
ILIAS TAXIDIS, *The Ekphraseis in the Byzantine Literature of the 12th Century* (Hellenica 90). Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso 2021. XXXVI, 276 pp. – ISBN: 978-88-3613-077-1. ISSN: 1825-3490 (€ 42.00)

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The book *The Ekphraseis in the Byzantine Literature of the 12th Century* by ILIAS TAXIDIS, Associate Professor of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, fully realizes the promise of its title. It provides an analysis of 137 *ekphraseis* of twelfth-century Byzantium, a wide range of texts both in prose and in verse: descriptions of buildings, churches, works of arts, persons, objects, animals, gardens, meadows, chariot races, shipwreck, battles, triumphs, cities, walls, mythological or biblical subjects, descriptions of the springtime, to mention but a few. Some of these *ekphraseis* are independent texts, whereas others are incorporated as digressions in other texts (e.g., historical accounts, epistles, erotic novels) where they form distinctive narrative units. Thirty-seven of the *ekphraseis* refer to actual works of arts, as for instance, statues, depictions, fountains, and relics .

The book is well structured, organized in five parts. In the first part (pp. 1–22), the author presents the cultural-historical context and the main characteristics of the *ekphraseis*, as well as their relation to ancient rhetorical manuals (Theon, Aphthonius and Hermogenes, and Nicholas of Myra). The author also specifies what he considers to be an *ekphrasis*, explaining the reasons why he excluded some sources from his study. The first part concludes with three useful tables about the Byzantine authors and their *ekphraseis* that are discussed in the book, specifying which of them are eponymous or anonymous works.

In the second part (pp. 27–199), the author offers a rich analysis of 137 descriptive texts. Each *ekphrasis* is treated in a separate section, which usually includes a discussion of its subject-matter, its structure, its common rhetorical devices, its model (where this is known), as well as remarks about the purpose of its composition. The analysis often contains an assessment of the literary value of the *ekphrasis*, as well as a judgement about whether the *ekphrasis* follows the standard conventions, techniques, and rhetorical patterns of the genre. The footnotes are enriched by a varied bibliography relevant to each *ekphrasis*, thus offering an overview of

earlier scholarship. The inclusion of the original Greek passages reveals the literary and rhetorical merits of these interesting texts. Among the examined texts, one can find *ekphraseis* composed not only by well-known authors of the twelfth century (e.g., Anna Comnena, Theodore Prodromos, Constantine Manasses, Eustathios of Thessaloniki, John Tzetzes, Niketas Choniates, John Zonaras, Nikephoros Basilakes, Niketas Eugenianos), but also by less known authors such as John Nomikopoulos, Basil Padiadites, and Manuel Sarantenos.

In the third part (pp. 205–215), the author explores the form and the subject matter of the *ekphraseis*, and provides some statistics related to these issues. He begins by classifying the *ekphraseis* into the following three categories, specifying also which of them are written in verses: 1. Autonomous *ekphraseis* (independent texts). 2. Incorporated *ekphraseis* (descriptions that are part of a longer composition, such as a historical text, an encomium or an epistle). 3. Embedded *ekphraseis* (descriptions inserted into a longer description). The *ekphraseis* are then classified according to their subject matter (e.g., *ekphraseis* on persons, actions, places, periods of time, works of arts, buildings, animals), thus following the example of the ancient rhetorical theory. The author highlights the commonest subjects of the *ekphraseis* (e.g., springtime, Constantinople, imperial triumph, Eros, Hagia Sophia, the Holy Land) and displays the literary taste of the twelfth-century Byzantine authors.

In the fourth part (pp. 217–232), the author analyzes some of the recurring literary themes, stylistic features, rhetorical devices and figures of speech that are typical of the ekphrastic production of the Komnenian period. He begins with a discussion of the relationship of the texts to the artistic objects they describe, presenting the view of the Byzantine authors that discourse can capture moments and provide an animated spectacle better than the visual arts. Then he presents the two leading themes of the Byzantine *ekphraseis*, namely beauty and eroticism. According to TAXIDIS, the Byzantine authors stress the whiteness of the skin and the rosiness of the lips in the case of feminine beauty, and the brilliance of the eyes in the case of male beauty; this reveals the ideal of beauty in twelfth-century Byzantium (p. 220). The theme of eroticism is interconnected with that of beauty, predominating in the erotic novels of the 12th century (p. 222). The author then presents the main features of the descriptions of the springtime, earthly paradises, gardens and landscapes, which were either real or depicted in a work of art (pp. 223–225). According to TAXIDIS, another topic, which

indirectly occurs in the *ekphraseis*, is the so-called “imperial propaganda.” The author rightly states that, since some of these texts were composed in the context of the Komnenian court, they aimed at praising the emperor, thus serving the imperial ideology (see, for instance, the poem of Theodore Prodromos on the triumphal return of John II Komnenos to Constantinople in 1133). The chapter continues with a section on mythological motifs, biblical subjects, and motifs drawn from the natural and animal world. The author points out that the *ekphraseis* of the Komnenian age abound with references to mythological figures/subjects (gods, Erotes, Muses, Graces), but they have only few motifs drawn from the Christian tradition (p. 229). The chapter ends with a section dedicated to the linguistic style of the *ekphraseis*, which offers an account of the commonest figures of speech and rhetorical devices used in the *ekphraseis* (e.g., paronomasy, simile, metaphor, antithesis, alliteration, circular framing, rhetorical question). It also highlights the use of terms related to sight, spectacle, viewing, which are particularly relevant to the act of seeing and describing, and the use of references to geometrical shapes, especially for descriptions of buildings or faces (p. 232).

The last part (pp. 233–236) draws our attention to narrative techniques that are displayed in the *ekphraseis*, such as the “first person narration,” the “description enriched with diegesis,” and the “gradual focusing”. It ends with some interesting conclusions regarding the authorial aims and the function of the *ekphraseis* as “exercises for teaching purposes,” “texts composed for the reader’s enjoyment,” or as texts performed at the literary theatra of the Komnenian court or in the context of a literary competition.

In his concluding section (pp. 237–238), the author mentions three topics which I believe can offer fertile ground for further research on the ekphrastic production of the Byzantine period in general. The first one is the relation of the *ekphraseis* to existing works of art and to buildings.¹ The second one, which in my opinion is highly important, is the relation of the Byzantine *ekphraseis* to the ancient tradition. A question that deserves exploration in a future study is the extent to which the Byzantine *ekphraseis* depend on the *ekphraseis* of late antiquity, since several of the recurring

1. Important contributions in this direction are: IOANNES VASSIS – LIZ JAMES, *Constantine of Rhodes, On Constantinople and the Church of the Holy Apostles*. Farnham 2012, and FOTEINI SPINGOU (ed.), *Sources for Byzantine Art History. Volume 3. The Visual Culture of Later Byzantium (1081–1350)* (forthcoming). See also the bibliography mentioned by TAXIDIS in p. 8 (n. 47).

topics of the descriptive texts of the Komnenian period are already present in the literary production of late antiquity.² Notable examples are the descriptions of springtime, battles, and triumphs found in the works of Nonnos of Panopolis and in the epigrams of the Greek Anthology, as well as the eroticism and other similar topics that characterize the erotic novels of late antiquity.³ The third point is the study of the emotions expressed in the *ekphraseis* from the perspective either of the narrator/author or of the personified object.

With a careful analysis of a large corpus of texts, TAXIDIS' book provides a clear overview of the ekphrastic production of the twelfth century, an epoch that could be characterized as the apogee of the Byzantine *ekphrasis*. It highlights the most important topics of the Byzantine *ekphraseis*, their function, and it contributes to our understanding of the Byzantine aesthetics, for it provides insight into a large set of themes much valued by the authors of the Komnenian period. The monograph makes a significant contribution to the research field of *ekphraseis* and is strongly recommended to Byzantinists, art historians, and students of Byzantine studies, as well as to classicists who are interested in the reception of the ancient ekphrastic traditions in Byzantium.

Keywords

ekphrasis; Komnenian period; narrative techniques; reception of antiquity

2. In addition, the rhetorical vocabulary and archaizing language of several of the Byzantine *ekphraseis* point to a relationship to ancient models. Cf. MAGUIRE's words "the Byzantines used the language of ancient art criticism to characterize their own art" in ELIZABETH JEFFREYS – JOHN HALDON – ROBIN CORMACK (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies*. Oxford 2008, p. 723.

3. For some examples, see LAURA MIGUÉLEZ CAVERO, *Poems in Context: Greek Poetry in the Egyptian Thebaid 200–600 AD (Sozomena 2)*. Berlin – New York 2008, pp. 283–309.