
IOANNIS POLEMIS, *An Author in Search of His Place in Time: Mercurius the Grammarian and His Texts* (Hellenica 115). Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso 2025. 170 pp. – ISBN 978-88-3613-628-5

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IOANNIS POLEMIS' latest book offers a new critical edition, with English translation and commentary, of four iambic poems transmitted together in a single manuscript now at the Monastery of the Great Lavra on Mount Athos (Λ 170 [Diktyon 28682]). These compositions have been attributed, either explicitly or on stylistic grounds, to Mercurius the Grammarian, a mysterious and elusive figure within the landscape of Byzantine Literature. Not only is virtually no detailed information about this author preserved, but also the dating of his work has long posed significant challenges. Last century, the compilers of the catalogue of the Great Lavra dated the manuscript to the fifteenth century; former editors of the poems, accepting that date and drawing on references to a certain Mercurius in the correspondence of Maximos Planoudes, identified the poet with a lesser intellectual active in the early Palaeologan times.

The four newly edited poems, all of hagiographical and religious character, are the *Martyrdom of Saint Theodore the General*, the *Martyrdom of Saint Theodore the Recruit*, a poetic rendition of a spurious homily by John Chrysostom on the Annunciation, and an iambic canon dedicated to John Chrysostom. The latter two texts had already appeared in twentieth-century editions, while the former two were the subject of unpublished graduate dissertations. Eventually, in 2017, THEODORA ANTONOPOULOU produced a complete edition of all four poems in the *Corpus Christianorum* series, accompanied by a thorough introduction addressing content, structure, literary models, as well as metrical analysis and lexicon.

A breakthrough came in 2022, when SOFIA KOTZABASSI convincingly demonstrated that the Lavra manuscript should be dated to the twelfth rather than the fifteenth century. This re-dating pushes Mercurius' activity back by almost two, if not even three, centuries. Given that one of the earlier editors had also recognized a *terminus post quem* in the similarities between Mercurius' hagiographical poems and the texts of Symeon Metaphrastes, who had composed, sometime in the late tenth century, a *Martyrium sancti*

Theodori Stratelatae and a *Martyrium sancti Theodori Teronis*. Thanks to these new elements, it is now possible to place Mercurius' *floruit* between the eleventh and the mid twelfth century, and he may thus be regarded as roughly contemporary with figures such as Michael Psellus and John Mauropous, whose influence is frequently detectable in his verses.

Although the poems had been edited before, POLEMIS' volume arose from his belief that earlier editions did not sufficiently address the textual difficulties they present, nor adequately dealt with Mercurius' sources and models, which instead are used by the present editor to restore, improve, or clarify the text.

The book constitutes a welcome contribution to the ever-growing investigation of Byzantine literature, in particular didactic poetry. It seems plausible that Mercurius was a teacher who aimed at instructing his pupils in the composition of twelve-syllable verses by creating poetic adaptations of well-known religious prose texts, such as the martyrdom accounts of the two Theodores. The didactic nature of these texts is further underscored by their structure, especially the persistent use of dialogues which serve an explanatory function. One may surmise that Mercurius operated within a monastic or ecclesiastical *milieu*, composing these poems to convey doctrinal and moral instruction to his targeted audience.

The English translation is both accurate and readable: it adheres to the Greek while remaining fluid and enjoyable, thus making these texts accessible also to non-specialists. The commentary is particularly valuable, clarifying many textual problems and identifying literary allusions, verse borrowings, and parallels across a wide chronological spectrum – from early Byzantine authors to the fall of Constantinople – thus showing the multiple layers of Mercurius' poetry.

POLEMIS tends, at times, to express somewhat harsh opinions about Mercurius' poetic skills, especially with regard to his habit to employ recurring words and portions of verses in the same metrical position to obtain metrical correctness easily and effortlessly. Yet, this was common practice, and can be also observed in highly regarded poets such as Theodore Prodromos and Manuel Philes. While Mercurius' poems may not rank among the most original or inspired examples of Byzantine poetry, they nevertheless contain flashes of wit, wordplay, and sophisticated turns of phrase that make these poems worth studying. More importantly, they offer valuable insight into the function of poetry in Byzantium and in Byzantine education. As

POLEMIS aptly notes, these compositions are a rare and direct testimony of Byzantine teaching practices in the capital.

This book will be of considerable interests to Byzantinists working on poetry, pedagogy, and intellectual culture. It may also serve as a useful teaching resource, particularly given the relative accessibility of these texts – especially the *Martyria* of the two Theodores – which offer several interpretative approaches.

Only minor shortcomings may be noted. Reader particularly interested in Mercurius' metrical technique or in the manuscript's dating, will need to acquire earlier publications, though this is facilitated by the comprehensive bibliography provided at the start of the volume. Additionally, the placement of the commentary separate from text and translation renders the comparison between text and commentary less instant; though, this is likely a matter of editorial design.

Despite these negligible issues, POLEMIS' edition represents a significant scholarly achievement. It not only enhances the understanding and circulation of Mercurius' *oeuvre*, but hopefully, it will also contribute to an ever-increasing recovery and appreciation of lesser-known Byzantine texts.

Keywords

middle Byzantine poetry