

КРИТИКА И БИБЛИОГРАФИЈА
COMPTES RENDUS BIBLIOGRAPHIQUES

VITOMIR MITEVSKI, *The Shadow of King Marko: Ancient, Byzantine and Macedonian Epic Poetry*, Skopje: Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2017. Pp. 358. ISBN 978-608-203-206-1.

This book is a result of decades of teaching and research in the field of ancient epic, as well as in the field of comparative studies of ancient, Byzantine, and medieval Macedonian epic poetry by the Academician Vitomir Mitevski. He spent most of his career as professor of classics at the Department of Classical Studies at the University Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje. One of his main compulsory teaching courses was Ancient Greek and Roman Epic Poetry, for which he had prepared a monograph: *Ancient Epic Poetry: Greece and Rome*, a book that was published twice. In his later teaching curriculum, he included Byzantine literature, and he dedicated himself to studying the Byzantine epic poetry. So, it was a natural course of things to summarize this research which happened when he was engaged in a project directed by the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, titled: “Ancient, Byzantine and Macedonian Epic Poetry”. His part of the project was the preparation of this book, the monography *The Shadow of King Marko: Ancient, Byzantine and Macedonian Epic Poetry*. His main idea was to trace the origin of Byzantine and Macedonian epic poetry in the Indo-European context. The origin of the Macedonian epic poetry is especially connected with the most famous epic hero King Marko, who bears the title of this book, and has a long shadow in which the secrets to his origin and genesis are hidden, as the author says. Only by careful examination of the material, one can discern the specific characteristic of the Macedonian epic poetry, but also its tradition. Acad. Mitevski wants to emphasize that in regards to Macedonian medieval epic poetry we are not allowed to speak of influence, but of contact with the Byzantine epic poetry. As a result of this contact, two-way influence is traceable.

The book is comprised of three main parts: 1. Indo-European Epic Poetry; 2. Byzantine Epic Poetry; 3. Macedonian songs on King Marko and the epic tradition, which are positioned in chronological order. There is an additional part with a text selection from the Grotaferata version of the *Epic of Digenis Akritas*, from the fifth song: “The Girl at the Oasis”, and a poem from the King Marko epic cycle titled: *The Confession of King Marko*. These two poems are similar in some themes, and represent very high emotional narrative. After the text selection follows the part with the Summary. Because the book is written in Macedonian language, there is an extensive Summary in English and Russian, in which the main points of the work are presented. At the very end of the book five types of indices are given: Index rerum, Index nominum auctorum, Index nominum et verborum, Index Graecus and Index locorum, for better communication within the book, which is common for books of this rank.

The first part: Indo-European Epic Poetry (15-52) is divided in four parts, in which the bases of the further examination of the Byzantine and Macedonian epic poetry are set. First, the author gives explanation of the terminology used: Why he uses the term Indo-European Poetry, what the contents of this term are in regards to epic poetry, and what are the temporal the spatial frameworks of this term. It is inevitable for a monography of this type which investigates diachronically and comparatively a

literary genre to start with the possible genealogy of the genre and to establish some special forms of presentation of the Indo-European epic. Of course, the emphasis is on the Homeric epics, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, with accent on the *Iliad*, because its contents is more heroic than the *Odyssey*. He also mentions the Indian heroic epics as well as the Near- and Middle East epic poetry, in order to establish some basic patterns which are used in this comparative research, such as: style, typical themes and motifs, the heroic world, and the hero who resides in it.

The author pays more attention to the style of IE epics, especially of Homeric epics, because there is much to be explained in this section. He emphasizes the oral character of the epic poetry and the formulaic character of the epic poetry in general, accepting the revolutionary theory of Oral-formulaic composition developed by Milman Parry and Albert Lord in the 1920s, who took as evidence the active creation of epic songs in the Balkans. The developed comparisons in the Homeric epics are most evident feature, but something that is not particularly developed in the Byzantine and Macedonian epic poetry. Of, course, as the title of the book suggests, the emphasis is on describing the epic hero and his actions, who is the most important generic marker of this type of poetry, and develops different features in this broad temporal frame.

The second part: Byzantine Epic Poetry, follows chronologically after the ancient epics, but not necessarily as a continuation of the ancient Greek tradition. It is more likely influenced by the oral literature of the ethnically diverse Byzantine population, in which Slavic population was also included. Byzantine epic did not follow the Homeric epic style, not even the Hellenistic epic, because it developed in the later part of the Byzantine period, somewhere between the 11th and the 13th century. As it is common in epic poetry, the themes that are building material of the epic songs describe some earlier times, because the epic poetry sings of the past. Historically, Byzantine epics sing about the events in the 7th century, or maybe earlier, when the Arabs were the enemies of the Empire, but there are anachronisms, due to the previous oral tradition of the songs, and the transmission through the centuries that followed. Mitevski focuses on two Byzantine epic poems, which were discovered in the late 19th and early 20th century in several Byzantine-era manuscripts featuring a hero known as *The epic of Digenis Akritas* (Διγενής Ακρίτης) and *The song of Armouris* (Ἔσσμα τοῦ Ἀρμούρη). The Byzantine hero, as shown through these two representatives, shifts from the Homeric tradition: the hero is no longer a warrior within a group, but a loner, a horseman, a cavalier, whose ethics are closely related to the Christian religion. The gods are not involved in his deeds; however, the only God is always addressed when something important is going to happen. Some of the features that are generic markers of the Homeric epic are also to be found in the Byzantine epic poetry. Mitevski describes and analyzes separately *The Epic of Digenis* and *The Song of Armouris*, narrating the contents and using the same analytical apparatus described in the first part. There is much to tell about the manuscripts transmission and the many versions of the story of Digenis Akritas, which are evidence of the epic twofold influence between Greek speaking population and the Slavic population in the Byzantine Empire, and at the margins of the Empire. It is obvious that the representation of the lonely hero on horse was popular theme amongst the Balkan peoples, which cannot be discerned as purely Byzantine or Ancient Greek influence. The biggest evidence is the numerous versions of this epic in Slavic and Greek language, but also the King Marko epic poems, which are to be analyzed in the third part of this book. The question of the composition of *The Epic of Digenis* is closely related to the genesis of this epic poem. Every version had appropriated some idiosyncratic features. The Grotaferata version and the Escorial version, which belong to the Greek language tradition, are described in detail due to their width, but the other Greek language versions are mentioned as well. The different themes are isolated with each other, and are narrated one after another with no strong bond between them. *The Epic of Digenis* was never finished entirely as a literary work. Because of its episodic character, the episodes inside

can be omitted without affecting the whole work. This is a strong indicator of the oral composition of the poem. There are four important manuscripts that belong to the Slavic language versions which are analyzed in this book. Here the hero is named Dvegni. It is recently believed and hence theoretically proved, especially amongst the Russian scholars, that the Slavic versions, due to their elementary narrative and historical references, are older versions than the Greek ones; this is a thesis which Mitevski accepts as well, not without a solid explanation.

The third part is titled: Macedonian Epic Poetry. The cycle of King Marko. In the first chapter, Mitevski proposes connection between *The Epic of Digenis* and the Macedonian epic poetry, as an introduction of what follows in chronological order: the epic poetry on King Marko. In the third chapter he attests the connection, using the already established analytical criteria. The basic stylistic features of the Macedonian epic are: the oral character of the poetry, the epithets, the comparisons, the typical numbers and hyperboles, the descriptions and the literary device that is typical Slavic generic marker: the Slavic antithesis. Mitevski successfully detects the epic constants in The King Marko epic cycle. Most of these epic poems that are taken in consideration are published by the eminent folklorist Kiril Penuškiski, whose main sources are the publications of the Miladinovci brothers, Marko Cepenkov and Kuzman Šapkarev. All these publications are from the 19th century; therefore, they are not authentic entirely, which is otherwise discernible from the details and the anachronisms. There is a detailed comparison between Digenis and King Marko, which discovers many similarities between them on many levels, but they are not to be linked necessarily to the Homeric epics. They are linked to the Homeric epics as part of IE epic poetry. Both heroes are of noble origin; they move in a restricted area: Marko in Macedonia, Digenis in Cappadocia, which means they were local heroes; they are heroes with horses, who are almost part of their personal identification; their main purpose is seeking honor and glory, in which they succeed; they fight alone, even with a numerous armies, but this was a feature of the hero Armouris as well. Christianity is their religion, and they present themselves as believers, who confessed their sins. Mitevski makes this analysis and comparison of the two epic heroes very precisely and in detail, addressing every typical theme and stylistic feature, in order to prove the twofold influence of the oral poetry on the territory of Byzantine empire and particularly the Balkans.

Overall, the book provides a wide range of examples of Byzantine epic poetry, and the epic cycle of King Marko, which is to be connected with Macedonian epic poetry, since he was famous as a hero on the territory of modern Macedonia. It should be pointed out that the territory of modern Macedonia is inherently connected to the Byzantine and ancient Slavic inheritance and culture in general; this connection, amongst the other things, is most of all evident from the Macedonian language, which is a modern and closest version of the ancient Slavic language, in which the Byzantine literature was translated first by the brothers Ss. Cyril and Methodius.

Those interested in the comparative treatment of epic texts and the legacy of Homer, Byzantine poetry and Medieval Slavic epics, will find the whole book indispensable. The approach of the book is a literary one, which could be a basis for new multidisciplinary approaches on the subjects, in order to cast a new light on the development of the epic poetry in the Balkans.

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