

FOREWORD

This book presents a survey of Byzantine poetry, secular and religious – but with one regrettable omission: hymnography, which deserves to be treated by someone with more expertise in musicology and liturgy than I can claim to possess. A survey must begin and end somewhere, and the choices made are by definition arbitrary: Pisides and Geometres are merely symbolic landmarks I have chosen to chart the history of Byzantine poetry before it reaches its peak with splendid poets such as Mauropous, Christopher Mitylenaios and Prodro-mos. As Byzantine culture is not confined to Constantinople and its hinterland, the survey also comprises poetry written in former parts of the Byzantine empire; however, poetry composed in languages other than Greek within the cultural orbit of Byzantium is not included. Although the epic of Digenes Akrites, the Song of Armoures and other heroic ballads certainly go back to a centuries-old oral tradition, I do not treat vernacular poetry because we still know too little about its remote origins.

I discuss Byzantine poetry “in the Vienna mould”: that is, genre by genre, just as the late Herbert Hunger did in his admirable handbook, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*. However, as I do not think that genres are static, the main thrust of this book is to demonstrate the importance of historical context. When this book was nearly completed, the late Alexander Kazhdan published the first volume of his equally admirable *History of Byzantine Literature*. As is well known, Kazhdan objected to Hunger's approach, because in his view the undue emphasis on genres and literary imitation turns Byzantine literature into a literature without any historical dimension, and Byzantine authors into writers without a personality of their own. Although I share Kazhdan's concerns, I do think that we can understand an author much better if we know something about the literary tradition he is part of and the generic rules he applies or changes or subverts (see Mullett 1992). Generic studies, such as the present one, simply provide decoding tools with which we may unlock the hidden door to the wonderland of Byzantine prose and poetry. Once the door is open, the key is no longer important, and then we may start to explore the literary vistas lying ahead of us. Grammar, vocabulary, metrics and genre are just tools – but without them it is obviously impossible to make any progress in the field of Byzantine literature.

This book is divided into three parts. The first part, *Texts and Contexts*, forms an introduction to the whole book, in which I present the manuscript evidence and explain the crucial concept of context. In the second and third

parts, *Epigrams in Context* and *Poems in Context*, where various kinds of Byzantine poetry pass in review, I analyze a large number of texts and attempt to situate them in their historical contexts. The book is also divided into two volumes: the present volume contains parts one and two; the second one, due to be published in 2006, will contain part three. Although I fully subscribe to the view expressed in the famous Callimachean maxim: μέγα βιβλίον μέγα κακόν, I must confess that the book has become very voluminous indeed. And by dividing the bulk of the material into two volumes, I most probably would not escape the scorn of Callimachus, who would just point out that “two bulky books make two bulky evils”.

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As for the difficult problem of transliterating Greek names or terms, I have followed the example of the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* with three exceptions: Cephalas instead of Kephalas, Planudes instead of Planoudes, and Mitylenaios instead of Mytilenaios. In the case of Cephalas and Planudes I follow the example of classical scholars, such as Alan Cameron; in the case of Mitylenaios I follow the example of the Byzantines themselves as well of the editor, Eduard Kurtz.