

DIMITRIOS ΝΙΚΟΥ, *Οι ιστορικοί λόγοι στη βυζαντινή λογοτεχνία, 8ος–15ος αι. (Βυζαντινά Κείμενα και Μελέτες 68)*. Thessaloniki: Κέντρο Βυζαντινών Ερευνών 2025. 238 pp. – ISBN 978-960-7856-67-8

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The book under review is the revised version of a doctoral dissertation defended in 2016 at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. It defines and systematically analyses a corpus of Byzantine literary texts that has so far lacked comprehensive treatment: the so-called ‘historical orations’, that is, rhetorical speeches composed on the occasion of major events in Byzantine history, such as sieges and battles, military campaigns and peace treaties, internal revolts and returns to power. This is an original and methodologically well-grounded contribution. The volume builds upon the line of inquiry opened by HERBERT HUNGER’s discussion of ‘occasional speeches’ in the chapter on rhetoric in *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner* (1978), while developing its implications in a coherent and far-reaching manner. ΝΙΚΟΥ succeeds in isolating a functional category – that of speeches composed, and in many cases delivered, in relation to a historical γεγονός – which, although not corresponding to a canonical rhetorical genre, nevertheless proves highly productive in interpretative terms. In this respect, the choice to define these texts as ‘historical orations’ (*historikoi logoi*) appears particularly appropriate. The term is adopted on the basis of the title transmitted for Alexios Makrembolites’ speech composed on the occasion of the naval battle between the Byzantines and the Genoese at Galata in 1349, as well as that of the speech written shortly afterwards by Philotheos Kokkinos, the *Historical Oration on the Capture and Destruction of Heraclea by the Latins* (1351).

Taken together, the speeches analysed here constitute a complex and heterogeneous group of rhetorical products. They do not properly belong to any of the genres codified by the ancient rhetoricians, yet at the same time they incorporate sections belonging to different rhetorical registers (epideictic, encomiastic, celebratory, and thanksgiving discourse), both in secular and in religious-ecclesiastical contexts. Alongside ‘secular’ declamations, ΝΙΚΟΥ therefore also includes a number of homiletic texts connected with historical events, beginning with Photius’ two well-known homilies on the

Rus' siege of Constantinople in 860 (§ 2), and extending to the homily on the capture of Thessaloniki written by Patriarch Nicholas I Mystikos in 904 (§ 3) and Gabriel of Thessaloniki's homily on the battle of Ankara in 1402 (§ 18).

The definition of the material under examination constitutes both the principal challenge and one of the major merits of the volume, since it gathers together and classifies texts that have until now remained dispersed within studies devoted to different literary genres. At the same time, however, this approach also suggests possible avenues for further development, since the corpus might legitimately be extended to include not only prose texts but also compositions in verse. Byzantine monodies and epic panegyrics, for instance, often display the same close relationship with the historical context (namely, their composition in response to events crucial for the survival of the Byzantine Empire), as well as similar thematic features, such as the presentation of the event, praise of the *basileus*, and thanksgiving to God or the *Theotokos*. They share further formal characteristics, including many of the rhetorical devices discussed in the section of the volume devoted to the synoptic comparison of the texts. NIKOU's decision to restrict his classification and analysis to prose texts nevertheless proves methodologically effective and leads to highly interesting results.

The author thus establishes a substantial corpus consisting of twenty-eight prose texts attributed to twenty-two authors, spanning a broad chronological range from the eighth century (beginning with Patriarch Germanos I, § 1) to the fifteenth century (with reference to the events of 1422: §§ 21–22).

We are therefore faced, first and foremost, with a careful process of selection and definition of the material, which brings together authors otherwise known for different works – such as Photius (§ 2), John Mauropous (§ 5), Constantine Manasses (§ 7), Niketas Choniates (§ 9), Nicholas Mesarites (§ 11), and Nikephoros Gregoras (§ 14) – alongside lesser-known figures, such as Antonios Tripsychoy (§ 8), author of the *Oration on the Revolt of Alexios Branas* (1187), as well as anonymous authors whose texts nevertheless survive as important historical testimonies, including the *Oration on the Peace with the Bulgarians*, composed on the occasion of the peace treaty concluded between Byzantines and Bulgarians in 927 (§ 4), and the text *On the Battle of Ankara* of 1402 (§ 20).

The decision to begin with the eighth century, opening the corpus with Germanos I's speech on the Arab siege of 717–718, is certainly consistent with the overall approach of the volume. One may nevertheless wonder

whether it might have been worthwhile to include texts connected with the crisis of the seventh century as well, especially in light of the role played by those events in shaping Byzantine historical and religious consciousness. One possible example would be the *Homilia de obsidione avarica Constantinopoleos*, a dubiously attributed work associated with Theodore Synkellos,¹ concerning the siege of Constantinople in 626 and to be considered alongside the historical-epic panegyrics of George of Pisidia.

Once the corpus has thus been defined, the volume offers both an organised repertory of these texts and a synthesis of their principal characteristics. Concretely, the book is divided into two parts.

The first part (pp. 25–188), which is essentially classificatory in nature, gathers and analyses the authors and individual speeches in chronological order. Each chapter follows a consistent structure, including information on the author, the historical context, questions of dating, the place and occasion of delivery (often difficult to determine), the structure and contents of the text, prosopographical and topographical issues, as well as language, style, and narrative techniques. The analytical sections are therefore highly uniform and based on a fundamentally descriptive approach to the texts. Although this inevitably produces a certain degree of repetitiveness, such an approach nevertheless guarantees clarity and comparability across the corpus, while at the same time relying on an up-to-date bibliographical framework concerning both the authors and the historical events and speeches under discussion. In this way, the reader is provided with an effective guide through the various *logoi* – whose original texts might perhaps have usefully been reproduced in an appendix, at least in anthology form – and gains access to a number of important texts connected with crucial moments in Byzantine history: among them are the Arab siege of Constantinople in 717–718 (the subject of Germanos I’s speech, § 1), the Rus’ siege of 860 (reconsidered through Photius’ homilies, § 2), the capture of Thessaloniki in 904 (addressed in the *Logos* of Nicholas I Mystikos, § 3), the battle of Ankara in 1402 (treated in Gabriel of Thessaloniki’s *Homily Delivered when the Turks Were Destroyed by the Scythians*, § 18, Demetrios Chrysoloras’ speech, § 19, and the anonymous discourse discussed in § 20), and finally the siege of Constantinople in 1422, documented in the texts of Dorotheos of Mytilene (§ 21) and John Kananos (§ 22).

1. FERENC MAKK, Traduction et commentaire de l’homélie écrite probablement par Théodore le Syncelle sur le siège de Constantinople en 626. Appendice : *Analecta Avarica* de LEO STERNBACH (*Opuscula Byzantina* 3). Szeged 1975.

The second part of the volume (pp. 189–222), comparative and synthetic in character, focuses primarily on the context in which these texts were produced: the relationship between authors, texts, and audiences (readers/listeners); the kinds of authors who engaged with this ‘genre’; the events to which they responded and the aims they pursued; as well as the ways in which the authors themselves classified their historical speeches. On this basis, NIKOU identifies the principal common features of the corpus, both from a thematic perspective – the relationship to the historical event, the role of the divine element, and the value of the texts as historical sources – and, above all, from a formal one. The study therefore examines and compares the ‘programmatic’ sections of these texts – namely prologues and epilogues – together with narrative techniques, the use of biblical and classical traditions, the function of encomium and lament, rhetorical figures, recurring *topoi*, and wordplay. Running throughout the discussion is also the performative dimension of these works, conceived not merely as rhetorical exercises or historical testimonies, but as instruments for the public and collective elaboration of historical events.

The principal merit of the volume lies precisely in this ambitious attempt at systematisation, which is far from straightforward and provides a solid point of reference for scholars working on Byzantine history and literature. Although the corpus remains difficult to classify definitively – and therefore potentially open to further expansion, given the absence of a precise technical definition of ‘historical discourse’ – DIMITRIOS NIKOU nevertheless succeeds in rendering it readable as a coherent whole, and this constitutes a highly significant contribution.

In this respect, NIKOU’s choice to bring together ‘secular’ and ‘ecclesiastical’ texts proves particularly productive for understanding the different ways in which historical events are interpreted. This approach reflects the broader tendency to move beyond the rigid boundaries imposed by the ‘Krubacher model’ of Byzantine literary production, a perspective that is increasingly establishing itself as a fruitful interpretative key for Byzantine literature as a whole.²

2. PANAGIOTIS A. AGAPITOS, Karl Krumbacher and the History of Byzantine Literature. *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 108 (2015) pp. 1–52; IDEM, Contesting Conceptual Boundaries: Byzantine Literature and its History. *Interfaces: Medieval European Literatures* 1 (2015) pp. 62–91; IDEM, Franz Dölger and the Hieratic Model of Byzantine Literature. *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 112 (2019) pp. 707–780; IDEM, The Insignificance of 1204 and 1453 for the History of Byzantine Literature. *Medioevo Greco* 20 (2020) pp. 1–56; IDEM, The Periodization of Byzantine Literature: From a Historical to a Literary Model. In: ISA-

Equally noteworthy is the decision to trace the phenomenon over the long term, highlighting both continuities and transformations in rhetorical strategies from the middle Byzantine period down to the final centuries of Byzantium.

One of the most convincing aspects of the volume is its sustained attention to the relationship between rhetoric and history. It should first be noted that, within these speeches, neither the historical occasion nor the events described are always immediately apparent, since protagonists and events are frequently disguised through references to ancient history or to the Bible – both Old and New Testament – or rendered less transparent through rhetorical devices. NIKOU is therefore rightly cautious in stressing that historical orations cannot be used as straightforward historical testimony without the application of an adequate critical filter. These texts do not provide complete and objective accounts of events; rather, they select, reshape, and at times distort historical facts according to rhetorical purposes.

In this regard, the careful historical and exegetical contextualisation carried out by DIMITRIOS NIKOU is all the more commendable. Given the need to take into account the context of production, authorial intentions, and the fundamentally rhetorical nature of these texts, NIKOU approaches the individual speeches with a firm command of critical and analytical method, as well as of the relevant bibliography. Since these works are not simple factual testimonies but highly ideologised rhetorical constructions, in which historical events are reinterpreted in the light of encomiastic, moral, and theological aims, his analysis of the constant presence of divine intervention within the narratives is significant. Equally valuable is his attention to the polarity between sin and punishment, the image of the emperor as an instrument of Providence, and the relationship between celebrated victory and the divine favour manifested through it.

As for the specifically rhetorical analysis developed in the second part of the book – an undertaking far from easy, given the considerable linguistic and stylistic diversity of the texts examined – DIMITRIOS NIKOU offers a number of stimulating insights for scholars of Byzantine literature and the history of medieval Greek. His analysis of prologues, narrative techniques, and recurring *topoi* – especially the *topos* of the orator's inadequacy, im-

BEL GRIMM-STADELMANN – ALEXANDER RIEHLE – RAIMONDO TOCCI – MARTIN M. VUČETIĆ (eds.), *Anekdotia Byzantina: Studien zur byzantinischen Geschichte und Kultur. Festschrift für Albrecht Berger anlässlich seines 65. Geburtstags* (Byzantinisches Archiv 41). Berlin 2023, pp. 1–20.

perial encomium, lament, and biblical models – provides a clear picture of the conventions governing these texts. Also of particular interest is the list of correspondences between historical figures and biblical or mythological characters on pp. 207–209, as well as the examples of wordplay (λογοπαίγνια) catalogued on pp. 214–215, which reveal once again both the linguistic sophistication of the authors and the complex rhetorical and historical nature of the texts analysed here.

As a possible avenue for further development, one might suggest a more systematic comparison between these texts and speeches relating to the same historical events embedded within properly historiographical works, in order to clarify more fully the boundaries and intersections of the category of ‘historical orations’ proposed here. Likewise, it might be interesting to see a more in-depth discussion of the relationship between these texts and the performative practices of public declamation, a theme that surfaces at several points in the volume but ultimately remains somewhat in the background of the analysis.

Overall, the volume – supplemented by an index of personal and place names – represents a solid and valuable contribution, particularly as a reference tool for further research. It offers a reliable overview of a complex and relatively understudied corpus, rendering it both accessible and comparable. While privileging a fundamentally descriptive approach in the analysis of the corpus – an approach that ultimately proves effective given the heterogeneous nature of the texts – the book fills a genuine gap in the field’s bibliography and establishes itself as a useful point of reference for specialists as well as for readers interested in Byzantine history and literature.

Keywords

historical orations; Byzantine literature; rhetorical analysis