

ENRICO E. PRODI (ed.), Τζετζικαὶ ἔρευναί. (Eikasmos. Studi di Eikasmos online 4). Bologna: Pàtron Editore 2022. xxxv, 481 pp. – ISBN 978-88-5558001-4. [Open Access](#)

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The outspoken grammarian John Tzetzes is perhaps one of the most colourful characters of the intellectual scene in twelfth-century Constantinople. He is particularly notorious for the harsh criticism and the verbal abuse he frequently directed at professional rivals and scholarly predecessors. His strong authorial presence, moreover, has become such a distinctive feature of his oeuvre that it is used as tool by modern scholars to identify Tzetzean authorship: if a text is not polemical in tone or self-promotional in character, it can hardly be the work of our grammarian, so the reasoning goes. Recent decades have seen a veritable surge in Tzetzean studies in parallel with an increased interest in the literary culture of the Komnenian period in general. Whereas the earliest interest in Tzetzes' work in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was largely of a text-historical nature, Tzetzes has now begun to be studied as an author and scholar active in the competitive professional milieu of Constantinople under the reign of the Komnenian emperors. Recent studies have placed his authorial persona, autobiographical tendencies, and didactic strategies firmly within the socio-cultural and literary context of the twelfth century. As the first collection of studies devoted exclusively to Tzetzes and his work, the volume under review is a milestone in Tzetzean scholarship.

This volume of eighteen essays written in English, Italian, and French is the product of a conference organized by the volume's editor, ENRICO EMANUELE PRODI, at Ca' Foscari University of Venice in September 2018. It brings together scholars specializing in classics and Byzantine studies who are at different points in their careers. As a result, we are presented with a wide variety of approaches to Tzetzes' oeuvre: some contributions concentrate on hitherto unedited or poorly studied texts by offering new editions or exploring neglected material (e.g. the essays by BÉRTOLA, BIANCHI, BRACCINI, CAVARZERAN, COWARD, and PIZZONE); others

examine better-known texts from new perspectives (e.g. GERBI, LAURITZEN, LAUXTERMANN, MONDINI, MUÑOZ MORCILLO, and RAVANI) or address neglected aspects of Tzetzes' works (e.g. D'AGOSTINI, MANTOVA, and RANCE). There is—perhaps inevitably—a strong focus on the reception of ancient texts (present in almost all the essays) and of specific ancient figures (JOUANNO on Alexander the Great, LOVATO on Thersites, NOVOKHATKO on Peisistratus and the wise men he commissioned). Several essays, moreover, aim at tracing the sources of the content or language of Tzetzes' works (e.g. JOUANNO, NOVOKHATKO, MANTOVA, and RANCE). The later reception of Tzetzes' work appears in the contributions of CAVARZERAN and MUÑOZ MORCILLO, even if more research remains to be done to fully appreciate the afterlife of Tzetzes' oeuvre in the later Byzantine period and the Italian Renaissance.

The volume opens with an introduction by ENRICO PRODI that offers a survey of Tzetzes' work and some of its recurring features, along with a brief overview of the history of Tzetzean scholarship, supported by ample references to both older and more recent studies. Next, TOMMASO BRACCINI presents the first edition of the final part of the allegorical prologue to Tzetzes' *Verse Chronicle*, a work that is, with the exception of several fragments, lost.¹ In this prologue, Tzetzes interprets various ancient myths, such as the wedding of Peleus and Thetis and the birth of Athena, as cosmogonical allegories. Braccini has discovered the most complete known version to date of the prologue in an Alexandrian manuscript (Patriarchal Library 62); he determines its place in the *stemma codicum* and edits the hitherto unknown verses that conclude the prologue. The edited verses (over one hundred) are accompanied by an English translation and annotations that connect Tzetzes' readings to the earlier allegorical tradition as well as Tzetzes' exegetical oeuvre more broadly. Tzetzes concludes the prologue by asserting his expertise in the art of grammar and disparaging those ignorant rivals utterly unaware of the rules of the *technē*. With their combative tone, these concluding lines form an appropriate bridge to the next set of chapters.

The next four chapters of the volume all deal in one way or another with Tzetzes' usual polemical stance towards his intellectual rivals, whether contemporary or ancient. AGLAE PIZZONE presents the results of her

1. See esp. HERBERT HUNGER, Johannes Tzetzes, *Allegorien aus der Verschronik: Kommentierte Textausgabe*. Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinischen Gesellschaft 4 (1955) pp. 13–49.

recent work on Tzetzes' Hermogenean commentary and the so-called *Logismoi*, a work long considered lost but recently rediscovered in the well-known manuscript Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Vossianus gr. Q1.² In addition to these texts, PIZZONE focuses on selected letters and the *Histories* accompanying them in order to shed light on Tzetzes' complex relationship with the Kamateros family, whose patronage he may have enjoyed at some point during his career. PIZZONE demonstrates how this significant episode in Tzetzes' life simultaneously offers us a view of the dynamics of public performance and literary patronage in the twelfth century, as well as the disputes over the interpretation of Hermogenes that may reveal broader intellectual rivalries. Her discussion shows that Tzetzes' oeuvre can provide us with a diachronic narrative of his life and work; each text reveals new dimensions when placed in dialogue with other works. NUNZIO BIANCHI offers the first edition of a caustic poem in the manuscript Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Conv. soppr. 627, best known for its important place in the transmission of the ancient novels by Chariton and Longus. Bianchi suggests that the poem may date to the early years of Tzetzes' professional activity in the 1140s as the lines are written in the 'un-technical' trimeter which Tzetzes would criticize at a later point in his career. In thirty-seven lines, Tzetzes lashes out against the 'son of a goat' who ruined a tome of his verses by removing a section from it. The poem is interesting for the glimpse it offers into the material facets of the literary culture of Tzetzes' time, and this is indeed among the aspects that receives the most attention in Bianchi's detailed annotations. YULIA MANTOVA delves into Tzetzes' invective language by focusing on his scholia to the *Histories*. She is particularly interested in the obscenities and swear words that do not stem from ancient literature (esp. Aristophanes) as these may reflect the everyday language spoken on the streets of Constantinople. MANTOVA suggests that words belonging to different linguistic registers may have had different 'levels of rudeness'. From a literary point of view, however, Tzetzes' switching between the learned and the colloquial should also be placed within the broader context of twelfth-century literary production, with its frequent use of the vernacular or the 'mixed language'.³ MARC LAUX-

2. For the rediscovery of the *Logismoi*, see AGLAE PIZZONE, Self-authorization and Strategies of Autography in John Tzetzes: The *Logismoi* Rediscovered. GRBS 60 (2020) pp. 650–688.

3. See e.g. MARTIN HINTERBERGER, The Language of Byzantine Poetry: New Words, Alternative Forms, and 'Mixed Language'. In: WOLFRAM HÖRANDNER – ANDREAS RHOBY – NIKOS ZAGKLAS (eds), A Companion to Byzantine Poetry (Brill's

TERMANN connects Tzetzes' frequent mockery of his colleagues for not understanding the workings of the so-called *dichrona*—vowels that can be either long or short—with ancient and Byzantine metrical scholarship and versification, demonstrating that irregularities in Tzetzes' verse stem from his understanding of irregular vowel lengthening in Hesiod and Homer. We should therefore not consider certain 'metrical oddities' in his verses to be mistakes but rather to be in conformance with Byzantine metrical theory.

GIULIA GERBI re-evaluates the label of 'fictional' that scholars have attributed to certain letters in Tzetzes' epistolographic corpus—amounting to ten out of 107 according to some scholars, fifteen according to others. GERBI argues for clear distinctions within this supposedly fictional set of letters: while six of them are clearly composed as model letters that offer examples of how to address certain individuals in the style of an *ethopoia* ('What X would say when addressing Y'), in GERBI's reading the remaining nine should be considered 'real' letters in the context of Tzetzes' activity as a teacher and scholar. Even though they are anonymized, these letters revolve around the same kind of professional competition and teaching controversies that we encounter throughout Tzetzes' oeuvre. GERBI's discussion is supported by close readings of the relevant letters, most of which appear in English translation for the first time. JESÚS MUÑOZ MORCILLO sets out to explore Tzetzes' contribution to 'the understanding of *ekphrasis* in the twelfth century' (p. 158) as well as its possible influence on the Renaissance by concentrating on Tzetzes' description of a silk scarf he had received as a gift (*Letter 76*). The chapter devotes the most space to the analysis of different Tzetzean descriptions and their typical features, which, however, may be more the result of the overarching didactic or literary character of the works in which they occur rather than a specific understanding of *ekphrasis* on the part of their author. The sections devoted to Tzetzes' relations to twelfth-century *ekphrasis* more broadly and the reception of Tzetzean perceptions in the Renaissance remain less developed. The next two chapters focus on the reception of certain ancient figures in Tzetzes' work. VALERIA LOVATO concentrates on Thersites and his adversary Odysseus in different Tzetzean texts and the Homeric commentaries of Tzetzes' contemporary Eustathios of Thessalonike in order to open a window onto the competitive dynamics of the twelfth-century literary scene. She reads their diverging interpretations of Thersites as reflections

Companions to the Byzantine World 4). Leiden 2019, pp. 38–65, with further bibliography.

of their self-fashioning as scholars and exegetes, most likely in direct exchange with one another. LOVATO's analysis demonstrates that the classical scholarship of figures such as Eustathios and Tzetzes is firmly grounded within its contemporary intellectual context; indeed, to use LOVATO's words, 'past and present were in constant dialogue' (p. 210) in the Byzantine exegesis of ancient authorities. CORINNE JOUANNO explores the rich reception of Alexander the Great throughout Tzetzes' oeuvre, providing a catalogue with the relevant passages as an appendix to her chapter. She divides Tzetzes' references to the Alexander material into three categories: some serve to illustrate the extraordinary scale of Alexander's adventures; others present Alexander as a model of the good ruler, while a third group of references concern Alexander's relationship with various intellectuals and artists of his time. JOUANNO's focus is primarily on the sources from which Tzetzes drew his material, in most cases rare texts that allowed Tzetzes to parade his erudition. On the other hand, however, he made use of the popular *Alexander Romance*, a concession perhaps to the less educated audience of the didactic *Histories*, as Jouanno suggests. In his mixture of learned and popular traditions, Tzetzes seems less interested in the historical accuracy of the Alexander material than in its edifying and narrative potential.

The contributions by UGO MONDINI and ALBERTO RAVANI offer new interpretations of the Homerizing *Little Big Iliad* and the *Allegories of the Iliad*, respectively. MONDINI interprets the programmatic opening scholion to the *Little Big Iliad* in order to explore the rhetorical and didactic implications of Tzetzes' emphasis on conciseness. This emphasis, it should be stressed, is consistent throughout Tzetzes' didactic oeuvre as a central feature of his pedagogical strategy.⁴ The second and third sections of the chapter shed light on the structure of the text and its scholia: MONDINI argues that Tzetzes carefully crafted them following the development of his readers' knowledge and in close imitation of Homer in order to enhance the didactic value of his work and demonstrate his literary virtuosity in a bid to impress potential patrons and aristocratic parents with his literary skill and pedagogical ability. RAVANI offers a new interpretation of the long prolegomena to the *Allegories of the Iliad*. His close reading of the text leads him

4. See e.g. BAUKJE VAN DEN BERG, John Tzetzes as Didactic Poet and Learned Grammarian. *DOP* (2020) pp. 285–302, esp. 291–292; MARIA TOMADAKI, Uncovering the Literary Sources of John Tzetzes' *Theogony*. In: BAUKJE VAN DEN BERG – DIVNA MANOLOVA – PRZEMYSŁAW MARCINIĄK (eds), *Byzantine Commentaries on Ancient Greek Texts, 12th–15th Centuries*. Cambridge 2022, pp. 130–147, esp. 143.

to the conclusion that Tzetzes had planned to produce something more like a historical account of the Homeric story material, a chronicle-like text with novelistic overtones à la Constantine Manasses' *Synopsis Chronike*, before the court commissioned him to produce the allegorical rendering that we find in the main body of the text. RAVANI argues that we should therefore not see the work as intended by Tzetzes as an exegetical endeavour, but as a text within the chronicle tradition—yet exegesis and historiography might not be mutually exclusive. RAVANI's interpretation raises questions about the relationship between (the prolegomena to) the *Allegories* and (the allegorical prologue to) the *Verse Chronicle*, which seems to have been intended to be exactly the kind of work that Ravani postulates here for the *Allegories*.

The next two chapters by FREDERICK LAURITZEN and ANNA NOVOKHATKO, respectively, revolve around Tzetzes' use of ancient myth. Lauritzen focuses on Tzetzes' methodological qualms with Psellos' Christianizing interpretations of Homeric myth, arguing that the difference between the two exegetes lies mostly in their divergent audiences and the disciplinary affiliation of their exegeses. Whereas Psellos offered a philosophical reading to an educated audience, Tzetzes' interpretation is rhetorical rather than philosophical and targets an audience unfamiliar with the *Iliad*. While this may be true to some extent, LAURITZEN's discussion concentrates primarily on Psellos and does not take into consideration the broader hermeneutic principles of Tzetzes' allegoresis. Tzetzes' methodological objections to Psellos' interpretations are founded on the premise that the allegorical meaning of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* had been deliberately constructed by Homer. In Tzetzes' view, therefore, the only correct interpretation of the Homeric text is the one that recovers the meaning intended by its author. As Homer lived in a pre-Christian world, he could never have intended for his poetry to be read through a Christianizing lens.⁵ NOVOKHATKO explores Tzetzes' account of the Peisistratan recension of Homer and its possible ancient sources, an episode in the history of the Homeric text that in Tzetzes' perception likely belonged to the realm of historical fact rather than myth. Tzetzes presents Peisistratus as the great

5. On authorial intention in Byzantine allegorical exegesis, see e.g. ERIC CULLHED, *Eustathios of Thessalonike: Commentary on Homer's Odyssey*, vol. 1: *On Rhapsodies A–B* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia 17). Uppsala 2016, pp. 29*–33*. See also PANAGIOTIS ROILLOS, 'Unshapely Bodies and Beautifying Embellishments': The Ancient Epics in Byzantium, Allegorical Hermeneutics, and the Case of Ioannes Diakonos Galenos. *JÖByz* 64 (2014) pp. 231–246.

Maecenas who safeguarded the transmission of the Homeric poems—just as his own aristocratic patron, Constantine Kotertzes, is a second Peisistratus to himself, a second Homer.

The next three chapters focus on largely neglected scholia to various ancient authors. JACOPO CAVARZERAN edits and analyses possible Tzetzean scholia to Euripides in the codex Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, gr. 909, a thirteenth-century manuscript containing the text of nine Euripidean plays. Based on a close analysis of selected scholia, CAVARZERAN concludes that the compiler of the manuscript likely did not have access to a Tzetzean commentary or scholia to Euripides but drew the relevant material from other Tzetzean works. More than anything, therefore, the scholia in the Vatican manuscript demonstrate that Tzetzes' works continued to be read a century after their composition. JULIÁN BÉRTOLA studies Tzetzes' verse scholia to Thucydides and Herodotus. He argues that the scholia, like most of Tzetzes' exegetical output, focus mostly on the content, grammar, and style of the work under discussion, that they reflect the same authorial and didactic attitudes manifest in his other works, and that they must be read as literature in their own right. Throughout his exegesis, Tzetzes aims to correct and control the ancient authorities under discussion as a veritable 'auditor (*logistes*) of the ancients and the moderns' (*Iambic Poem* 3.361 Leone). Scholia not pursuing this mission and lacking typical Tzetzean features are therefore hard to ascribe to our grammarian, as demonstrated by BÉRTOLA's discussion of a previously unedited scholion from the Herodotean codex Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 70.3. THOMAS COWARD gives us a promising foretaste of his planned critical edition of Tzetzes' commentary on Lycophron's *Alexandra* by offering a sample of edited excerpts, with English translation, a tripartite *apparatus testimoniorum* (parallels within Tzetzes' oeuvre; Tzetzes' sources; instances where Tzetzes may have been used as source) along with a critical apparatus, and explanatory notes. A new edition would greatly facilitate a closer study of the ways in which Tzetzes read Lycophron's labyrinthine poem and the role it may have played in Byzantine culture and education. That Tzetzes' work may have enjoyed some popularity is suggested by the significant number of manuscripts that survive: more than seventy with the entire commentary, in addition to seventeen or eighteen containing fragments of the work.

The two final chapters address the role of technical literature and scientific works in Tzetzes' oeuvre. CHIARA D'AGOSTINI explores Tzetzes' reception of Ptolemy's *Geography*, of which he appears to have produced a para-

phrase in dodecasyllables that is now lost. His use of Ptolemy, D'AGOSTINI argues, must be read alongside his criticism of the *Description of the Known World* by the second-century geographer Dionysius Periegetes, which some of Tzetzes' contemporaries preferred as the basis for teaching geography. Among them was Tzetzes' rival Eustathios of Thessalonike, who composed a commentary on Dionysius' poem and, through his exegesis, compensates for some of the faults on the basis of which Tzetzes rejected the work.⁶ D'AGOSTINI's analysis shows that geography was considered an integral part of the educational curriculum, closely related to the social and political dimensions of geography in the twelfth century in general and in Tzetzes' work in particular. PHILIP RANCE, finally, offers a detailed survey of Tzetzes' engagement with ancient scientific literature, with a particular focus on the sources surrounding catoptrics and the famous mirror of Archimedes. RANCE argues that Tzetzes must have been familiar with the works of the fourth-century mathematician Pappos of Alexandria and the sixth-century architect Anthemios of Tralles as well as with certain other technical works that are no longer extant. Tzetzes inserts technical details from these scientific sources into Cassius Dio's historical account of Archimedes and the Siege of Syracuse, revealing an interest in applied rather than theoretical mathematics. RANCE concludes that the technical language used by Tzetzes demonstrates that he must have had at least a superficial knowledge of scientific literature—another element in his encyclopaedic polymathy.

The collected essays shed light on diverse aspects of Tzetzes' oeuvre and, to varying degrees, on the intellectual world of twelfth-century Byzantium. The volume is available open access for students and scholars interested in the Byzantine afterlife of ancient literature, the history of Byzantine scholarship, and the world of erudition and education during the reigns of the Komnenian emperors. The new material presented and the new directions explored, in addition to the generous number of passages offered in translation, make this volume a valuable starting point for future studies on one

6. On Eustathios' commentary, see now DIMITER ANGELOV, *Repurposing Ancient Knowledge: Eustathios of Thessaloniki and His Geographical Anthology*. In: DIMITRI KASTRITSIS – ANNA STAVRAKOPOULOU – ANGUS STEWART (eds), *Imagined Geographies in the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Beyond* (Hellenic Studies Series 97). Washington, DC, 2022; INMACULADA PÉREZ MARTÍN, *Geography at School: Eustathios of Thessalonike's *Parekbolai on Dionysius Periegetes**. In: BAUKJE VAN DEN BERG – DIVNA MANOLOVA – PRZEMYSŁAW MARCINIĄK (eds), *Byzantine Commentaries on Ancient Greek Texts, 12th–15th Centuries*. Cambridge 2022, pp. 195–213.

of the many fascinating figures of the twelfth century.

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Keywords

John Tzetzes; Byzantine literature; classical tradition