

BYZANTIUM – Literature

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Overview Byzantine post classical literature in Greek is an archaizing body of work, largely written in versions of ancient Greek, the Greek of 5th century Attica, and often concerned with versions of or takes on ancient Greek literature. While we call this literature Byzantine, and properly so because its inspirational center remained Byzantium, ninety percent of Byzantine literary production took place outside the imperial capital, in the dominating cultural centers of the Empire, in Antioch and Alexandria, and as far away as Palestine and Syria. The unifying trait of this huge body of texts, created until the fall of Byzantium, was that it was written in Greek, that was largely imitative, and that its themes included generous representations of Christian, Greek, and Roman cultures.

The range of literary types As we know from Byzantine philosophy and theology, the thought-world of the Byzantine Empire--with its many imperial schools, religious infighting, theological distinction-making, and highly sophisticated aesthetic perspectives--was hermetic and refined. The sixth century C.E. historian Procopius, chronicler of the times and even amours of the Emperor Justinian, is considered the last of the great tradition of ancient historians. Working from the classical inspiration of such as Lucian the satirist (125-180 C.E.), generations of satirists thrived on the news of the Rialto, as it played out in the socially cool, and often debauched, milieu of the capital, Constantinople. Refined poetries--didactic, panegyric, romantic, epigrammatic-- sharpened wits and stirred emulation throughout the Empire. In the last five centuries of Byzantium popular poetry flourished on the fringes of the Empire, and was at its best reminiscent of the epic of classical times or of the profound religious perspectives inherent to Byzantine mysticism.

Three brief excerpts from Byzantine literature may leave a taste in the mouth.

Romanos, the Melodist Romanos (490-556 C.E.) was one of a number of legendary hymn composers, whose powerful poetry and strong sense of poetic rhythm earned him a perennial place in the Orthodox liturgy. He is said to have composed a thousand hymns, after an unpropitious early life as a Jewish kid from Syria, who was widely thought to be a slow learner and a poor prospect for the priesthood. His gifts were revealed to him one night in dream, by the Virgin Mary; she appeared to him holding a scroll, the proof that he was destined to be a great poet and cantor. And the rest was history.

*Why thus faint-hearted?
Why veil ye your faces?
Lift up your hearts!
Christ is arisen!
Join in the dances,
And with us proclaim it:
The Lord is ascended,
Gleaming and gloried,
He who was born
Of the giver of light.
Cease then your mourning,
Rejoice in blessedness:
Springtime has come.
So bloom now, ye lilies,
Bloom and be fruitful!
Naught bringeth destruction.
Clap we our hands
And shout: Risen is He
Who helpeth the fallen ones*

To rise again.

Digenes Akritas The Byzantine folk epic by this name, *Digenes Akritas*, rises from the fund of highly popular story material under creation in Greek Byzantium from the 7th to the 12th centuries B.C.E. The narrative concerns an Arab convert to Christianity, who becomes an outstanding fighter for the Christian faith, living and overcoming all manner of enemies on the wild distant eastern margins of the Byzantine Empire. The following excerpt is from a manuscript dating from the 12th century C.E.

*They mounted at once and they came to the battlefield.
They hissed like dragons, they roared like lions,
they soared like eagles, and the two clashed.
And then you could see a fight between fine brave youths.
In the heat of the battle they struck continuously,
and from the great clashing and the cut and thrust
the plains grew fearful and the mountains re-echoed,
trees were uprooted and the sun was darkened.
Blood flowed down over their horse-trappings
and their sweat ran out over their breastplates.*

Michael Psellos Psellos (1017-1078) was an outstanding Byzantine monk and academic, a chronicler, a theorist of history writing, and an unparalleled observer of the society of his times. He is a perfect example of the fruit of sophisticated Byzantine culture; a trace of his narrative skill persists in the translation below, from his *Chronographia*, a record of the political infighting (and more) of the age.

As for the common mob, it was already on the move, greatly stirred at the prospect of exercising tyranny over him who had himself played the tyrant. And the women -- but how can I explain this to people who do not know them? I myself saw some of them, whom nobody till then had seen outside the women's quarters, appearing in public and shouting and beating their breasts and lamenting terribly at the empress's misfortune, but the rest were borne along like Maenads, and they formed no small band to oppose the offender. 'Where can she be?' they cried. 'She who alone is noble of heart and alone is beautiful. Where can she be, she who alone of all women is free, the mistress of all the imperial family, the rightful heir to the Empire, whose father was emperor, whose grandfather was monarch before him -- yes, and great-grandfather too? How was it this low-born fellow dared to raise a hand against a woman of such lineage? How could he conceive so vile a thought against her? No other soul on earth would dream of it.' Thus they spoke and hurried together as though they intended to fire the palace. As there was no longer anything to stop them, for all men had already rebelled against the tyrant, they took up their positions ready for battle, at first in small groups, as if they were divided by companies. Later, with all the citizen army, they marched in one body to the attack.

Reading

Benton, R., *The Mediaeval Greek Romance*, Cambridge, 1989.

Jeffrys, Elizabeth, *Digenes Akritis*, Cambridge, 1998.

Kazhdan, A.P., *A history of Byzantine Literature, 650-850*, Athens, 1999.

Discussion questions

In what ways, or at what points, does Byzantine literature seem to you to take its inspiration from the classics of Greco Roman Literature? How familiar were educated Byzantines with Greco Roman literature?

What was the state of literacy in the Byzantine Empire? Where would people go to find texts to read? What was the role of the monasteries in educating 'the people'?

What was the condition of Universities in Byzantium? Was there a surge in university foundings in 12th and 13th centuries C.E. Byzantium, as there was at that time in the West?