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Feasting and Reading: Some Suggestions on Approaching Banquet Scenes in *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*

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Abstract

This paper examines connections between Theodore Prodromos' *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* and the production of space in Byzantium in the early twelfth century. Previously, Panagiotis Roilos (2005) has argued that banquet scenes in *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* may have worked as liminal spaces within the narrative of the text, allowing the satirization and parody of established codes of conduct and communication. We build upon Roilos' work to propose that interplay between passages depicting feasting and performative contexts aligned with satirical elements within the text. This, we argue, rendered the humor and satire more explicit for the gathered audience. We locate the performance of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* in large halls in the households of a group involving the ex-empress Eirene Doukaina and her son-in-law Nikephoros Bryennios. Here we argue, the performance of the text contributed to the production of a space which challenged the emperor John II and his wife Piroška-Eirene's monopoly on dynastic imperial legitimacy. The article is intended as a case study which raises broader research questions on the spatial dimensions of twelfth-century literature. Suggestions for further research on this topic are offered in our conclusion.

Keywords: Banquets, Byzantium, Literature, Novels, Prodromos, Space, Twelfth Century.

Introduction

During the middle years of the twelfth century in Constantinople, the Byzantine capital, four texts concerned with the love and adventures shared by two principal characters were produced. They are Theodore Prodromos' *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* (most likely composed in the early 1130s), Eumathios Makrembolites' *Hysmine and Hysminias* (AD 1120-1150), Constantine Manasses' *Aristandros and Kallithea* (c1145), and Niketas Eugenianos' *Drosilla and Charikles* (c. AD

1156).¹ In this article, we examine connections between Prodromos' *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* and the production of space in Byzantium at the turn of the twelfth century. Our method involves a narratological analysis of the text. We also use Henri Lefebvre's analytical category of 'social space', articulated in his monograph *La production de l'espace*, to explain the connections between the text and processes of spatial production in Byzantium. We propose that *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* was read aloud in multiple spaces, rather than being focused to one space, known as a *theatron*, as has sometimes been argued in modern scholarship. This article is intended as a case study which raises broader research questions on the spatial dimensions of twelfth-century Byzantine literature, including the other novels. Suggestions for further research are offered in our conclusion.

The emergence of the four novels has attracted attention from scholars of Byzantine and medieval literature. Connections have been drawn between the western leanings of the Komnenoi, who were the ruling family in Byzantium in the twelfth century, and the production of the novels, or romances.² However, as the high-register Byzantine novels have distinct features from other vernacular romances composed in the medieval west, we argue that it is also effective to examine internal changes to Byzantine culture, in order to understand how the texts worked.³

Rhodanthe and Dosikles features several passages which depict banquets at length. Panagiotis Roilos has argued that banquet scenes in both *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* and *Hysmine and Hysminias* novels may work as liminal spaces within the narrative of the texts, allowing the satirization and parody of established codes of conduct and communication.⁴ Focusing on *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, we depart from Roilos to propose a hypothesis that interplay between passages depicting feasting and performative contexts aligned with satirical elements within the text. This, we argue, rendered the humour and satire more explicit for the gathered audience.

¹ The possible dates of composition of each novel are discussed by Elizabeth Jeffreys (2012) in the introductions to each novel. In addition, the appearance of the first written version of the epic *Digenes Akritas* and the satirical *Timarion* have also been dated to the mid twelfth century: Jeffreys, E., *Digenes Akritis*, lvi-lvii.

² For intertextual connections suggesting that the novels and western European texts influenced one another: Jeffreys, E., "The Comnenian Background to the romans d'antiquité", 455-66; Jeffreys, E., "Byzantine Romances: Eastern or Western?" 221-40.

³ Although the texts are often described as novels in modern scholarship (see for example the title of Elizabeth Jeffreys' 2012 English translation of the texts), they have also been described as romances. This is because the texts are versified. However, the texts are written in a high register of Greek, rather than the vernacular often associated with romances in other cultures. For a discussion of the problems involved with defining these texts as romances: Beaton, "Byzantine Verse Romances", 539-40. In this paper, we describe the texts as novels, in line with the conventions of Byzantine scholarship, whilst noting the problems surrounding their definition.

⁴ Roilos, *Poetics of the Twelfth Century Medieval Greek Novel*, 253-88.

Spatial contexts for *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*

It is now widely accepted amongst modern scholars that the texts which survive to us from eleventh- and twelfth-century Byzantium were once connected to a context involving oral performance.⁵ In this context it is useful to conceptualise the performance of these texts as a part of a process by which social space is produced through social actions, as proposed by Lefebvre.⁶ The oral performance of the four Byzantine novels has been connected with a space which has been described by modern scholars as a *theatron* (θέατρον).⁷ As will be seen below, the word was used by the Byzantines themselves, and appears in a variety of eleventh- and twelfth-century texts. In Byzantine texts, the word *theatron* is often associated with spaces involving literary performances and it was therefore first used by Herbert Hunger to describe literary circles in middle Byzantium.⁸

In Byzantine texts, however, θέατρον is also sometimes used to describe the hippodrome.⁹ Noticing this, Floris Bernard has argued that for the eleventh century the word does not refer to a specific sociocultural phenomenon. Rather, Bernard argues, θέατρον is sometimes used to emphasise the competitive element, by implicit comparison with the games of the hippodrome, of a variety of moments and spaces involving rhetorical and literary performances.¹⁰

⁵ See for example, Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos*, 353; Bernard, *Writing and Reading in Byzantine Secular Poetry*. In the novels, several speeches and songs can be found throughout the stories. These would have been appropriate for an audience listening to an oral performance, suggesting a performative context for the texts themselves. The songs are divided into choruses and stanzas, thus connecting them with ancient lyric or dramatic poetry, written for oral performance. See, Jeffrey, E., *Four Byzantine Novels*, 14, who connects this phenomenon with the antique pastoral poet Theocritus. In *Hysmine and Hysminias*, the prose story is interrupted several times by short verse passages, often derived from Euripides' tragedies, and longer iambic sections. It is notable that the three other twelfth-century novels, including *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* are written in verse metres, suitable for oral performance, thereby deviating from their ancient predecessors, which were all written in prose. Two of the novels are written in the twelve-syllable iambic trimeter, with *Aristandros and Kallithea* written in fifteen syllable political verse. For the iambic trimeter: Jeffrey, E., *Four Byzantine Novels*, 278-79. For political verse: Jeffrey, M., "The Nature and Origins of the Political Verse", 141-95.

⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 26-34. For a summary of the scholarship on space in Byzantine studies: Veikou, "Space in Texts and Space as text: A new approach to Byzantine spatial notions", 143-75, especially 144-47. For previous analyses of the spatial dimensions of performances in a Byzantine context: Agapitos, 1999, "Dreams and the Spatial Aesthetics of Narrative Presentation"; Nilsson, "Spatial Time and Temporal Space". For an analysis of the spatial turn in wider scholarship: Williamson, "The Spatial Turn of Social and Cultural History", 703-14.

⁷ Jeffrey, E., *Four Byzantine Novels*, 9-10.

⁸ Hunger, *Das Byzantinische Herrscherbild*.

⁹ See for example Psellos' description of the procession of the imperial women Zoe, Theodora and Maria Skleraina to the Hippodrome at, Psellos, *Chronographia*, VI, section 61. See further: Puchner, "Acting in the Byzantine Theatre".

¹⁰ Bernard, *Writing and Reading Byzantine Secular Poetry*, 98-99, 165-73; 211-212. See for example: Psellos, *Oration for Xiphilinos*, section 9. In his funeral oration for the patriarch John Xiphilinos (d.1075), the courtier and polymath Michael Psellos describes how when he and Xiphilinos were younger: Καὶ θέατρα μὲν ἐτελεῖτο δημόσια, καὶ ἀγωνοθέτης τούτοις προὔκαθητο, καὶ οἱ διαμιλλώμενοι περιδέξιοι· οἱ δὲ τῶν λόγων ἀγῶνες ἐψεύδοντο τούνομα, καὶ ἐν παραβύστῳ ἔνιοι τοὺς λόγους Ὑπεριθύριζον. Subsequent lines of Psellos' oration indicate that he is referring to contests between schools, involving teachers and his pupils.

We argue that Bernard’s observation is also relevant for the twelfth century. A large quantity of occasional verse and prose survives from this period. Amongst these texts we find some references to *theatra*, but it is not clear that these references consistently describe a specific space. At best, we argue, the appearance of the word shows how aspects of display and competition remained important within twelfth-century literary culture.¹¹ We suggest, for this period, it might be fruitful to think in further detail about the possibility that performances of texts, including the novels, took place in a variety of spaces and contexts.

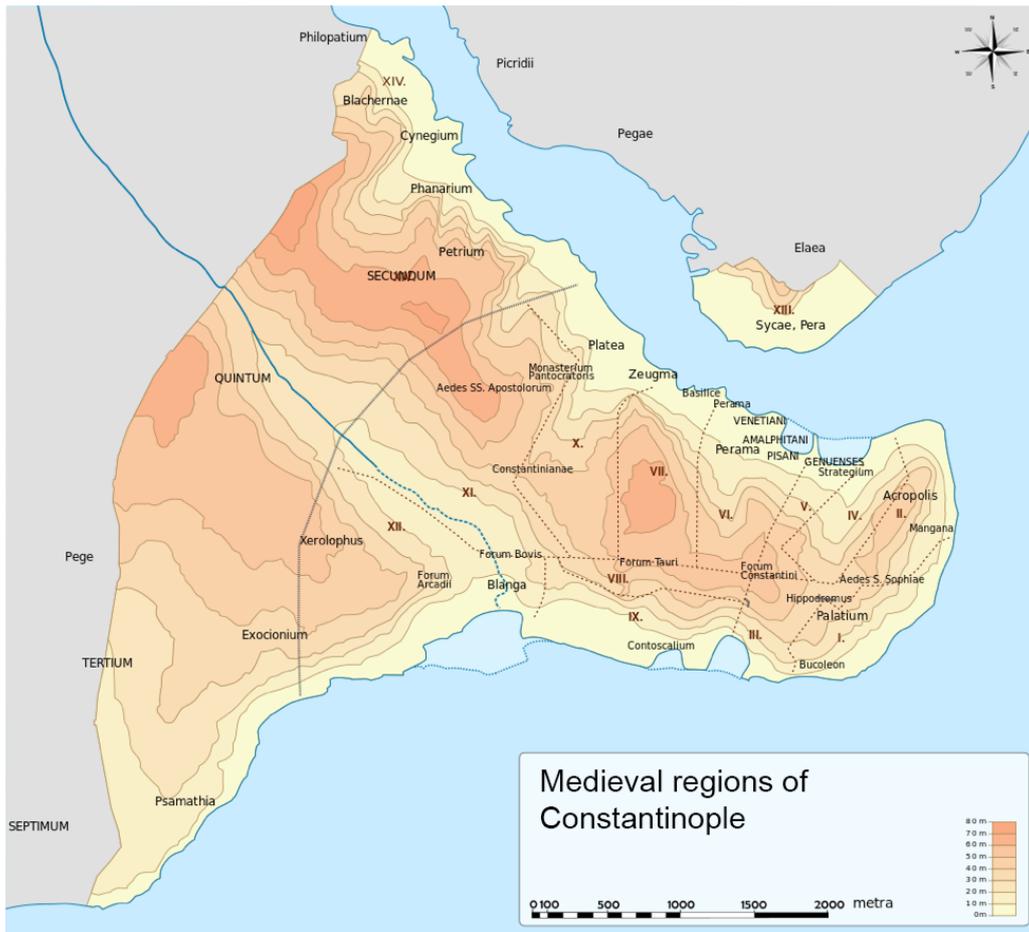


Figure 1: Map of Byzantine Constantinople showing numbered regions and major districts, including the Blachernae (top left) and the Great Palace (bottom right). Map adapted from Wikicommons users Andrew Dalby and Cplakidas. Licensed according to the licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. Universal Public Domain Dedication

¹¹ Magdalino has described the phenomenon of performance in different contexts in the twelfth century as connecting to an overarching culture of rhetorical theatre in the twelfth century: Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos*, 335-56. For twelfth-century references to a *theatron* see, Italikos (ed. Gautier), *Lettres et discours*, 146, 154. For Italikos see below.

In the twelfth century there is evidence that men-of-letters gave rhetorical and literary performances before audiences in great households (oἶκοι) outside of the main imperial palaces (the Blachernae and Great Palace, fig. 1). This is indicated by references in written sources, which also suggest performances took place within various spaces within these households, including audience halls, courtyards and gardens.¹² We suggest it might be fruitful to think in more detail about the different spaces and occasions within these oἶκοι, which may have provided settings for performances. Below, we argue that one occasion for performances of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* may have been feasts, perhaps held in large halls within households.

Theodore Prodromos, the writer of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, seems to have performed widely in this context. In a demotic verse written to Manuel I Komnenos soon after this emperor's accession in 1143, Prodromos provides us with some autobiographical information on his own literary career. He claims to have been primarily supported by the ex-empress Eirene Doukaina until her death in c1138.¹³ Eirene was the empress consort of Alexios I (r.1081-1118). However she was probably estranged from the imperial government during at least a part of the reign of her son John II Komnenos, because she had attempted to arrange for her son-in-law Nikephoros Bryennios to succeed Alexios.

Prodromos' own account suggests that he produced texts for Doukaina during this time.¹⁴ *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* is however dedicated to a *Kaisar*.¹⁵ The content of the prologue to the text suggests that a presentation copy was prepared for this person. Modern scholars agree that the

¹² For example, the poet Manganeios Prodromos, writing in the second half of the twelfth century, appears to have performed in various spaces in the household of Eirene the *Sevastokratorissa* (the sister-in-law of Manuel). He also appears to have received food and lodging from her. He also hoped that she would secure his retirement in the Mangana complex located on the first hill of Constantinople. Manganeios Prodromos' poems where he appeals to Eirene concerning his retirement at the Mangana are published by, Bernardinello, *Theodore Prodromos*. See also, Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos*, 351.

¹³ Part of this verse is translated at Magalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos*, 351. Magdalino also points out that Prodromos neglects to mention that he had also sought the support of Doukaina's daughter, the famous historian Anna Komnene, and her son Isaac, who was also a writer. For Prodromos' life: Hörandner, *Historische Gedichte*, 22-35.

¹⁴ The date of Eirene's death is disputed, but she is described as deceased in the typikon for John Komnenos and Eirene-Piroska's foundation of the Pantokrator monastery in 1136. However, this passage of Pantokrator's typikon must be a later interpolation because it also describes Nikephoros Bryennios as deceased, but his wife Anna Komnene writes that her husband contracted a fatal illness during John II's first campaign against Antioch, which took place in 1137/1138. The 1152 typikon for the Kosmoteira monastery, founded by Eirene's son Isaac, also states that she died on 19 February in the first indiction. Between 1118 and 1136, the only date that matches with this statement is 19 February 1123. However, Prodromos and Italikos also composed a poem which describes Eirene as mourning her third son Andronikos, which are further discussed below. In Italikos' poem, Andronikos is described fighting the Getes across the Danube. Italikos' description of this campaign seems to match that which the historian John Kinnamos says John II fought against the Hungarians in 1129. Eirene's death was therefore most likely on February 19 1138, which was in the first indiction, shortly before Bryennios' death in the same year. For further analysis, and a summary of the sources: Polemis, *The Doukai*, 71-72 n15.

¹⁵ Prodromos, *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, Dedication.

Kaisar is most likely to be Nikephoros Bryennios.¹⁶ The text was likely presented to Bryennios after 1122 (the date of Prodromos' earliest securely dated writings) but before Bryennios died in 1138.¹⁷ The dedication does not however contradict Prodromos' assertion that he was primarily supported by Doukaina in these years. As will be outlined in further detail in the last section of this article, there is evidence that Bryennios was involved in a group including some of the Komnenoi-Doukai family and their relatives by marriage, who partook in intellectual activities during John II's reign. As will be shown, Doukaina was preeminent in this group, and so a text dedicated to Bryennios would likely have been implicitly written for her reception too.

In the remainder of this article we will first discuss passages within *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, which reflect evidence from other sources for twelfth-century Byzantine feasting practices. Then, in the following section, we conduct a more detailed prosopographical analysis of the group involving Doukaina and Bryennios. We suggest that parts of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* may have been performed when an audience gathered to feast in the households of Doukaina, Bryennios, or one of their allies. Lastly, we will highlight the possible significance of dynastic rivalry as context for the composition of Prodromos' *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, especially the satirisation of Byzantine culture during feast scenes.

Evidence for oral performance in feast scenes

In this section, we will focus on the significance of banquets and feasts within the narrative structure of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*. Below, two banquets occurring in the text will be examined in detail. Through a comparison with other written and visual sources we will show that several elements in these passages reflect feasting practice in twelfth-century Byzantium. We will then argue that the text was likely performed orally in a feast setting, and that the clustering of realistic elements around feast scenes was therefore especially significant. We will propose a hypothesis that they aligned with satirical elements in the same passages to alert the audience that here the text functioned as a critique of the outside world, namely twelfth-century Constantinople.

The first banquet in *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* occurs in the second book (II, lines 57-495). Several elements reflect twelfth-century practice. First, before the start of the meal, Rhodanthe

¹⁶ Jeffreys, E., *Four Byzantine Novels*, 7; Agapitos, "Poets and Painters", 176-77.

¹⁷ In 1122 Prodromos wrote a poem for the crowning of John II's son Alexios: Prodromos (ed. Hörandner), *Historische Gedichte*, 177-81.

displays reluctance to participate because she is a virgin and therefore considers it inappropriate to be present amongst a great number of men.¹⁸ This compares with the writings of the twelfth-century canonist Balsamon, who describes how pious women sometimes avoided feasts from fear of the potentially lecherous behaviour of gathered men on these occasions.¹⁹ Next, as the party takes their seats, the order of seating is described in detail (II.97-104).

*He was at the head, in the chief place,
Seated together with his friend the merchant.
Immediately below them was Myrtipnoe on the right,
And with her Rhodanthe, and the third
Was Myrtipnoe's daughter, the maiden Kallichroe.
We were opposite, below Stratokles,
I next to him and a little lower Dryas,
And the third with us was the sailor Nausikrates. (II.97-104, trans. Jeffreys, E.).²⁰*

This reflects the focus upon seating order as a signifier of hierarchy and status in middle-Byzantine feast settings. The stress on formality and rank in the text bears comparison with the German ambassador Liutprand of Cremona's description of strict seating order at a tenth-century imperial banquet in Constantinople. Further comparisons may be drawn with the focus on seating order in the tenth-century *Book of Ceremonies* attributed to Constantine VII and the fourteenth-century ceremonial book by Pseudo Kodynos.²¹

Once the feast has begun, some details are provided on mixing, pouring and offering of wine. A character named Dryas offers a cup to Rhodanthe as a romantic gesture (II.141-6).

¹⁸ 'πῶς οὖν, Δοσίκλεις, εἰσοῦσα τὴν θύραν / τόσων μετ' ἀνδρῶν συμφάγω γυνὴ μία;' 'How, Dosikles, can I enter that door / and a woman on her own - join in a meal with so many men?' (II, lines 74-5, trans. Jeffreys, E.).

¹⁹ Balsamon's comments are summarised by Kazhdan and Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture*, 23, who also note that John Zonaras made similar observations. See further, Jeffreys, E., *Four Byzantine Novels*, 38 n.55, Roilos, *Poetics of the Twelfth Century Medieval Greek Novel*, 247. The eleventh-century advice book written by Katakalon Kekaumenos stresses the need for younger women to be secluded, Kekaumenos, *Consilia et Narrationes*, III. See also the depiction of a secluded virgin in the epic *Digenes Akritas*, which may have been first put into writing in the twelfth century: *Digenes Akritas*, IV, lines 254-299.

²⁰ Ἄνω μὲν αὐτὸς ἐς κορυφαῖον θρόνον / ὁμοῦ καθεσθεις τῷ φίλῳ συνεμπόρω: / εὐθὺς δ' ὑπ' αὐτοὺς δεξιὰ Μυρτιπνόη, / καὶ δὴ μετ' αὐτήν ἢ Ῥοδάνθη, καὶ τρίτη / Μυρτιπνόης παῖς, παρθένος Καλλιχροῆ: / τὰ δ' ἔνθεν ἡμεῖς ὑπὸ τὸν Στρατοκλέα, / ἐγὼ μετ' αὐτόν, καὶ κατωτέρω Δρύας, / τρίτος δ' ὑφ' ἡμᾶς ναυτίλος Ναυσικράτης.

²¹ Liutprand of Cremona, *Mission to Constantinople*, section 447; Constantine VII, *Book of Ceremonies*, sections R70-71; Pseudo Kodynos (ed. Macrides), *Book of Ceremonies*, 272.

(...) but the gentle lad Dryas,
 Overcome by an unwarranted passion for Rhodanthe,
 Jumped up in a frenzy and seized the wine bowl,
 And mixed a pleasant cup for the guests to drink.
 Coming up to Rhodanthe like one possessed,
 He took a sip from the bowl first and gave it to the girl. (II.141-6, trans. Jeffreys, E.).²²

This is a recurring topos in Byzantine texts, including *Hysmine and Hysminias*, as well as earlier ancient literature.²³ The frequent appearance of this topos in Byzantine texts suggests that it is reflective of feasting practices, where romantic gestures may have been more acceptable than in other spaces. This suggestion is corroborated by the twelfth-century canonists Theodore Balsamon and John Zonaras, who both write that pious women sometimes avoided feasts, because they feared the lewd behaviour of the participants.²⁴

Finally, a large part of this banquet scene is taken up by Dosikles telling stories about his adventures (II.171-485). Other written sources suggest that this reflects a common practice in Byzantium. For example, a letter written by Michael Psellos between 1068 and 1071 to the exiled Caesar John Doukas recounts how the reigning emperor Romanos Diogenes had been listening to stories about the Caesar whilst at table (ἐπιτραπέζια).²⁵ In a monastic context, two early fourteenth-century *typikons* (foundation documents) for the Constantinopolitan monasteries of Lips and Bebaia Elpis prescribe that edifying works be read aloud during meal times.²⁶ We should also note here that the depiction of oral performances which evoked the oral performance of the text itself

²² Ἄλλ' ὁ προσηγῆς μειρακίσκος ὁ Δρύας, / ἄλοῦς ἔρωτι τῆς Ῥοδάνθης ἀδίκῳ, / βακχῶν προπηδᾷ καὶ κρατῆρα λαμβάνει, / λαρὸν δὲ κινῶν τοῖς ξένοις πιεῖν πόμα. / Εἰς γούν Ῥοδάνθην ἔμμανῶς ἀφιγμένος / διδοῖ προπιῶν τὸν κρατῆρα τῇ κόρῃ·

²³ Jeffreys, E., *Four Byzantine Novels*, 40 n.61. For a further example of the topos in a Byzantine text: Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, section 26. For the topos in ancient texts, see Achilles Tatius, *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, II, section 9.2; Longos, *Daphnis and Chloe*, III, section 8.2.

²⁴ Kazhdan and Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture*, 83.

²⁵ Psellos (ed. Sathas), ιστορικοί λόγοι, επιστολαί και άλλα ανέκδοτα, *Letter* 156, line 30, 408.

²⁶ The *typikon* for the Lips monastery prescribes that the document itself should be read out three times a year at mealtimes: Palaiologina (trans. Talbot), *Typikon for Lips*, section 8. The author of the *typikon* for Bebaia Elpis also prescribes the reading of the *typikon* at mealtimes but acknowledges that other books will be read as well: Synadene, (trans. Talbot), *Typikon for Bebaia Elpis*, section 120. See further: Rapp, "Figures of Female Sanctity", 315. When considering the applicability of evidence from monastic sources to secular contexts, it is worth noting here that the twelfth-century historian and imperial woman Anna Komnene describes the culture of her father's court as similar to a monastery: Komnene, *Alexiad*, III, section 8.

would have produced a further element of interplay between the textual world and the outside world.

Let us now examine the second banquet of the novel (IV.119-417). This meal occurs at the court of the pirate commander Mistylos, in the absence of the two main characters of the story. The resulting detachment from the rest of the story, and the crudity of some of the content of this passage, sets this scene apart. The banquet is preceded by the arrival of Artaxanas, carrying a letter. After the feast, Mistylos writes his reply. The banquet is therefore enclosed by two letter writing scenes, suggesting a connection between the reception of the letters and the banquet. The episode where Artaxanes offers a letter to Mystilos is significant as it likely reflects the process by which Byzantines presented and received letters. A possible connection to Byzantine practice is foregrounded when the commander is suddenly called ‘emperor’ (τῷ βασιλεῖ) in verse IV.25.²⁷

And so the summons was made and Artaxanes presented himself.

The satrap, bowing his head

Before the feet of the fleet commander Mistylos,

put a small sealed letter

into the emperor’s hands.

He in turn gave it to Gobryas,

so that he could read it in the presence of all.

Breaking the seals, Gobryas

Read the letter in everyone’s hearing: (IV.21-29, trans. Jeffreys, E.).²⁸

After the letter has been read aloud and despite the fact that it contains ill news, Artaxanes is invited to share in a meal with his hosts.²⁹ Here it is worth noting Margaret Mullett’s studies of miniatures from the Madrid Skylitzes manuscript. Mullett has shown how twenty of the miniatures illustrating the manuscript present the reception of letters in eleventh- and twelfth-century

²⁷ Jeffreys, E., *Four Byzantine Novels*, 67 n121; Roilos, *Poetics of the Twelfth Century Medieval Greek Novel*, 253-255.

²⁸ Καὶ γοῦν ἐκάλουν καὶ παρῆν Ἀρταξάνης / πρὸ τοῖν ποδοῖν δὲ τοῦ στολάρχου Μιστύλου / κλίνας ἑαυτοῦ τὴν κάραν ὁ σατράπης / ἐπιστόλιον μικρὸν ἐσφραγισμένον / τῷ βασιλεῖ δίδωσιν εἰς χεῖρας μέσας / ὁ δ’ αὐθις ἀντέδωκεν αὐτὸ Γωβρύα, / ὡς ἂν ἀναγνῶ τῶν παρόντων ἐν μέσῳ. / Τὰς γοῦν σφραγίδας ἐξελὼν ὁ Γωβρύας / τὸ γράμμα πᾶσιν εἰς ἐπήκοον λέγει

²⁹ (...) ‘λαβὼν σύ, Γωβρύα, σὺ καὶ τέως / φιλοφρόνησον καὶ μακροῦ μόχθου βάρος / λύσον τραπέζην καὶ καταστρώσει κλίνης;’ (...) and in the meantime, Gobryas, / show him hospitality and remove the weight of much toil / with a banquet and comfortable couch’ (IV, lines 106-8, trans. Jeffreys, E.).

Byzantium as a multi-stage process involving elements of performance, ritual and private reading (figs. 2, 3). The content of letters written during this period also shows that they were often bound up with gifts such as incense or foodstuffs.³⁰

Although feasting is not explicitly associated with letter reception in the Madrid miniatures, these images do suggest that the reception of the letter bearer was a prolonged and formal process. In this context, it would make sense if a stage of letter reception involved a feast where the letter bearer was a guest, and where consumables attached to the letter could be enjoyed by the recipients. Here, once more, the second banquet depicted in *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* likely reflects twelfth-century feasting practice. We should also note the possibility that a manuscript of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* may have been received by Eirene Doukaina, or Nikephoros Bryennios and their households in the same way as a letter. The parallels between the reception of a letter at a feast within the text and Doukaina and Bryennios' reception of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* would likely have produced a further element of interplay between the textual and outside worlds.



Figure 2: The Emperor Michael III receives a message. Uploaded to Wikicommons 07 August 2013. Source: History of John Skylitzes (Skylitzes Matritensis (Biblioteca Nacional de España). Author: Unknown, 13th-century author. This is a faithful photographic reproduction of a two-dimensional, public domain work of art. This work is in the public domain in its country of origin and other countries and areas where the copyright term is the author's life plus 100 years or fewer.

³⁰ Mullett, *Theophylact of Ochrid*, 31-42; 1989, 172. For examples, see: Tsamakda, *Illustrated Chronicle*, fig. 29 (fol. 19va), fig. 30 (fol. 19vb) Fig. 184 (fol. 75v), fig. 190 (fol. 78a), fig. 487 (fol. 205r). For examples of letters bound with gifts: Psellos (ed. Sathas), *ιστορικοί λόγοι, επιστολαί και άλλα ανέκδοτα*, *Letter* 53, 284; *Letter* 132, 377. For the provenance of the twelfth-century Madrid manuscript: Tsamakda, *Illustrated Chronicle*, 2002, 15-19, 260-66, 394-97. For the provenance of Skylitzes' *Synopsis of Histories*: Flusin, "Re-writing History", xii-xxxiv.



Figure 3: Georgios Maniakes sends the letter of Christ to Romanos III. Uploaded to Wikicommons 31 August 2012. Source: History of John Skylitzes (Skylitzes Matritensis (Biblioteca Nacional de España). Author: Unknown, 13th-century author. This is a faithful photographic reproduction of a two-dimensional, public domain work of art. This work is in the public domain in its country of origin and other countries and areas where the copyright term is the author's life plus 100 years or fewer.

What follows in the text is a banquet with numerous comic elements. As Roilos has pointed out, Prodhomos seems to use this banquet as a setting for humorous scenes. Artaxanes becomes the subject of a joke when a flock of sparrows appears from inside of a piece of cooked meat. A magician called Satyrion (Σατυρίων) also performs a show, first killing himself but then quickly springing back to life again. After reviving, Satyrion sings a song, accompanied by lyre music (IV.243-308). This song consists of thirteen four-verse stanzas, with single-versed choruses dividing them. Here Roilos notes how Satyrion evokes performers that might entertain at the Byzantine court and aristocratic gatherings. The depiction of Satyrion aligns with several passages in the history written by Niketas Choniates, which describes lavish twelfth-century imperial banquets involving performances of singers and mimes. Here we also note Roilos' argument that the depiction of Satyrion works as satire on the Byzantine imperial and elite culture, as the character's name indeed suggests.³¹ In the next section we build upon Roilos' argument to propose that the clustering of realistic elements in the banquet scenes of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* renders the satirical elements of the text more forceful.

³¹ Roilos, *Poetics of the Twelfth Century Medieval Greek Novel*, 278; Choniates, *History*, sections 384, 388-9, 441-2, 529, 530, 540-1.



Figure 4: Crown of Constantine IX Monomachos, viewer's left. Photograph by Wikicommons user Johnbod. Licensed according to the licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. Universal Public Domain Dedication.



Figure 5: Crown of Constantine IX Monomachos, viewer's right. Photograph by Wikicommons user Johnbod. Licensed according to the licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. Universal Public Domain Dedication.

Satyron's song is followed by an extensive ekphrasis of Gobryas' cup (IV.331-411). Ironically, the cup is first shattered by Artaxanes before the narrator describes the, by then, lost object. Depicted on the cup are the classical god Dionysus and his accompanying Maenads and Satyrs. Jeffreys notes how the depicted dance of the Maenads 'may reflect contemporary peasant dances'.³² On the other hand, we propose that the depiction of Maenads in *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* might refer to a ceremonial celebration, perhaps at the imperial court. We base this proposition upon the depiction of dancing women on the so-called Monomachos Crown, which has been identified in recent scholarship as ceremonial item used in a military triumph in 1043. The images of dancing women in this item may allude to the context where it was worn, when dancing women performed during the celebrations (figs. 4, 5).³³ Therefore, the conversion of Byzantine women performing a ceremonial dance to wild Maenads may in *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* work as satirical and humorous reference to the Byzantine imperial court.

In summary, two aspects of the depiction of banquets in *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* stand out. Firstly, as Roilos has suggested, these banquets appear as distinct moments in the text, which suspend the linearity of the narration.³⁴ Their distinctiveness is marked by their length, and the narratological significance of the events taking place during the banquets. Secondly, elements which reflect contemporary twelfth-century Byzantine societal practices are clustered in these passages. Also notable in these passages are the recurrent depictions of oral performances within the text. The clustering of these realistic elements produces a clear sense of interplay between the textual banquets and the contemporary world in which they were written. This may have disrupted the boundaries of the textual and outside world, thereby encouraging audiences to receive the texts as commentary on wider society and culture.

The effect of the interplay between the textual and outside worlds would have been amplified if one of the performative contexts for *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* was indeed a feast setting, as we will argue below. Commenting on *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* and *Hysmine and*

³² Jeffreys, E., *Four Byzantine Novels*, 78 n.151.

³³ It has been argued that this item is a forgery, but recently, Dawson, "The Monomachos Crown", 183-93, has proposed that it may have functioned as a Byzantine ceremonial armband. In 2019, in a paper titled 'The male gaze in Drosilla and Charikles (c.1150)' given at the *New Approaches to Medieval Romance from the Eastern Mediterranean and Beyond Workshop* (Birmingham), we highlighted evidence that young aristocratic girls were presented in public around the time of their first wedding. It is also possible that this passage of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* alludes to such occasions. Maguire, *The Crown of Constantine Monomachos*, 210-11, argued that the women represent virtues, but this does not preclude their simultaneous connection to the occasion when the crown was worn.

³⁴ Roilos, *Poetics of the Twelfth Century Medieval Greek Novel*, 253.

Hysminias, Roilos suggested that the banquet scenes ‘may create liminal spaces within the story where subversive metalanguages are employed to reverse or satirize established codes of conduct and communication’.³⁵ In the next section, we build upon Roilos’ suggestion by first suggesting that *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* was performed in a feast setting, then arguing that the interplay between the textual and outside worlds during the banquet scenes was significant for the reception of satirical elements in the text. We will argue that the interplay developed in these scenes maximised the impact of the satire in the text for contemporary audiences.

Feasts at the households of Doukaina and Bryennios as a setting for the performance of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*

We will now further discuss the possibility that *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* was produced within a group involving Eirene Doukaina and Nikephoros Bryennios. We will also identify feasts organised within the households of Doukaina, Bryennios and their allies as likely settings for the performance of the text. Above, we have noted evidence that the author of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, Theodore Prodromos, was connected to Eirene Doukaina in the period after her son John II Komnenos became Byzantine emperor in AD 1118. As we have also mentioned, the Byzantine historians John Zonaras, Michael Glykas and Niketas Choniates all attest that Doukaina made an unsuccessful attempt to arrange the succession for her son-in-law Nikephoros Bryennios, who was married to Doukaina’s first-born daughter, the historian Anna Komnene.

Choniates writes that Doukaina was eventually reconciled to her son John Komnenos. However, he does not specify what this reconciliation involved, or when it took place. Although the evidence is not conclusive, it therefore seems likely that Doukaina was isolated from the centre of government in the imperial palace for at least a part of John II’s reign. Combined evidence from several written sources, including Choniates and Zonaras’ histories, and Komnene’s *Alexiad*, indicates that a group of Doukaina’s relatives shared her opposition to John’s government. We can identify Bryennios and Anna Komnene as members of this group, as well as Doukaina’s youngest son Andronikos, her daughter Maria Komnene and her son-in-law Nikephoros Katakalon Euphorbenos.³⁶

³⁵ Roilos, *Poetics of the Twelfth Century Medieval Greek Novel*, 301.

³⁶ Evidence for Doukaina and Bryennios’ attempt to secure the succession is provided by Zonaras, *Epitome*, VXIII, sections 26-27 (who links Andronikos and Nikephoros Euphorbenos with the effort) & Glykas (ed. Bonn), *Annals*, 622. Choniates, *History*, sections

Both the writings of Michael Italikos and Anna Komnene suggest that these people gathered together to form an audience who received literary performances which they had commissioned. We have already noted that Doukaina was the commissioner of Bryennios' history. A speech composed by Italikos, which was purportedly impromptu, provides further evidence for the hierarchy of this group. In the speech, delivered after Alexios I's death, he describes Doukaina as presiding in a space described as a *theatron*, involving her relatives, including Bryennios and Anna Komnene. This suggests that Doukaina, as mother, or mother-in-law of the other group members, held a position of precedence within the group.³⁷

Bryennios' role as the commissioner of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* suggests that performances of this text contributed to the production of spaces involving Doukaina and her group. This is the view of Elizabeth Jeffreys, who has argued that *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* was performed in a *theatron* where Doukaina presided, and that it was possibly located in the Kecharitomene monastic complex which the empress founded in c. AD 1110.³⁸ However, as we have seen, it is not clear that twelfth-century Byzantines used the term *theatron* in consistent connection with a specific organised space. We suggest it is more likely that Doukaina, Bryennios and their allies received texts in a process more akin to the multi-stage process of letter reception mentioned above, rather than being focused around a single moment in a *theatron*.

1-12, describes a further conspiracy after John II's reign had begun, involving Anna Komnene, but not Eirene Doukaina. The fragmented account of Alexios' death in the *Alexiad* also depicts Doukaina as distressed when she heard that John II had moved to secure the throne: Komnene, *Alexiad*, XV, section 11. The possibility that Doukaina was in some way distant from John II during at least part of his reign is hinted at by the man-of-letters Michael Italikos, who says that he does not blame her for his lack of favour from John II: Italikos (ed. Gautier), *Lettres et Discours*, 98. Further evidence for this group is provided by two funeral monodies for Andronikos, which portray Bryennios as playing a major role in the funeral, alongside Doukaina: Italikos (ed. Gautier), *Lettres et Discours*, 87; Prodromos (ed. Hörandner), *Historische Gedichte*, 188. In his impromptu speech for Doukaina, discussed below, Italikos mentions Bryennios, Komnene and some other imperial women. Gautier suggested they might be Komnene's sisters or daughters, but we suggest it is likely that one of these women was Maria Komnene, the wife of Euphorbenos: Italikos, (ed. Gautier), *Lettres et Discours* 151. Italikos also produced a letter for Bryennios, where he recalls receiving humorous letters from the *Kaisar*, which he claims to have read aloud in a space he describes as a *theatron* Italikos (ed. Gautier), *Lettres et Discours*, 154. This is likely the space involving Doukaina and her group described in his impromptu speech. Further evidence for this group and their activities appears in the *Alexiad*, the history written around 1148 by Bryennios' wife Anna Komnene. The author uses the first-person plural 'us' to describe a group of recipients of drafts of the *History* which Bryennios himself wrote, and which was commissioned by Doukaina. In the same passage, when describing how Doukaina commissioned Bryennios to write the *History*, Anna also refers to her mother as 'our *Despoina*'. I suggest that in this passage Anna seems to be referring to a distinct group, headed by Eirene, also involving herself and Bryennios: Komnene, *Alexiad*, Prologue, section 3. Doukaina is also named as the commissioner of texts written by Nicholas Kataskepenos, Nicholas Kallikles and Manuel Starboromanos: *PBW* (2016), Eirene 61. It is important to note that Leonora Neville has argued against the likelihood that Doukaina, Bryennios and Komnene were opposed to the succession of John II: Neville, *Anna Komnene*, 93-112.

³⁷ Italikos (ed. Gautier), *Lettres et Discours*, 146-51. See also Komnene's description of Doukaina as 'our *Despoina*', above.

³⁸ Jeffreys, E., *Four Byzantine Novels*, 9-10.

Komnene writes that she and her mother received multiple drafts of Bryennios' history. It is also possible that different drafts and sections of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* were sent to Bryennios, and performed before the *Kaisar* and Doukaina.³⁹ It is likely these texts might have also been accompanied by gifts, like Byzantine letters. In this context, one of the stages of the reception and performance of the *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* could well have involved a gathering for a meal. Here, physical items which accompanied the text would have been enjoyed in tandem with the performance of the text itself. Here we should also note the connection between letter culture and feasting suggested by the depiction of the second banquet in the text, which we have examined above. It is therefore likely, we argue, that *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* was performed in a feast setting at the household of Doukaina, Bryennios, or one of their allies.

Above, we have already encountered evidence that communal eating was combined with reading in monastic settings. There is also specific evidence that Eirene Doukaina herself staged readings at mealtimes during her tenure as empress consort alongside Alexios I. In the *Alexiad*, Anna Komnene describes how in this time Doukaina would read and discuss the content of texts during meals. Komnene provides a specific example, by recounting a conversation she held with her mother whilst she was reading the vita of Maximus the Confessor. Just before describing Doukaina's readings at mealtimes, Komnene also describes the pupils of the polymath John Italikos as frequent visitors to the Great Palace, implying that these people held an audience with imperial persons around mealtimes.⁴⁰ Komnene's account adds plausibility to our suggestion that Doukaina also held audiences with men-of-letters, including Prodromos, in feast settings in her household, when she was no longer empress-consort after AD 1118.

The performance of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* within the context of Byzantine dynastic politics

Lastly, we propose that the performance of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* in a feast setting contributed to the production of a space which challenged the imperial court in the Great Palace as a source of legitimacy. We will connect the actions of Doukaina, Bryennios and their allies with patterns in dynastic politics.⁴¹ In eleventh and twelfth-century Byzantium, emperors often designated their

³⁹ Komnene, *Alexiad*, Prologue, section 3.

⁴⁰ Komnene, *Alexiad*, V, section 9.

⁴¹ It should be noted that Barbara Hill has offered a different argument, suggesting that Doukaina's involvement as a commissioner and sponsor of Byzantine literature was an act of patronage which allowed her to attain visibility and power when she had no other official role in society: Hill, *Imperial Women*, 161-73. See also: James, *Empresses and Power*.

eldest sons as co-rulers, implying that they were their preferred successors. However, it is important to note that the Byzantine Empire never adopted a firm system, such as that of primogeniture which developed in the medieval west, to manage imperial succession. The legitimacy of specific emperors was often therefore challenged by rival persons or groups.⁴²

In this context, Doukaina and Bryennios' actions compare with those of Doukaina's grandfather, the *Kaisar* John Doukas. John was connected to Michael Psellos, and was the recipient of several letters, bound up with gifts, which dealt with intellectual topics.⁴³ Significantly, two lines of the Doukai house engaged in rivalry during the 1060s and 70s. John Doukas headed one of these lines, with the emperors Constantine X and then his son Michael VII the other.⁴⁴ We might also note the ex-empress Maria's (former wife of Michael VII, r.1072-78) engagement with scholars and literati during Alexios I Komnenos' reign, when her son Constantine Doukas was tentatively recognised co-ruler and heir to the throne, before being pushed aside for John II around 1092.⁴⁵ It is possible that both John Doukas and Maria fostered ties with intellectuals and men-of-letters as a way of enhancing the prestige of their own dynastic line. We have already discussed evidence that the reception of letters in middle-Byzantium was a highly visible process, producing spaces which visualised the status of the recipients. It is likely that both John Doukas and Maria's reception of letters, other literary texts and performances worked in the same way. Therefore, it can be argued that during occasions when they received texts and performances, their status as alternative bearers of legitimacy to the imperial house was visualised for onlookers.

⁴² See the analysis of Dagron, *Emperor and Priest*.

⁴³ For summaries of these letters: Jeffreys, M. & Lauxtermann, *The Letters of Psellos*, 159-61.

⁴⁴ Cheynet, "Intrigues à la cour de Constantinople", 76-82.

⁴⁵ Garland, "Mart'a-Maria 'of Alania"; Mullett, *Theophylact of Ochrid*, 364. Zonaras describes Doukas' relegation at the expense of John: Zonaras, *Epitome*, XVIII, section 21. The first document referring to Alexios and John's co-rule is dated to 15 November 1092 and is preserved in the archive of Naples: Stathakopoulos, "John II Komnenos: A historiographical essay", 16-17.



Figure 6: Zeyrek Mosque (Pantokrator Monastery), Istanbul. Photograph taken by Emma Huig, February 2020.

Returning to Eirene Doukaina and Bryennios, we note the significance of the Pantokrator monastery in Constantinople (fig. 6). This monumental structure seems to have been built after AD 1118 as a visual assertion of the legitimacy of John II and his wife Piroska-Eirene's eldest son Alexios as successor, rather than other members of the Komnenos-Doukas family.⁴⁶ John II and Piroska-Eirene's commissioning of this structure might well have responded to Doukaina and Bryennios, who may have been acting in the same way as their predecessors, John Doukas and Maria. Doukaina, Bryennios and their group perhaps sponsored literature to bring about moments when their reception of texts and performances created a display, which contributed to the production of spaces challenging imperial legitimacy.⁴⁷ These spaces may have visualised Doukaina's own status as a carrier of legitimacy, and the status of her other descendants, including Bryennios, Komnene and their children, as potential imperial successors. We have noted that feasting visualised hierarchy in Byzantine society. The spectacle of a feast, with its hierarchised

⁴⁶ Jeffreys, M., "Piroska and the Komnenian Dynasty", 109-117, who highlights Piroska-Eirene and John II's cooperation in founding the monument.

⁴⁷ Italikos' purportedly impromptu speech likely contributed to the production of such a space. The speech is structured as a *Basilikos Logos*, as prescribed by Menander Rhetor. The prestige of Doukaina's lineage, and her imperial characteristics, receive extensive attention. As mentioned above, Bryennios and Komnene are also addressed: Italikos (ed. Gautier), *Lettres et Discours*, 146-51.

seating would have visualised the high status of Doukaina and her relatives.⁴⁸ Guests invited to Doukaina's feasts would have therefore witnessed a setting which worked alongside the spectacle of a reception of a literary performance, producing a space which challenged John II and Pirooska-Eirene's monopoly on dynastic legitimacy.

Conclusion

Here we now arrive at our concluding hypothesis, where we also make some suggestions for further research. We propose that Prodromos expected *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, which was commissioned by Bryennios, to be performed in front of Doukaina and her group. We argue that Prodromos, who aimed to retain Doukaina and Bryennios' support, anticipated that satire of imperial culture would be welcomed by his audience, who were disenchanted with the emperor. It is likely that during the process when different parts of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* were sent and received, there were oral performances of the text at feast settings in large halls in the households of Doukaina, Bryennios and their allies. These could have been delivered by Prodromos or a representative acting in a similar way to a letter bearer. The performances contributed to the development of spaces which functioned more widely as a display of prestige and legitimacy, and a challenge to imperial power.

We propose that anticipating this setting, Prodromos focused satirical and humorous elements around the passages depicting feasts, where elements reflecting the immediate performative context were clustered. The alignment of satirical elements with passages where the immediate outside setting was reflected in feasts in the text likely alerted the audiences that this text worked, on one level, to critique the outside world of twelfth-century Constantinople, and the imperial regime in particular.

Here, this case study of Prodromos' *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* raises questions for wider research on twelfth-century Byzantine literature, including the Byzantine novels. Firstly, we suggest there is a need for further research on intertextual connections between *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* and *Hysmine and Hysminias*. The narrative of the latter text also includes several banquet scenes, which share features with *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, including satirical and realistic

⁴⁸ For thrones, footstools, tables and other furniture in Byzantine imperial and aristocratic society: Parani, *Reconstructing the Reality of Images*, 160-75.

elements.⁴⁹ The possibility that the author of this text, Eumathios Makrembolites, wrote within the same oeuvre as Prodromos has previously been discussed in modern studies, and this now needs to be revisited.⁵⁰

Broadly, there is also a need for further research on the connections between literary performances, the experience of audiences, and the production of space in eleventh- and twelfth-century Byzantium. We suggest the need for a broader interdisciplinary study on how the positions of specific individuals and groups may have been developed through their reception of texts and literary performances. Within this study, there is a need to examine further how specific textual elements intersected with spatial dimensions of performances to constitute literary strategies, such as the alignment of satirical and realistic elements in *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, which we have proposed here. Lastly, there is a need to examine how these literary strategies were developed within different texts to meet the needs of commissioners and audiences.

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⁴⁹ See for example Makrembolites, *Hysmine and Hysminias*, I, sections 8-9, II, sections 12-13, V, sections 10-11, and VIII, sections 4 and 12-13.

⁵⁰ Agapitos, “Poets and Painters”, 173-85. Macalister, “Byzantine twelfth-century romances”, 175-210. For the argument for a later twelfth-century date: Jeffreys, E., *Four Byzantine Novels*, 161-65.

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