

REVIEWS

Marc D. Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres: Texts and Contexts. Volume Two*. Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2019. Pp. 431.
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It is with great pleasure, and a certain amount of relief, that one welcomes the appearance of the second volume of Marc Lauxtermann's masterly study of the Byzantine poetry written between the seventh and tenth centuries: relief because the first volume appeared quite some time ago, in 2003 with its follow-up promised for 2006 (by which time life – as L puts it – had intervened), and pleasure because this second instalment lives up to the insights of the first. It must be stressed, however, that the two volumes were devised as a unit from the outset and that practicalities of size had led to the split. So the rationale behind this second volume must be sought in the first. Here L's reasoning is set out in the three chapters that make up the first Part of the three that form the complete work: Parts One (Texts and Contexts) and Two (Epigrams in Context) are in vol. 1 and Part Three (Poems in Context) in vol. 2.


L's intentions are to examine all Byzantine poetry composed within his chosen period, apart from hymnography which makes specialist musical demands on commentators. His starting and ending points are confessedly arbitrary but delimit an ill-examined period that comes before an era of great poets, such as Mauropous, Christopher Mytilenaios or Theodore Prodromos, and the more studied Komnenian and Palaiologan ages. L covers poetry written in Greek both in Constantinople and beyond the city (e.g. in Sicily and South Italy) but excludes anything using the vernacular (admittedly scanty in these centuries). The modern reader, L argues, has to accept that Byzantine poetry works by rules unfamiliar to today's audiences; but, if discussion of texts operates with due consideration for the historical context from which they emerge, the results can be productive: a modern reader has a much better chance of understanding what a medieval author was getting at if that reader has a sense of what rules are being respected or subverted: 'Grammar, vocabulary, metrics and genre are just tools' which open up Byzantine literary productions for further exploration.

In the three chapters in vol. 1, Part One (1. Byzantine Poetry in Context, 2. Collections of Poems, 3. Anthologies and Anthologists) L's arguments are persuasive, and presented with engaging verve. Vol. 1, Part Two (chapters 4-9, pp. 189-273) puts this background exposition into practice with a wide-ranging analysis of the Byzantine epigram and the six categories which can be distinguished in that genre, whether fully inscriptional or untethered compositions: L notes that the distinction between epigrams and poems in general, which he has found useful in organizing this large mass of material, was one recognized in Byzantium. These brief statements do no justice to the breadth of L's admirable scholarship. It is surprising that there appear to have been few reviews of the first volume of this opus, presumably through an excess of caution in anticipation of the present volume, though there has been a noticeable background chorus of admiration in oral comments in seminars and conferences, a rise in 'context' as a topic for discussion on Byzantine texts, and a marked increase in respect for Byzantine poetry as well as new editions and studies of Byzantine poets.

So, vol. 2, Part Three: Poems in Context. This deals with all poetic texts and genres surviving from the relevant period that are not classed as epigrams. These texts L labels simply 'poems'. There are eleven chapters, covering the same period as Volume One and thus the years *ca.* 600 to *ca.* 1000. The categories cover, *inter alia*, enkomion, ekphrasis, ethopoiia, monody, love song, satire, prayers, didactic poetry. This last category is a good example of L's skill at acknowledging the clash between a modern reader's sensibilities and those of his Byzantine counterpart: where the one sees tedium and incongruity in, say, a verse etymological dictionary, the other, to judge by Psellos' reactions, sees charm, grace and ease of comprehension. The depth of scholarship demonstrated in vol. 1 is further demonstrated here, most conspicuously, in the extensive Appendix *Metrica* (pp. 265-383) where L sets out the rules of prosody and the principles of Byzantine versification (isosyllaby, regulation of stress and isometry) in great detail, referring not only to the poets discussed in these two volumes but also later writers. This will forever be the *vade mecum* for all aspiring editors of Byzantine prosodic verse.

Both volumes are prefaced by a list of primary sources, i.e. the texts (and the editions) discussed in the body of the books (the one in vol. 2 has been slightly amended to account for new editions), and completed by Indices of Epigrams and Poems, Manuscripts, and a General Index; Volume Two has a fourth index for *Metre*.

The work presented here is a major scholarly achievement which should be acclaimed enthusiastically and gratefully and will lead to an infinitely more nuanced appreciation of poetry written in Byzantium.

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