ACTA CLASSICA UNIV. SCIENT. DEBRECEN.	LX.	2024.	pp. 157–164.

A CRITIQUE OF A SATIRE: CONSTANTINE ACROPOLITES' LETTER ON THE *TIMARION*

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Abstract: The protagonist of the satire *Timarion*, by an unknown author from the 11th or 12th century, falls into a state of suspended animation on his journey and is carried by two demons into the underworld, where he proves in a court trial that he is not dead and is allowed to return to the living. The aim of this paper is to present and interpret a short letter written two hundred years later by Constantine Acropolites, who sharply criticises the *Timarion*, without clearly presenting his objections.
Keywords: *Timarion*, Constantine Acropolites, Byzantine satire, literary criticism

Timarion has journeyed from Constantinople to Thessaloniki to attend the feast of St Demetrius, but on the eve of his trip home, he falls seriously ill. One night, while trying to sleep in his weakened state, two demons from the underworld mistakenly snatch him away and lead his soul to the realm of the dead. While Timarion encounters mythological figures, rulers, philosophers, and orators in this special *katabasis*, he and his former master Theodore of Smyrna manage to prove, literally in a court trial, that he is not really dead, so he can return to the living. This is the short synopsis of the satirical dialogue *Timarion*.

Although the longer narrative passages make the text predominantly monologic, the genre is strictly speaking a dialogue, for the protagonist, having been to the underworld and back, recounts his ordeal in a conversation with a friend, the inquisitive Kydion, repeatedly urged by the same. In addition to the main theme of the underworld, the dialogue form certainly contributed to the fact that the work, together with the series entitled *Dialogues of the Dead*, was handed down in the same manuscript as the works of Lucian (c. 120–180), who had established the genre of *dialogos nekrikos*.[1] The link with Lucian was further strengthened by a third, equally prominent feature of the work; its satirical style evokes the very best of the orator from Samosata. It is no exaggeration to say

1 The complete text of the *Timarion* is preserved in the *Vaticanus Graecus 87* manuscript (453–470^{v}), which contains more than seventy (!) works by Lucian, while a short fragment of the work is contained in the *Vindobonensis Theologicus Graecus 222* (193^{v}) preserved in Vienna.

that the *Timarion* is a gem of Greek prose, a series of oratorical feats, yet a readable, witty, and entertaining composition, which rivals Lucian's dialogues on similar subjects (*Philosophies for Sale*, *Menippos, or Descent into Hades*, etc.).[2]

The author of *Timarion*, however — as even a cursory reading will attest — is certainly not Lucian, since a significant number of the characters who appear in the underworld, some named and some identified by allusion, are connected to Byzantium. It is precisely these Byzantine characters and the historical events associated with them that can serve as a point of reference for determining the provenance of the work, or at least for establishing the approximate *terminus post quem*. It is not our purpose here to survey all the theories, arguments, and counter-arguments concerning the dating and authorship of the *Timarion*, but we will accept as a working hypothesis that the work was composed between the last decade of the 11th century and the second decade of the 12th.

Who the author really was, we can only guess. Throughout the research history, several names have emerged, most notably the title character himself, who some have taken to be a real person,[3] although there is no actual evidence for this. The Byzantine master of satire, Theodore Prodromos (c. 1100–1168),[4] whose oeuvre even contains several imitations of Lucian, has been an obvious candidate. Others have suspected, because of the extensive medical aspects of the text, that the author of the *Timarion* may have been a medically trained poet, such as Nicholas Kallikles (first half of the 12th century),[5] or possibly Michael Italikos (c. 1090–1157), a physician of the Pantokrator Hospital,[6] but other, unnamed conjectures have also been made, such as a disciple of Theodore of Smyrna.[7] The list could go on, but there is little point in continuing it, for the question is unlikely to be settled.

What is certain, however, is that the author of the *Timarion* was a highly educated, rhetorically literate person, well-versed in ancient literature, with an excellent sense of style and humour. Nor would we rule out the possibility — although this idea has not been given sufficient prominence in the conjecturing — that the author deliberately remained anonymous, his anonymity not being the result of a malicious irony of tradition but of a very conscious attitude,

2 Nilsson 2016 sees this satire as a work that draws on the Lucianic tradition consciously and directly.

3 Dräseke 1912, 353; Vasiliev 1964, 497.

4 Hunger 1978, 154.

5 The idea was first suggested by Lipsic 1953, 357–365, and later by Romano 1973, 309–315, who also published the *Timarion* and the poetic works of Kallikles. For more detail on the latter, see Skoulatos 1980, 251–252.

6 Baldwin 1984b.

7 Cf. Kaldellis 2014, 115–129, who assumes that the *Timarion* was created during the lifetime of Theodore.

which could be justified by the delicate and possibly dangerous nature of the lessons of the *Timarion*. It is equally intriguing what this message actually consists in, the author having so cleverly concealed it that it continuously eludes us. Some have seen in the carefully edited *ekphraseis* an invective against the influential Dukas and Palaiologos families, culminating in the description of the fate in the underworld of Romanos IV Diogenes (reigned 1068–1071), who was politically defeated, while others found it a piece of sweeping social criticism or an attack on fasting.[8]

What emotions and passions the publication of the *Timarion* aroused and what consequences it threatened its author with is clear from an epistle of Constantine Acropolites, written approximately two hundred years later, even though, as we shall see, the writer of the letter did not object to the nuanced political position that can be extracted from the work.

Two manuscripts have survived of the short letter in which Constantine Acropolites (c. 1250–1324) summarized his views on the satirical dialogue *Timarion* for an unknown friend.[9] Although we do not know the identity of the addressee, the dispatcher ranked most high.[10] Constantine, eldest son of the historiographer George Acropolites, held important offices in the reigns of Michael VIII Palaiologos (1261–1282) and Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282–1328), first as what we might refer to as a finance minister (λογοθέτης τοῦ γενικοῦ), later as chief minister of sorts (μέγας λογοθέτης). In addition to his courtly activities, he was a prolific author, especially in the genre of hagiography. Besides writing hagiographies and encomiums, he was active in other areas of religious life as well: we know that he opposed the ecclesiastical union and founded the Monastery of the Anastasis in Constantinople among other things. His oeuvre (including his voluminous correspondence) is largely unavailable in modern critical editions,[11] but the "Timarion letter" has been repeatedly published as an appendix to the text of the dialogue since the *editio princeps*.[12]

Despite its grammatical difficulties, the outspoken, sometimes rather crudely worded letter is an enjoyable, readable text. It reveals that a friend of Constantine Acropolites' gave him a manuscript of the *Timarion* to read and comment. Acropolites, in response to the request, cuts straight to the chase, without the usual courtesies and without any introduction. As he writes, the au-

8 Of a rich literature on the *Timarion*, see Alexiou 1982–1983; Krallis 2013. See also the introduction to the French translation of the text in Bondoux, Grélois 2022, 5–35.

9 Ambrosianus Graecus 442, ff. 301^{v}–302^{v}, Ambrosianus Graecus 649, 31^{v}–32^{v}.

10 Nicol 1965.

11 The texts of some letters and a speech of his are published in Delahaye 1933.

12 The first edition of the letter was Treu 1892. The Greek text was later published by Romano 1974, 42–45. Cf. Romano 1981. An English translation is given (rather freely) by Baldwin 1984a, 24–26. For the French translation of the text, see Bondoux, Grélois 2022, 36–41.

thor — whom he, too, identifies with the title character and calls Timarion — must have had some oratorical training and mastered the Attic language, the model to be followed in Byzantine literature, but there his merits end. Although the *Timarion* is a dialogue, which genre would theoretically be a suitable vehicle for the airy exposition of philosophical doctrines, this aspect is completely absent, owing to the author's lack of philosophical training. Moreover, however promising the feast of St Demetrius the Martyr is as Timarion's starting point for the plot, it is worth nothing in view of what follows it. Moreover, it is not at all clear what the author's purpose in writing was. To criticize the Christian religion? To promote pagan mythology? Either way, the end result is disappointing, and the book deserves to burn in fire. This might actually have happened, but for Acropolites changing his mind at the last moment out of respect for his friend.

Apart from a literary historical interest, the short letter owes part of its importance to the fact that its critical perspective certainly reflects not only the author's own point of view, but also a general impression of how a Byzantine intellectual at the turn of the 13th and 14th centuries might have thought about authors and works that had adopted antique literary forms without an obligatory "interpretatio Christiana" or, rather, "interpretatio Byzantina."

The qualifications for the author are telling. According to Acropolites, this Timarion (Τιμαρίων οὗτοσί) is an old Scythian (Σκύθης πρεσβύτης),[13] an old-fashioned (ἔξωρος) figure, who has nothing at all to do with philosophy (πάμπαν ἀμύητος), nor is it certain that he can be called a man at all (εἴ γε δέον καλεῖν αὐτὸν ἄνθρωπον). His blindness is beyond all repair (ποίαν οὐχ ὑπερβάλλον ἀπόνοιαν), fitly comparable to that of a lunatic (τίνι τῶν ἐπὶ μωρίᾳ γνωρίμων παραβαλεῖ), but he is worse than the notorious fools,[14] for his madness is not merely endured but chosen by him (τὴν παραφροσύνην οὐ παθών, ἀλλ' ἑλόμενος). In a word, he is a hateful and shameful (μισητέος καὶ βδελυκτέος) fellow. And the work itself is unseasonably histrionic (ἄκαιρος δραματουργία), pure babbling (ληρωδία), an enterprise of a crazed and insane person (ἐμβροντήτου τοῦτ' ἔργον καὶ παραπλῆγος), a stupid composition (τὸ δὲ ληρῶδες τουτοὶ βιβλίον).

If we seek the motives of this summary condemnation, the situation is less clear. It should be pointed out at the outset that the characters in *Timarion* do not make dogmatic statements or take positions on particular issues of devotion. The author merely recounts a fictional story in which the reader can see almost whatever they want to. What is clear from the letter is that everything that

13 The qualification "Scythian" could just as simply mean an uneducated, uncouth person as it could refer to Timarion's alleged Cappadocian, that is, "barbarian," origin.

14 Acropolites names the eponymous hero of the Homeric comic epic *Margites*, a *par excellence* fool, as well as the lesser-known Koroibos (here as Korybos) as pitiably short-witted. Cf. Tzetzes *Hist*. IV, 836–871.

Acropolites thinks is of value in the work is to be found in the first half of the *Timarion*; he explicitly highlights that the description of St Demetrius' feast and fair and the ceremony in his honour provide a suitable pretext (δεξιὰν ὡσπερεὶ ταυτηνὶ ποιησάμενος ἀπαρχὴν καὶ σεμνολογήσας). The problem is (unsurprisingly) the second part, that is, the main protagonist's descent to the underworld. Acropolites' reservations, however, are only vaguely and quite inaccurately formulated.

The description of the underworld in the *Timarion* is by and large based on the underworld topoi familiar from ancient literature. Hades is underground, its entrance is a narrow opening, its boundary is the river Acheron, its unbreakable gate is guarded by Kerberos, it consists of dark and bright parts, its area is densely covered with vegetation (e.g. the field of Elysion) and rich in water. Its inhabitants, the dead, live undisturbed and indulge in their pleasures, once judged by the adjudicators of the underworld (Aiakos and Minos), although the wealth disparities that have characterized earthly life remain, and in terms of food — a crucial theme in the *Timarion*! — they are forced to adapt to the local crops. It is obvious that the *Timarion*'s view of the underworld is fully incompatible with Constantine Acropolites' orthodox belief in the afterlife; this blatant fact may be partly his reason for not going into any detailed critical remarks. Acropolites writes the author deliberately spouts pagan nonsense,[15] confuses incongruent things, and mocks everything whose very thought gives one the shudder (ἑκοντὶ λήρους συνείρειν Ἑλληνικοὺς καὶ μιγνύειν ὄντως τὰ ἄμικτα καὶ διακωμῳδεῖν τὰ φρικὴν ἐκ μονῆς ἐμποιοῦντα τῆς ἐνθυμήσεως). The latter statement probably refers to the fact that, according to Acropolites, the *Timarion* makes a mockery of the fundamental eschatological teachings of Christianity.

The letter contains but one specific objection: in the underworld of *Timarion*, the author "presents heathen judges, subjecting to their judgement all those whom the Lord our Creator himself has redeemed with his own blood, and to whom he has offered his own precious and great calling" (παῖδας Ἑλλήνων δικαστὰς καθίσαι καὶ ὑπὸ σφᾶς ἄγειν, οὓς αὐτὸς ὁ δημιουργὸς καὶ δεσπότης τῷ οἰκείῳ ἐξηγόρασεν αἵματι καὶ οἷς τὴν τιμίαν ἑαυτοῦ καὶ μεγίστην κλῆσιν ἀπεχαρίσατο).[16] Who we are to understand by "heathen judges" is not quite clear. There is no doubt about the "pagan" nature of Aiakos and Minos, whose names are mentioned several times along the way to the court of the underworld (their third traditional companion, Rhadamanthys is not mentioned in the work!), and, indeed, the two of them are to pass judgement in the courtroom. The same holds for the "college of medical experts" convened because of the specific nature of Timarion's case. None of its four members (As-

15 The adjective "Hellenic" here means ancient Greek, i.e., pagan.

16 For the latter, cf. 2 Peter 1:4: τὰ τίμια καὶ μέγιστα ἡμῖν ἐπαγγέλματα δεδώρηται.

clepius, Hippocrates, Erasistratus, and Galen) are Christians. But what of the only Byzantine member of the tribunal, Emperor Theophilus (813–842), who, according to Theodore of Smyrna, was invited precisely in order that the followers of Christ would not be left without an advocate? It is known that Theophilus was the last emperor under whose reign iconoclasm flared up one final time. This not only meant the prohibition of the use of holy icons (a decree issued by the emperor in 832), but also manifested itself in personal policy (the appointment of John Grammatikos as Patriarch of Constantinople) and in the aggressive suppression of icon-venerating monasticism. No wonder, then, that all the merits of the otherwise well-educated and highly cultured Theophilus were overshadowed in the eyes of posterity by his iconoclastic convictions. Since the condemnation of the destruction of icons was the official position of Byzantine Christianity, declared at the Second Council of Nicaea (787) and subsequently confirmed by the measures taken after Theophilus' death, it is perhaps not too far-fetched to assume that in the eyes of Constantine Acropolites, the judgement of Theophilus only differed from that of Aiakos or Minos inasmuch as a heretic would disagree with a pagan. In other words, even if Acropolites did not make it explicit, he certainly resented the fact that the only Byzantine judge in the underworld be an iconoclast. Especially considering that, while the *Timarion* criticises all pagan judges and doctors without exception, he portrays Theophilus as a clearly positive character, far superior to his counterparts in both appearance and intrinsic worth: "Theophilus wore nothing bright or shining. He was dressed in plain, simple black. They say that when he was emperor he was similarly austere and inelegant in appearance. What he did shine in most splendidly was honest judgement and all the other virtues. Roughlooking as he was, he radiated gracefulness from his eyes, and in countenance he was shining and confident."[17] The emperor's authority is further enhanced by the fact that the strange figure standing behind him, whom Timarion first thinks to be a eunuch, is in fact a guardian angel. Theophilus is aided by the angel in making the right decision, meaning that in *Timarion*, an iconoclastic emperor enjoys divine support. But again, Acropolites does not say all this, and in his letter he does not name any of the characters in the *Timarion*, Byzantine or otherwise.

We find it even more peculiar that Acropolites omits all mention of the term "Galilean" (Γαλιλαῖος), which is the standard term in the dialogue for Christians. He could have been rightly indignant about this, for it is a pejorative connotation that, for example, the pagan Emperor Julian consistently used to refer to Christians, presumably with the intention of making the universal world religion appear to be the faith of a geographically localized, insignificant sect. The pejorative connotations of the adjective in the *Timarion* is illustrated by the out-

17 *Timarion*, chapter 33. Translated by B. Baldwin.

burst of Pythagoras, the sage from Samos, against John Italikos in one of the subterranean scenes: "You filthy rat, you who have put on the mantle of the Galilaeans which they call divine and heavenly, meaning baptism, where do you get the nerve to join us, men who spent their lives in epistemology and syllogistic thought? Either take off that strange robe or take yourself off right away from our company."[18] But Acropolites does not criticise this language, either, and the actual content of his criticism — whichever passage or statement in the *Timarion* is assumed to be behind it — remains elusive and vague.

Is it merely that some elements of the pagan concept of the afterlife in *Timarion* are unacceptable to a Christian believer? In our view, this is not the main objection Acropolites makes. Most genres of Byzantine literature are based on antecedents inherited from antiquity. This is particularly true of the prose genres — historiography, oratory, the novel, or even dialogue, where the need closely to mimic ancient models is a self-evident and fundamental requirement, which demands that Byzantine authors use the Attic dialect and vocabulary, however far removed from the spoken language of the time. All this was well known to the educated Acropolites, who himself had often struggled in the course of his studies to compose various oratorical exercises (*progymnasmata*) based on Greek mythological stories. Since he must have had an excellent knowledge of antique literature in Greek, he was hardly likely to be shocked when he came across a work of literature that was alien to, or incompatible with, his Christian faith. He had surely read worse things. It was not the content — or, rather, *not the content alone* — that caused his indignation, but the fact that it was produced by a *Byzantine author*. For what might be a forgivable error in a pagan writer is an irreparable sin for a Byzantine. To borrow a phrase from Acropolites, the former only "endures" (παθών), the latter "chooses" (ἑλόμενος) madness. The author of the *Timarion*, unlike his antique precursors, was well acquainted with Christian doctrine, "which clearly refutes falsehood, unequivocally affirms the truth, and, as it were, sets before the eyes of all who are not blind the doctrines of the true faith" (Χριστιανισμοῦ τοῦ τὸ ψεῦδος ἀριδήλως ἐλέγξαντος καὶ κρατύναντος εὖ τὴν ἀλήθειαν καὶ ὑπ' ὄψιν ὡς εἰπεῖν προθέντος τὰ τῆς ὀρθῆς δόξης τοῖς μὴ τυφλώττουσιν), yet he did not behave as a Christian but only put on the mask of Christianity (ἐν προσχήματι Χριστιανισμοῦ). Accordingly, everything he wrote was a deliberate falsification of the truth, and thus irredeemable. This, then, is the reason why the *Timarion* is rightly regarded as worthless waste (ὁ ἐν καρὸς αἴσῃ δίκαιος ὢν τάττεσθαι Τιμαρίων οὗτοσί) — at least according to Constantine Acropolites.

18 *Timarion*, chapter 43. Translated by B. Baldwin.

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DOI 10.22315/ACD/2024/13
ISSN 0418-453X (print)
ISSN 2732-3390 (online)