

Nikos Panou

Normative Knowledge and Virtue Ethics in the Late Seventeenth Century

This paper focused on a little-known instance in the history of post-Byzantine advice literature. Its geographical setting is Bucharest, the capital of Wallachia, a semi-autonomous and strategically important principality in the periphery of the Ottoman Empire, which had witnessed unprecedented growth and prosperity in the second half of the seventeenth century and especially during the reign of Constantin Brâncoveanu (1688-1714). A group of manuscript paraphrases of classical and Byzantine parenetic works, written in vernacular Greek and produced under the auspices of the Wallachian ruler by the Pontic scholar and professor Sevastos Kyminitis (1632-1702), serve as a point of reference for an investigation into the conceptual and rhetorical mechanisms that conditioned the complex relationship between political realities and their linguistic representations in the period. These texts, known as “mirrors for princes,” offer valuable insights into the processes of creative reception of ancient and Byzantine culture in the early modern Balkans. They also show that despite the peculiar nature and radical precariousness of political authority in the Ottoman-controlled region north of the Danube, a concrete need had emerged that called for the exploration of notional territories and the cultivation of discursive practices that could secure a better understanding of the workings of sovereignty on the one hand, but could also contribute to an elaborate propagandistic program of monarchical emancipation on the other.

All the examined texts were produced within the last years of Kyminitis' life. He had moved to Bucharest in 1690, where he was invited by Brâncoveanu to serve as the director of the Principal Academy that had been recently established in the Wallachian capital. It is there that Kyminitis turned his attention to the specific group of advice treatises, which he included in the curriculum of the Bucharest Academy. More than that, however, he proceeded to paraphrase these texts one after the other in the following order: Synesius of Cyrene, *On Kingship*, in 1697; Isocrates, *To Nicocles* and *Nicocles or the Cyprians*, as well the pseudo-Isocratic *To Demonicus*, in 1698-99; Theophylact of Ochrid, *Royal Education*, in 1700; Agapetos Diakonos, *Exposition of Admonitory*

Chapters, in 1700-01. In the same period, he also paraphrased the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *On Virtues and Vices*, which provided a theoretical framework for the moral system – virtue ethics – within which all the other paraphrased texts operated.

Both in the introductory remarks of the prologues and in the main body of the paraphrases it becomes clear that Kyminitis had conceived his work as an attempt towards the production of a series of comprehensive handbooks of government. He confesses his eagerness to contribute to an advancement of practical politics, which to his frustration had been widely neglected in the preceding centuries. It is evident that he saw the project as a way to facilitate interested readers in the acquisition of the theoretical knowledge and pragmatic skills that are indispensable for the successful exercise of the duties and responsibilities that being in charge of a state entails. Furthermore, Kyminitis advocates a monarchic regime based on written laws and not on custom, and fleshes out the figure of a powerful ruler who can secure conditions of safety and equality for all his subjects, regardless their socio-economic status. In this sense, all the chosen source texts provided him with a solid and highly respectable context for his endeavors. The uncompromising insistence of these works on the absolute necessity for an imperial administration based on moderation, justice, and knowledge was corresponding to some of the most urgent requisites of contemporary political and philosophical inquiry at the end of the seventeenth century.

The perception of the scholar as a mediator of such knowledge has no precedents in Kyminitis' previous output, and seems to have been determined to a large extent by the extraordinary circumstances that he came across in Wallachia. Upon his arrival to Bucharest, he found himself in conditions significantly different than those he had experienced up to that point, having spent his entire life strictly within the traditional territorial core of the Ottoman Empire. What he encountered in that new environment was an exceptional political situation of semi-autonomy that gave the prosperous principality a very special status in relation to the Sublime Porte and the Ottoman policies of institutional, economic, and cultural integration. He also found an organized and centralized government that claimed unmediated control over the administration of the country's internal and external affairs. Finally, he experienced a prolific and fertile climate of intellectual and cultural activity that a powerful local Orthodox ruler was

systematically promoting and generously supporting. Brâncoveanu had given considerable attention to the dissemination of knowledge and the cultivation of arts and letters from very early on in the course of his long reign. A vital reorientation of Wallachian culture towards a new set of standards and ideals was gradually being outlined and put into effect.

The specific historical moment – with its complex diplomatic and geopolitical dynamics – favored the construction and cultivation of a monarchical ideology that promoted the ideal of an imperial defender of both Orthodoxy and the state, with his power consolidated on the traditional concepts of political moderation and social justice. It called for a ruler who could exhibit a solid knowledge of the affairs of the world, but would also be able to assume the challenging role of a philosopher-king. These were the official lines of the propagandastic program launched by Brâncoveanu and his courtiers already since the very early stages of his reign. It was precisely designed to promote an idealized image of himself as a moderate and enlightened ruler, whose authority and legitimacy were cemented not only on the indisputable possession of royal charisma but also on the instinctive reactivation of crucial signifiers of Byzantine imperial conduct.

Kyminitis' paraphrased texts bear the marks of the role they were meant to play in that large-scale program of political self-fashioning. Brimming with terms, metaphors, and concepts closely associated with the imperial dignity in Byzantium, they were only partially intended to function as instructive manuals of political education and moral edification. More importantly, they were perceived as textual representations of the Wallachian prince himself. It is often stressed, for instance, that the latter barely needs any advice since he is already adorned with an abundance of princely virtues and skills. Interestingly, Kyminitis strives to make clear that the intended audience of the paraphrases is not exclusively restricted to members of the royal family and the princely court, but should be extended to include the prince's subjects as well. This radical expansion of the potential readership of the paraphrases is by no means accidental. For in all these texts it is the ruler's figure that reigns supreme. Indeed, Brâncoveanu is implicitly presented more as the embodiment rather than the recipient of the respective work's counsels. In reading through, his subjects could recognize and assess his captured

image, as they gained access into the mysteries of sovereignty by being offered a privileged view of the exposed surplus of royal virtue.

It can be argued, therefore, that besides their didactic value these texts reflect Kyminitis' concern to produce what Pierre Bourdieu would call a "legitimate language": an official, normative vocabulary designed to exemplify, at the same time as consolidating, the unity and coherence of the linguistic community, thereby serving as a necessary precondition for symbolic domination. The formal, obligatory language of sovereignty that Kyminitis is trying to (re)produce does not fail to relate the political and moral content of the paraphrased works to the discursive depiction of a perfect monarch who is unambiguously identified as none other than Brâncoveanu, the addressee of the rehabilitated texts. The Wallachian ruler is being represented under the very eyes of his grateful subjects who are left with no doubt as to the existence of a divinely sanctioned order that links the depicted royal body to the supra-personal body politic of the principality. In the context of that association the ruler emerges as a true sovereign: it is he who decides on the exception. That assertion of royal competence generates a strong sense of political hierarchy that removes the holder of power from the sphere of general norm and ordinary jurisdiction, thereby giving him uncontested superiority not only over the local nobility, the boyars, and the highly antagonistic voivodes of Moldavia, but also, and much more dangerously, vis-à-vis his Ottoman overlords.