

Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium: Perceptions and Representations in Art and Text

Review Number: 907

Publish date: Saturday, 1 May, 2010

Author: Myrto Hatzaki

ISBN: 9780230007154

Date of Publication: 2009

Price: £55.00

Pages: 204pp.

Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan

Place of Publication: New York, NY

Reviewer: Eugenia Russell

The product of extensive fieldwork, *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium; Perceptions and Representations in Art and Text* is a revised version of an already polished PhD thesis submitted under the title 'Unveiling Male Beauty: Perception and Representation in Byzantine Imagery and the Texts from the Eleventh to the Fourteenth Centuries' at the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, in 2004. Its lucid and assertive prose and its stylish presentation are unusually attractive for a first solely-authored academic book. Further, the claims of originality Myrto Hatzaki makes are absolutely justified as there is no other comprehensive study that deals explicitly with the topic of beauty in Byzantium published in any major European language. A so far unpublished PhD thesis on St Demetrius (1) that belongs to the present reviewer would have been most probably unknown to her. In any case, the said thesis only deals with aspects of this topic, and it does so obliquely and recurrently, and not as a main focus of what is discussed. This book's arguments are robust and elegant, and they stand perfectly happily without knowledge of my findings. Yet, for the sake of completion and the stimulation of fruitful scholarly discussion (a main objective of *Reviews in History* after all), I shall list them before I continue.

The first and more general aspect that corresponds to Hatzaki's interests is the perception of youthfulness and physicality in the veneration of St Demetrius, by physicality meaning both strength and beauty. The saint's physicality is a quality evidently lauded in the sources (especially those written by authors in their more mature age) but one that seems contrary to traditional notions of monastic bodily denial. This element would have fitted well into the discussion of the beauty of soldiers or military saints, the last chapter of *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium*, which indeed Hatzaki pursues with due skill. St Nestor, the even younger (and rawer in his beauty) companion of St Demetrius in martyrdom, is also present in that last chapter, unlike the older and more obscure St Loupos, also a military saint and a *therapon* (servant) of St Demetrius. The latter is said to have cured the faithful using his dead master's blood, an allusion to the sacrificial blood of Christ but not to physical beauty. Although the absence of St Loupos from the book can be justified, perhaps a more general parallel between the youthful sacrifice (and beauty) of Christ and his martyred saints could have been more prominent in Hatzaki's appraisal. Such a Christo-centric approach was vital in the veneration of youthful saints such as St Demetrius, St Panteleimon, St Stephen and others. In the West this is most obviously expressed in the heightened depiction of the martyrdom of St Sebastian.

The second aspect relevant here is the discussion of Lucian's *Imagines* or *Essays in Portraiture* (2), an unparalleled Hellenistic work of appreciation of ancient painting and sculpture, which deals with all the important art historical monuments of antiquity, many of which are now lost. The Lucianic dialogue is transformed by the Byzantine author Demetrius Chrysoloras into a discourse on the nature of deity between St Demetrius and his executor, Emperor Maximian. (3) It takes the form of a new dramatic dialogue on the representations of divine beauty and, as it is a Byzantine re-working, its super-imposed Christian meanings. This would have connected with Hatzaki's third chapter and her references to Apelles and Pheidias, especially with regard to the treatment of the body as *agalma* (statue) and the permanence of beauty represented in that way. Although the two works mentioned here are mainly concerned with female beauty, they throw light onto notions of beauty and its representations more generally. Incidentally, Hatzaki does use instances of female beauty in parts of her book to make certain points.

There is another recent book that deals with countenance but in a very different way. External appearance was a core value of the Roman world, one that was fiercely criticized by philosophers and the early Christians. V. Henry T. Nguyen, *Christian Identity in Corinth: A Comparative Study of 2 Corinthians, Epictetus & Valerius Maximus* (4) is an excellent study of societal dynamic and identity in the affluent Roman colony of Corinth. It focuses on the social commentary of three authors, Epictetus, Valerius Maximus and St Paul. Using heuristic as opposed to comparative methodology, Nguyen investigates the resonance of persona/???????? in the three sources used, while he warns of similar resonances in Seneca, Plutarch, Petronius and Dio Chrysostom. The distinction between ????? and ????? evident in the letters of Paul (2 Cor. 5.12; 2 Cor. 10.7; Gal. 2.6; Gal. 6.12 are some examples) speaks of Greco-Roman influences, and especially the Hellenistic philosophical systems of Stoicism and Cynicism, both of which influenced early Christian thought and practice significantly. The social concept study of persona/???????? in Nguyen encompasses much more than beauty. It is about an implicit Romano-centricity that expressed itself in a multitude of ways. The visual expression of that persona/ ????? can be further subdivided into several distinct functions all of which were clearly and publicly expressed. This approach is very different to the study of latent beauty in Byzantium encountered in Hatzaki and offers a welcome counterpoint.

Originality of thought and expression are not Hatzaki's only virtues. Her ability to carve a securely-defined area of expertise in such a highly populated field as medieval art history is also remarkable. After opening daringly with a reference to Oscar Wilde, the book establishes early on how traditional ancient Greek perceptions of beauty can be found in Byzantium too, with particular reference to being blond (*xanthos*), a highly praised characteristic in the Eastern Mediterranean where blond hair is generally a rarity. The blond hair of Achilles, Menelaos, Jason, and Orestes, among other heroes, had been regarded a sign of god-like status by the ancient Greeks. The concept of blondness offers a punchy and memorable introduction to the complex discussion that is to follow. The book falls roughly into two distinct halves. It discusses in its first three chapters the ideal of beauty in Byzantine historiography and literature, while the second half is dedicated to more specific themes. These themes are beauty in pain and death, including the beauty of the dead Christ, the beauty of liminal masculinity, and beauty in relation to military saints. The comparison between the idealised, perfect dead body of Christ and the pained and anxious expression of a pale Theotokos is particularly resonant. (5) Throughout the book, descriptions of visual evidence, the author's specialism, act as an intricate internal dialogue that illuminates other materials and concepts discussed. A handsome study of the depiction of sorrow in the Byzantine tradition by Teodora Burnand, relevant to Hatzaki's fourth and sixth chapters, was published only a month before this book. (6)

Hatzaki is equally at ease discussing the learned Byzantine authors and the genres of the Greek Vernacular, a rare virtue in a scholarly field that has a greater fondness for fragmentation than the search of similitudes. The same interest in both aspects of medieval Greek literature has been lavishly displayed in a recent monograph about Byzantine identity by Gill Page. (7) Hatzaki also makes a point of throwing light upon neglected corners of the discipline. She is sure to comment, for instance, on under-rated sources such as the work of the court poet Manuel Philes. The personality of St Neophytos the Recluse, recently re-appraised by Anthoules Demosthenous (8) long after Catia Galatariotou's original monograph (9), also finds

accommodation in her commentary. Likewise, inclusion of the 14th century church of St Vlassios in Veroia, a church very rarely mentioned in works about Byzantium, is to be lauded. The same holds for two relatively unknown depictions of the martyrdom of St George on the Wheel, and a string of evocative Lamentation scenes which, although not unknown, are rarely viewed comparatively.

Hatzaki conducts her research in an open manner that establishes contact with other work done in the field. Her insightful and confident scholarship makes excellent use of existing secondary literature, as is evident in her bibliography and detailed discussions of the material. Looking at things at a larger scale, she complements brilliantly the work of Margaret Alexiou (10) regarding the practice of *threnos* (lamentation) in the Byzantine tradition and the work of Christopher Walter (11) regarding the portrayal of military saints. Yet, if I had to liken *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium* to one other book alone, this would have to be *The Icons of their Bodies; Saints and their Images in Byzantium* by Henry Maguire. There is much that is obvious in what the two works share. However, there is more than commonalities in the field of study and high production values that links them together. To make my point, I will use a distinction made by another author reviewed in *Reviews in History*.(12) That is Andrekos Varnava and he said, while talking about his own work in his Response, that Cyprus was not the subject but the object of his study. That is exactly the case with the two books in question. Maguire's book, in his own words, is about art.(13) Hatzaki's, in hers, about beauty (p. 2). The discussion of saints, iconography and spirituality is not the subject but the object of their work. This detachment in their perspective and the complexity of their interpretations unites them.

In conclusion, the wealth of new scholarship akin to Hatzaki's that is mentioned in this review is by no means a criticism of her work. On the contrary, the fact that several new scholars are producing related work independently, shows how pertinent her research is. Furthermore, the meticulousness and intensity of this book will make it a must amongst Byzantinists and Hellenists, whether art historians or not. Its extensive illustrations render it a useful reference source for Byzantine imagery. Palgrave Macmillan, too, must be commended for the high production values displayed here. Further, the book's inventive art historical language can serve as a model for new researchers and its engagement with historiography and literature offers fresh perspectives to those who study or teach those disciplines. *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium* has come well over a decade after Henry Maguire's seminal monograph *The Icons of their Bodies* and it has every reason to hope to succeed it. Moreover, the interest in masculinities and spirituality as a distinct field of study within Anglo-American scholarship is evident in the production of a relatively new American online, scholarly, peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary journal, the *Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spirituality (JMMS)*. This growing interest might mean that *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium* will be read and appreciated well beyond the world of Byzantine Studies and enter the conscience of other spheres of scholarship.

Hatzaki's argument is further asserted in a forthcoming chapter playfully named 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly'. In this piece the author states that 'Byzantium has largely been seen as a world which valued spirituality over physicality' (14), a thesis that she seeks to overturn with her work. Having appreciated the skill and persuasive power of Hatzaki's writing, my personal inclination is still to hold on to the more traditional view of Byzantine culture that she describes. This may simply show my preoccupations as a student of hagiography and ecclesiastical history. It also shows my interest in Byzantium as a literary and musical culture, an angle which introduces further complexities to Hatzaki's Byzantium. Those who work with hymnography and liturgical materials often find that Byzantine notions of beauty in word and song somehow defy physicality. Similar notions are found in the sources. The Byzantine statesman and author Constantine Harmenopoulos, for instance, has given extensive descriptions of the melodious chanting that took place in the Acheiropoietos which, matched with the beauty of the light within the church, uplifted the minds of the faithful. In this he seems to focus more on oral than on visual beauty. He also mentions that there is cause for dual praise spread equally on the object of the adoration and those who practice it. In that the act of worship seems as important as its visual symbols.(15) In any case, Hatzaki offers an interpretation that is appealing and thought-provoking. Her filter of physicality is a tool for studying well-known materials in a new way. She has explored another interpretative possibility through this research that most art

historians had overlooked. As with most arguments in the arts and humanities, however, it will be up to each individual reader to decide how far they will follow Hatzaki, and others who make similar claims, in their pursuit of a physical over a spiritual Byzantium.

Notes

1. Eugenia Russell, 'Encomia to St Demetrius in Late Byzantine Thessalonica', Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London (2009). A revised version of this work is forthcoming with Peter Lang.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Lucian of Samosata, *Essays in Portraiture*, in *Lucian, Volume IV*, ed. and trans. A.M. Harmon (London and Cambridge MA, 1925), pp. 255–95.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Demetrius Chrysoloras, '??? ?????????? ????? ?????????? ??? ??????????, ????? ??? ?δ? ????? ?????????? ?? ???? ?à ?ú??', ed. Vassileios Laourdas, *Gregorios Palamas* 40 (1957), 342–53.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. V. Henry T. Nguyen, *Christian Identity in Corinth: a Comparative Study of 2 Corinthians, Epictetus & Valerius Maximus*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, Series 2 (Tübingen, 2008).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Myrto Hatzaki, *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium: Perceptions and Representations in Art and Text* (New York, 2009), p. 67 ff.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Teodora Burnand, 'Donors and Iconography: The Case of the Church "St. Virgin" in Dolna Kamenitsa (XIV c.)', in *Spirituality in late Byzantium; Essays Presenting New Research by International Scholars*, ed. Eugenia Russell (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2009), pp. 99–105.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Gill Page, *Being Byzantine: Greek Identity Before the Ottomans, 1200–1420* (Cambridge, 2008).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Anthoules A. Demosthenous, '????????????? á????? ??ó????? (1134-1214 ???.) ??? ? ?ó????? ??? (Leukosia, 2007).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Catia Galatariotou, *The Making of a Saint; The Life, Times and Sanctification of Neophytos the Recluse* (Cambridge, 1991).[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (2nd ed., Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford, 2002).[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Christopher Walter, *The Warrior Saints in Byzantine Art and Tradition* (Aldershot, 2003).[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Author's Response to Hubert Faustmann, Review of *British Imperialism in Cyprus, 1878–1915: the Inconsequential Possession* (Manchester, 2009), by Andrekos Varnava (review no. 845) <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/paper/faustmannhresp.html> [2] [accessed 1 February 2010].[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. Henry Maguire, *The Icons of their Bodies; Saints and their Images in Byzantium* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), p. xvii.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Myrto Hatzaki, 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly', in *A Companion to Byzantium*, ed. E. James, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World 37 (Oxford, 2010, forthcoming), pp. 93–107, p. 93.[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. These matters are discussed extensively in my thesis, as in note 1. Also see Constantine Harmenopoulos, '????? ?????????? ?????????????? ??????6?????? ??? ??? ?????6????? ?????? ??? ??? ??????i??', ed. Demetrius Gines, *EEBS* 21 (1951), 145–62.[Back to \(15\)](#)

The author is grateful for this thoughtful and insightful review and does not wish to respond, except to express her thanks to the reviewer.

Other reviews:

[3]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/907#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/4747>

[2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/././paper/faustmannhresp.html>

[3] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/>