

Florin Leonte, *Imperial Visions of Late Byzantium: Manuel II Palaiologos and Rhetoric in Purple*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. x+334 pages. ISBN: 9781474441032

The life and reign of the emperor Manuel II Palaiologos (r. 1391–1425) were central to the last century of Byzantium. From the mid-fourteenth century to 1453, the Roman Empire that was ruled from Constantinople was not only a shadow of even the modest territorial state that had been restored in 1261 by Manuel's ancestor, Michael VIII Palaiologos; it survived, under the guise of rigid institutional continuity, as something rather different from its former self, and Manuel, as the main manager of the empire's survival for close to thirty years, was the public face of its transformation posing as tradition. He was respected by his contemporaries and has attracted the admiration of modern scholars for his dignified, skillful maintenance of the Byzantine imperial ideal in the face of overwhelming odds. He has gone down in history with the conventional imperial image reproduced on the cover of the book here under review: the miniature portrait of himself and his family in full imperial regalia illustrating the copy of the manuscript of Dionysios the Areopagite that he presented to the abbey of Saint-Denis.

Yet Manuel's experience of imperial rule from the moment of his birth was anything but conventional or ideal. The unity and integrity of the imperial system were fatally damaged. The imperial family alternated between power sharing and civil war, and their conflicts were exploited by the empire's enemies. Imperial sovereignty became confined to the walled city of Constantinople and a few scattered enclaves, while the territories that had sustained the Christian empire before 1350 now became the military and agricultural base of the

expanding Ottoman state. What was left of "free" Byzantium grew financially and economically dependent on the commercial giants of Venice and Genoa, which drew Byzantine society into their conflicts. The components of Byzantine "national" identity—Orthodox Christianity, Roman political institutions, and Greek literary culture—increasingly separated out, pulling in different directions or regrouping in new combinations. The Byzantine ruling class overturned long-cherished values under the pressure of circumstances: emperors traveled outside their realm in order to seek help or to serve the Ottoman sultan as vassals in his military expeditions, while the court aristocracy, deprived of its agricultural estates and its military commands, openly invested in commercial activity, which it had traditionally despised as the preserve of the middle and lower classes. By the late 1390s it looked as if the progressive disintegration of Byzantium would be resolved by a complete Ottoman takeover, as Sultan Bayezid I besieged Constantinople with every expectation of capturing the city, however long this took.

The fifty-one-year reprieve that Byzantium won with Bayezid's defeat at the Ankara War in 1402 and his death at the hands of Timur in 1403 was important because it allowed the inhabitants of Constantinople to think of their situation as the new normal, in which they could plan for their continued survival as a city state in symbiosis with the Ottoman territorial empire and in partnership with the cities of Renaissance Italy. Certainly, from a modern perspective, the situation lasted long enough to take on the shape of a distinct historical period, a last plateau in the decline of Byzantium, rather than the final cliff edge of the road to ruin. This "last Byzantium" was qualitatively and quantitatively different from the preceding phase of late Byzantium. It was distinguished by not only its tiny territorial dimensions, its mainly commercial economy, and its fragmented political structure but also its ideological pluralism, the secularity of its ruling elite, and the concomitant division of interest between the impe-

rial court and the patriarchal church. The singularity of last Byzantium is accentuated, for modern scholarship, by the wealth of its written documentation, especially its literary production, which contrasts oddly with its material poverty. While this literary output is notably lacking in history writing (at least in Constantinople), which had flourished in the early Palaiologan period and was to flourish again after the fall of Constantinople, it is rich in occasional rhetoric, including letter writing. The abundance of rhetorical literature surviving from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries can partly be explained by the fact that the authors and their friends belonged to the network of Byzantine intellectuals who ensured the preservation of their works in the humanist libraries of Renaissance Italy. But it is also a fact that this literature largely owed its existence to the sponsorship and the authorship of the emperor Manuel II. Thus, the literary texts that provide our most direct evidence for the political reality of last Byzantium, and indelibly color our impressions of the period, directly reflect the priorities of the figure who did most to stamp his agenda on the empire's survival. As Florin Leonte argues in this book, rhetoric was a vital part of the imperial agenda of Manuel II Palaiologos.

Manuel's considerable literary oeuvre awaits a comprehensive treatment that Leonte does not set out to provide. His goal is rather to explore the role of rhetoric in the emperor's regime by contextualizing Manuel's rhetorical compositions and then subjecting a selection of them to a rigorous literary analysis. Following a short introduction, the two chapters forming Part I define the cultural context of the emperor's authorship in terms of dissent and consent. Dissent is seen as the dominant theme of the large body of apologetic, homiletic, and didactic literature emanating from the church hierarchy. Religious leaders blamed the empire's misfortunes on the sins of society and particularly of its political leadership. In their writings, which in language and style were aimed at a wide audience, they castigated the

204 general immorality and especially the social injustices that accentuated the gap between rich and poor. They deplored the widespread deviation from Orthodoxy, by not only those Byzantines who apostatized to Islam but also the businessmen and intellectuals who were exposed to Roman Catholicism through their dealings with the Italians. Some churchmen even saw the emperor's traditional authority in religious affairs as a tyrannical violation of the divine order of things, and while upholding the traditional unity of church and state, advocated the subordination of the emperor to the priesthood on the principle that "he who anoints is greater (μειζόν ἐστι) than the anointed" (p. 49).

Manuel himself was a deeply devout individual with a love of theology, and he had close personal ties to two of the most charismatic religious writers of his generation: Makarios Makres and Joseph Bryennios. Yet, as Leonte points out, these were not members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Rather, their affiliation was to the imperial court, and their role was to bring an element of Orthodox spiritual consensus to the mood of secular intellectual consent that Manuel cultivated in his entourage. The sources naturally privilege the intellectual dimension of this entourage, but there is no reason to doubt that they reflect the emperor's own priorities and that Manuel himself privileged his intimate contacts with a small group of literary friends in rhetorical performances known as *theatra*. Rhetorical *theatra* had a long history at the Byzantine imperial court, but those convened by Manuel II were distinctive in several ways that Leonte brings out perceptively, principally from the examination of the emperor's letters. First, they represented a revival of a practice that had largely fallen out of favor since the reign of Andronikos II and had been particularly neglected by Manuel's father, John V. Secondly, the authors of the rhetorical compositions read out on these occasions included not only the emperor's most talented servants but also his closest collaborators. With two notable

exceptions, Demetrios Chrysoloras and John Chortasmenos, these collaborators were greatly indebted to Manuel's own intellectual mentor, Demetrios Kydones, and like Kydones, they were all open and receptive to the Latin church and to Italian humanism. Thirdly, the emperor participated in court *theatra* to an unprecedented degree, not only convening the gatherings but also performing his own compositions and giving and receiving feedback. Thus, the court *theatron* as revived and indeed reinvented by Manuel II was not so much the verbalization of court ceremonial, the one-way celebration of the imperial image that it had been in the Komnenian and early Palaiologan periods, but more a seminar in which the emperor assumed the role of teacher, and the demonstrative rhetoric of idealizing the ruler through encomiastic description acquired more than ever the deliberative function of advocating the political ideals that were necessary to the state's credibility and indeed its very survival. Moreover, the ideals promoted in the rhetoric of the imperial *theatron* no longer represented a consensus between church and state. Manuel and his rhetoricians consciously diverged from the church's program of revival; they emphasized the emperor's undiluted authority, Hellenic and Roman models as markers of "national" identity, and education as the remedy for national decline under the leadership of the emperor, who was not a philosopher king but a master rhetorician with a powerful, persuasive voice.

In the second and longer part of the book, Leonte examines the political dimension of Manuel's own rhetorical production by an in-depth treatment of four of the emperor's longer works that are each discussed in a dedicated chapter: the *Dialogue with the Empress Mother on Marriage*; the *Foundations of an Imperial Education* (Ἐπιθετικὴ βασιλικὴ ἀγωγή); the *Seven Ethico-Political Orations*; and the *Funeral Oration on His Brother Theodore, Despot of Morea*. All four texts directly concerned members of the emperor's close family; this is imme-

diately clear from the titles of the first and the fourth, while the others, the *Foundations* and the *Orations*, were pieces of advice literature addressed to Manuel's son and presumptive heir, John VIII Palaiologos. All were recopied, with some revision, into a single deluxe manuscript dedicated to John, which now survives in Vienna (Vind. Phl. Gr. 98).

Leonte methodically examines each text through a series of philological lenses, which in turn focus on (1) structure and content; (2) literary genre, as defined by a combination of form and occasion; (3) authorial voice, the visible markers of the author's own concerns; and (4) rhetorical strategies, the inflection of prescribed modes of expression in pursuit of chosen goals. From this analysis it emerges, in each case, that while working with a highly conventional toolkit on a mass of clichés derived from classical and biblical literature, Manuel has crafted a highly individual rhetorical statement of political intent. In the final chapter of Part II, Leonte draws these statements together and argues that they point "towards a renewed vision of imperial authority" as manifested in the chapter title. The vision involved, on one level, the consolidation of the specific policies that Manuel endorsed in his funeral oration for his brother Theodore: alliance with the Latins, resistance to the Ottomans, and the cultivation of national unity, both within the imperial family and within the society of the Peloponnese, where a fractious landed aristocracy still existed. On another level, Manuel's vision of imperial authority reconfigured the image of the ideal emperor in accordance with the empire's reduced circumstances. Love and humility emerged for the first time as the primary imperial virtues, and Manuel defined the emperor's absolute, God-given supremacy not in terms of military victory, material abundance, and coercive power, but in terms of peaceful, charismatic, spiritual roles: as a wise *primus inter pares*, a teacher, and a father to the imperial heir. In all of these roles, it was his mastery of rhetoric that made him supreme.

Rhetoric was thus not just a tool of government, but the essence of government, and by the very act of performing it, Manuel II was demonstrating his right to rule. He did not need to express new ideas in order to make an innovative political statement.

The straitened circumstances of last Byzantium affected Manuel's vision of imperial authority in other ways that Leonte notes but does not go into extensively. On the one hand, Manuel defined the functions of kingship in terms of less exalted social roles of fatherhood and pedagogy; on the other hand, he showed himself to be aware of the widening gap between the institutional ideal of kingship and the pragmatic human reality, and his comments on the subject have the effect of relativizing the absolute authority that he asserts. Conceding defeat at the end of his *Dialogue with the Empress Mother*, he says that her victor's crown cannot be of gold, since gold is in short supply and anyway there is the risk of theft, so she will have to be content with a wreath of roses and branches. In the same text he asserts that rulers should exhort their subjects to virtue, even when they themselves are far from virtuous. In the "Epistolary Epilogue" with which he ends his *Orations*, he expands on this theme of the role being greater than the actor to produce a remarkably original and unsettling statement on the perfection of imperial authority. Manuel argues that even if he does not live up to his own precepts, his son should obey them. For if the priests and Pharisees had to be obeyed when they taught the law of Moses that

they themselves failed to observe, it was all the more necessary to obey the emperor, whose throne was as superior to the throne of Moses as the *New Testament*—on which Manuel based his precepts—was superior to the *Old*. He is not claiming to be superior to Moses but simply comparing their thrones. Manuel's throne is the image of God. His authority is greater than that of Moses because he is a king and Moses was merely a leader. Although Moses also had the distinction of being a prophet and wonder-worker, this did not give him the authoritative voice of a father over a son.

Leonte translates a part of the relevant passage, which he reads as a proclamation of "the pre-eminence of imperial rule over priestly authority" (p. 248). The observation is surely correct, but it does not do justice to the full significance of what Manuel is saying. Firstly, he is inverting the conventional interpretation of the biblical origins of Christian monarchy and priesthood, by deriving the former not from Old Testament kingship but from Christ, and the latter not from Christ's mandate to the Apostles but from Moses and the priestly succession of the Jews; moreover, by explicitly linking the priests with the notoriously hypocritical Pharisees, he is implicitly pointing to the moral failures of the clergy in his own day. Secondly, he contrasts the human fallibility of the office holder with the infallible perfection of his office, represented by the throne on which he sits; it is thus the imperial throne—and not the person of the emperor nor even his crown—that is the image of God. Thirdly, the natural authority of a

father overrides the supernatural authority of a prophet and miracle worker.

The vision of imperial authority that Manuel II projected in his rhetoric was no different, in its main lines, from the image portrayed by the encomiasts of his intimate intellectual court nor from the miniature of the imperial family in the Louvre manuscript of Pseudo-Dionysios. It was essentially this vision that had sustained Manuel's predecessors on the throne of New Rome for over a thousand years. Yet Manuel's own rhetorical iteration of this vision was tinged with the recognition—which his predecessors had managed to avoid and his image-makers were duty bound not to express—of the irreversibly widening gap between the theory of imperial authority and the reality of imperial power. Rhetoric provided him with the means to close the gap in a way that did not bend the theory out of shape but made it even more uncompromising. This was not a denial of reality but a hands-on appropriation by the ruler himself of the real power of words that had always made Byzantium tick. In studying how the father of the last two Byzantine emperors put this power to work for himself and his family, Florin Leonte has established a new forward base for two more books that now need to be written: a new biography of Manuel II and a comprehensive survey of imperial authorship in Byzantium.

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