluid that washes away the stains of sin. In the writings of these Neo-Stoudites, the body figures heavily both as a cesspit of sin and as a locus of spiritual beauty. As KRUEGER points out, the language used by these three quite often does not shy away from obscenity: there is a lot of masturbation, ejaculation, and penetration, sometimes couched in metaphors, but sometimes pretty straightforward. And the penis plays a major role as one of the members of Christ, pure and guileless, and therefore not to be ashamed of.

In reading between the lines and discovering a queer discourse, there is always the danger of reading too much into the texts under scrutiny, and there are passages where I think KRUEGER is overinterpreting the Greek. A good example is Niketas Stethatos' ascetic chapter 1.21 (PG 120: 861), which deals with the topic of the sense of touch:

Ὅταν οὖν μὴ χρειωδῶς προσψαύσειέ τινος [sc. ἡ ἀφή], ἔτι προσπάσχουσα ταῖς λειότησι, σαλεύεσθαι τὸν νοῦν ὑπὸ λογισμῶν ἐμπαθῶν ἀπεργάζεται· ὅταν δὲ κατὰ χρεῖαν τὴν ἀναγκαίαν τῇ φύσει, ταῖς ἀπαλότῃσιν ἀποταξαμένη καὶ τὴν αἴσθησιν ὑπερκύψασα, οὐκ εἴωθεν ὑποσαίνειν τὰ τῆς ψυχῆς αἰσθητήρια.

KRUEGER's translation reads (pp. 215–216): 'When one touches something unnecessarily, still addicted to its smoothness, passionate thoughts perturb the intellect. But whenever [one touches anything] in accordance with proper usage, having specially assigned 'what is necessary for nature' [that is: the penis] to softness, and having risen above sensation, it does not tend to seduce the sense organs of the soul'. In his commentary, he avers that 'the necessity for [or: of] nature' is an euphemism for male genitalia in Classical Greek; but it is the word φύσις itself that may stand for 'penis' and, in Aristophanes, the expression τὰς τῆς φύσεως ἀνάγκας means 'nature's imperatives', i.e. 'sexual urges'.⁴ And the key-word ἀναγκαίαν

4. JEFFREY HENDERSON, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*. Oxford 1992, p. 5 and p. 77. LSJ s.v. ἀναγκαῖος, offers οἱ ἀναγκαῖοι τόποι, 'the privy parts', but here it is the word τόποι that is euphemistically used to indicate the genital

agrees with *χρείων*, a common lexical collocation for the ‘essential needs’ of the body (food, drink, clothes, sex, etc.).

My translation would be: ‘When [our sense of touch], still yearning for things soft and smooth, needlessly comes into contact with something, passionate thoughts perturb the mind; but when [it touches] in accordance with the essential needs of nature, having renounced softness and having transcended sensation, it no longer tickles the sense organs of the soul’. It is certainly true that ‘keeping the penis flaccid’ under all circumstances (which is how KRUEGER interprets this passage) is seen in monastic circles as a sure sign of self-control and dispassion, but I do not think that is what Niketas Stethatos is trying to say here. His message to the beginning monk appears to be that as long as one still clings to sensory delight (‘things soft and smooth’), feelings of arousal may arise especially when the touching is not necessary; but that once one has become detached from sensation through asceticism, the sense of touch is harmless provided it serves an essential need. This and other quibbles, with which I will not bore the reader, do not detract from the overall quality of KRUEGER’s monograph. Read this book!

Keywords

homoeroticism; asceticism; history of sexuality