

*Manuel II Palaiologos (1350–1425). A Byzantine emperor in a time of tumult.* By Siren Çelik. Pp. xxvi + 445 incl. 11 ills and 2 maps. Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022 (first publ. 2021). £27.99. 978 1 108 81262 7

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Manuel II Palaiologos, the antepenultimate Byzantine emperor (and father of the last two, John VIII and Constantine XI) undoubtedly had a complicated life. He was not the eldest son, so under normal circumstances he was not destined to rule. That he did become emperor after his father's death in 1391 is down to the complicated family dynamics of the Palaiologoi – throughout his life Manuel fought against his elder brother Andronikos IV, his nephew John VII, even his father John V to attain and to keep power. This was, sadly, not unusual during the last centuries of Byzantium, a period riddled with civil strife between close members of the same imperial family. Manuel is probably more familiar to non-specialists than other emperors of the period for a number of reasons. He was the only emperor to have travelled as far West as Paris and London. This was a trip borne of desperation: in 1394 the Ottoman sultan Bayezid began an eight-year blockade of Constantinople that saw the city ravaged by famine and coming close to capitulation. Manuel decided to seek help from the Christian nations of Europe and in 1400 he embarked on a trip that would last three years and would introduce him to various royal and princely courts. The appearance of the emperor and his retinue made a lasting impression in Europe; there were feasts and talks, but very little actual help materialised, and Byzantium was saved by Tamerlane who defeated and captured Bayezid in 1402. Manuel's other claim to fame comes from a fairly recent event: in 2006 pope Benedict XVI used passages taken out of context from a work by the emperor, the *Dialogue with a Persian*, in a speech seemingly to juxtapose Christian rationality with a Muslim concept of absolute transcendence, in which God's will is not bound up by rationality. The strong reaction to the speech helped to make Manuel known to new audiences as the author of a polemic against Islam.

Siren Çelik's book is based on her 2016 PhD dissertation and aims to be 'a biography that seeks to construct an in-depth portrait of Manuel as a writer, ruler and a personality' (p. 3). The emperor's own texts serve as the key sources in this project. They may be numerous, but they disclose very little about Manuel as a person, a fact already observed in the seminal book on Manuel by J. W. Barker, *Manuel II Palaeologus (1391–1425): a study in late Byzantine statesmanship*, Brunswick, NJ 1969 ('In view of the bulk of Manuel's own surviving literary output, it is disappointing that we find so little personal information about him in it', p. 403) and often acknowledged by Çelik herself. In ten chapters she follows the emperor from cradle to tomb. Despite her best efforts, as a straightforward biography the book faces serious obstacles. The concrete evidence at hand (or rather its lack) makes the study necessarily apophatic: so much is not known, unrecorded, unknowable (and the author does not resort to creatively imagining what might have been – this is not that kind of biography). What remains on the page is often somewhat underwhelming.

The book's strengths, however, lie elsewhere. The author has meticulously read and analysed all of Manuel's major texts, including those that were only very recently published in critical editions and are therefore very little studied. The

presentation and analysis of these texts forms a major part of the book: they are discussed according to the chronology of their composition and are organically linked to the various phases of the emperor's life. Nevertheless, the book is not a literary study of Manuel's texts – perhaps it would have been more poignant if this had been the case. Some of the emperor's texts have already received scholarly attention, such as the *Dialogue with a Persian*, his *Dialogue with the Empress Mother on marriage* or the *Funeral oration to his brother Theodore*. Çelik, however, also discusses works that have received very little attention so far such as the *Discourse to Iagoup*, an aggressively negative response to the Latin-leaning thinker Manuel Kalekas and a defence of traditional Orthodox theological enquiries against the use of syllogisms. Another important work discussed in the book is Manuel's treatise *On the procession of the Holy Spirit*, composed during the emperor's stay in Paris, in which he defends the Orthodox position (against the *filioque*), but shows awareness of Western theological thought through translations from the Latin (including of Thomas Aquinas, produced by Manuel's beloved teacher and mentor Demetrios Kydones). Çelik's analysis revisits known facts, but her close reading manages to tease out new and interesting aspects such as the importance of Aristotelian ethics in many of his works, or how – despite being a powerful emperor – he often seemed to yearn for Kydones's approval, sending him his texts and expecting his comments right up to the moment of his teacher's death.

Çelik is very much aware that Byzantine texts more generally and Manuel's more specifically are not simple repositories of information: the rules of genre, the creative intertextual dialogue with tradition, the use of *topoi* – all these aspects had a significant impact on both the content and the style of these texts. She does a very good job of highlighting these aspects and discussing the literariness of the emperor's texts as well as emphasising his constant efforts at self-representation, something that previous studies had not done. She consistently undermines the sense that because Manuel wrote these texts, we can expect to find the real him in them. But this necessarily also undermines her aim to produce a biography: how can a personhood be reconstructed based on texts that employ so many devices to mask the author? All the more credit should go to the author for trying.

There is an aspect of the book that one cannot overlook. Unfortunately (and surprisingly, for this reviewer) the book obviously did not go through a rigorous copy-editing and proof-reading process. There are very many spelling mistakes, frequent cases of bad English usage and typographical errors; so many that they detract from the pleasure of reading. It would be very appropriate for the Press to prepare a thoroughly revised edition that would do justice to this serious effort to take the literary output of this Byzantine emperor seriously.

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*Margery Kempe's spiritual medicine. Suffering, transformation and the life-course.* By Laura Kalas. Pp. xvi + 252 incl. 9 figs. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2023. £24.99 (paper). 978 1 84384 684 0

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In this deeply researched monograph, Laura Kalas reads *The book of Margery Kempe* through the lens of medical humanities, considering Kempe's engagement with