

BODY LANGUAGE IN THE NARRATIVE OF THE HISTORIES WRITTEN BY BYZANTINE HISTORIANS OF THE 11TH AND 12TH CENTURIES

The presence of body language in the literary texts of byzantine writers is a topic that has not been thoroughly examined, in contrast with similar phenomena in literary texts of the western medieval literature or other periods and writers.

We use the term “body language” to refer to all nonverbal forms of communication, such as physiognomonics, movements and posture, instinctive reactions, behavior in space and in respect with other people, facial expressions and glances etc. In oral communication, of course, body language as a transmitter of messages can be marginal or without importance. However, when written communication is concerned and mostly literature, since the text mediates so that the reader can form concepts and impressions, even if body language appears sporadically, these references to such details are never undistinguished or random.

We choose to focus on the 11th and the 12th centuries, for there we find a substantial number of history writers, many of whom stand out due to their unique literary style. Specifically we will study the works of Michael Psellos, Michael Attaleiates, John Scylitzes, George Kedrenos, Nikephoros Vryennios, Anna Komnene, John Kinnamos, John Zonaras, Constantine Manasses, Michael Glycas, Eustathios of Thessaloniki and Niketas Choniates.

It is a period with remarkable diversity concerning the method of writing history: chronographies starting from the beginning of time (one written in lyrics); histories depicting events that the author has witnessed – whether earlier periods are included or not – or some that end before events contemporary to the author’s lifespan are mentioned; laudatory or critical histories; even a text written by the only female historian that Byzantium has to offer. Each historian had of course their own goals and they tried to achieve them with the means that seemed best to each of them, including the use of body language, which shows significant fluctuation in volume as well as in manner. However, our research will expand to compare our findings with the works of history writers from earlier periods, to reach reliable conclusions.

We will try to answer certain questions based on our examination of the texts concerned:

- Which writers use body language more frequent and which ones less frequent?
- What do they try to achieve with the use of body language? When do they use it and why?
- Where do they converge and when do they diverge?

– What is the difference between describing something as eyewitnesses and reproducing something from a source? In the second case, how close are they to the original?

– What do they owe to earlier writers and what new do they have to offer?

– Do they use earlier works concerning physiognomies, and, if so, to what extent?

– Can the differences be attributed to the different literary genre, to the passing of time and the changes in vogue, or mainly to the author's personal style and goals?

– What is the focus of each narrator (specific movements, specific persons)? Do they describe the movements of individuals or groups of people?

– What do they try to achieve by narrating events that never truly took place?

– Why do they describe one event with extreme detail, while another is barely mentioned at all?

– Since the majority – where body language is concerned – focuses on military events, why do some choose to include aspects of the everyday life?

– How do different historians describe the same event? What differences are there?

– Can we derive information concerning the everyday life and the ideals of the Byzantines based on the use of body language in the texts?

– How close to reality are the descriptions in the texts?

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