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Byzantine Mime: A Marginalized Profession?

This chapter focuses on the Middle and Late Byzantine periods because of the usual terminus set by the Council of Trullo (whose significance might have been overstated in earlier research)[1] and because, in these periods, mime in its ancient and late antique versions almost certainly ceased to exist. It is hard not to believe that an important paper by Franz Tinnefeld is partly responsible for popularizing the view that the canons of the Council of Trullo were the defining boundary in the history of Byzantine mime. Interestingly enough, Tinnefeld's paper was first delivered during a seminar on "Subkulturen in Byzanz." The author himself, somewhat reluctantly, labeled the Byzantine mime as belonging to a subculture. Although Tinnefeld is undoubtedly right in perceiving mimes as different, *others*, the notion of mimes as constituting a subculture is not tenable.[2] However, individuals described in the sources as mimes, performers, or similar figures appear to have constituted a distinct social group. Consequently, this chapter aims to discuss to what extent mimes could be seen, if at all, as a marginalized group within Byzantine society.

Forms of ancient entertainment in Byzantium experienced different developments: 1) they could cease to exist; 2) they could be incorporated into the new society's fabric; 3) ultimately, they may have been tacitly tolerated. Gladiatorial games were abolished soon after their institution as supposedly being too bloody (5th century).[3]

1 Franz Tinnefeld, "Zum profanem Mimos in Byzanz nach dem Verdikt des Trullanums (691)," *Byzantina* 6 (1974): 323–343.

2 See, for instance, the classic definition of a subculture by Milton M. Gordon, "The Concept of the Sub-Culture and Its Application," *Social Forces* 26/1 (1947): 40–42: "a sub-division of a national culture, composed of a combination of factorable social situations such as class status, ethnic background, regional and rural or urban residence, and religious, affiliation, but forming in their combination a functioning unity which has a integrated impact on the participating individual." Even more modern definitions of a subculture as "an identifiable subgroup within a society or group of people, especially one characterized by beliefs or interests at variance with those of the larger group" (after the *Oxford English Dictionary*) do not apply in this case.

3 See, for instance, *Codex Thedosianus* 15.10.12: "Cruenta spectacula in otio civili et domestica quiete non placent. Quapropter, qui omnino gladiatores esse prohibemus eos, qui forte delictorum causa hanc condicionem adque sententiam mereri consueverant, metallo magis facies inservire, ut sine sanguine suorum scelerum poenas agnoscant" (325); "Bloody spectacles displease Us amid public peace and domestic tranquility. Wherefore, since We wholly forbid the existence of gladiators, You shall cause those persons who, perchance, on account of some crime, customarily sustain that condition and sentence, to serve rather in the mines, so that they will assume the penalty for their crimes with-

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Chariot races survived well into the 12th century,[4] but no names of individual charioteers are known beyond the early Byzantine period, apart from a few isolated instances.[5] Though the Church was not particularly fond of chariot races, and early Byzantine preachers saw them as a competition, there were never attempts to ban the sport altogether. This was mainly because the Hippodrome and the races served as means to provide entertainment for the inhabitants of Constantinople and as venues for displaying political power and messages. Other kinds of performers experienced an entirely different fate—ancient mime and pantomime mostly disappeared (partly because some of them were openly anti-Christian)[6] and were subjected to a vehement critique by the Church Fathers, while canonical law was directed against scenic entertainment. There were attempts at banning mimes, but it is difficult to establish what kind of performances were prohibited and how successful these attempts were in the long run.[7]

Our knowledge of Byzantine performative practices, including mimes, is meagre.[8] Scholars use the designation "Byzantine mime" to describe its late antique/early Christian phase, which does not extend beyond the 6th to 7th centuries. Fragmented evidence in sources (historiography, hagiography, legal texts) make it impossible to (re) construct a reliable image of this social group.

As a consequence, students of Byzantine theatre have attempted to reconstruct Byzantine mime history by using evidence whose nature is too varied to say anything certain. Be that as it may, the available sources confirm the existence of various performers throughout the entire existence of Byzantium.[9] Byzantine mimes (perhaps

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out shedding their blood." *The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmondian Constitutions*, trans. Clyde Pharr (Princeton, 1952), 436.

4 Gilbert Dagron, "L'organisation et le déroulement des courses d'après le Livre des Cérémonies," *TM* 13 (2000): 5–101; Alan Cameron, *Circus Factions: Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium* (Oxford, 1976).

5 See, for instance, poem no. 6 by Christopher of Mytilene, where he ridicules a charioteer called Jephtha (Although, as far as I am aware, it is not possible to determine whether this individual was real or fictitious).

6 Costas Panayotakis, "Baptism and Crucifixion on the Mimic Stage," *Mnemosyne* 50/3 (1997): 302–319.

7 According to Joshua Stylites, a Syrian chronicler, mimes were banned in 502. See Roger Scott, "Interpreting the Late Fifth and Early Sixth Centuries," in *Basileia: Essays on Imperium and Culture in Honour of E.M. Jeffreys and M.J. Jeffreys*, eds. Geoffrey Nathan and Lynda Garland, Byzantina Australiensia 17 (Leiden, 2011), 88.

8 See, for instance, Walter Puchner, "Byzantinischer Mimos, Pantomimos und Mummenschanz im Spiegel der griechischen Patristik und ekklesiastischer Synodalverordnungen," *Maske und Kothurn* 29 (1983): 311–317; Przemysław Marciniak, "How to Entertain the Byzantines? Mimes and Jesters in Byzantium," in *Medieval and Early Modern Performance in the Eastern Mediterranean*, eds. Evelyn Birge Vitz and Arzu Öztürkmen (Turnhout, 2014), 125–149.

9 Walter Puchner, who is perhaps too skeptical, is right in saying that a reliable reconstruction of Byzantine mime is impossible. See Walter Puchner, *The Crusader Kingdom of Cyprus: A Theatre Province of Medieval Europe. Including a Critical Edition of the Cyprus Passion Cycle and the 'Repraesentatio*

"performers" would be a more accurate term, as it also includes a group of entertainers often, though somewhat inaccurately, referred to as jesters) appear to have formed a very heterogeneous group. Their precise legal, fiscal, and social standing are shrouded in mystery. Both textual and visual sources project a picture that confirms the presence of various performers, but, at first glance, they say very little beyond that. It has been noted that mimes also took part in infamy parades, but their precise identity remains unclear. Were they professional actors, or simply individuals hired to mock the victims?[10] Visual sources regarding the costumes worn by mimes are unreliable and can be interpreted in various ways. Yet some scholars have attempted to identify the elements of such attire.[11] In her paper on acrobats, Victoria Kepetzi repeatedly observes that some of the characters depicted in manuscripts are dressed in "circus garments." However, this is a debatable statement (it is unclear what should be understood as such a garment and to what extent conventional depictions mirror reality at all).[12] While the possibility of defining a group (and especially a marginalized group) by using precise indicators (such as a garment) would be beneficial, the extant visual sources are rather unhelpful in this matter.

Another unsolvable problem is the terminology—Byzantine writers use a plethora of terms to describe entertainers. Zosimos (fl. 5th–6th centuries) uses the term μῖμοί γελοίων, thus underscoring the relationship between mimes and laughter.[13] The sources mention the terms such as μῖμος, σκηνικός, παιγνιωτής, γελωτοποιός, γελωτοπόνος, γελοιαστής, παίκτης. It seems that, for the most part, they use these interchangeably. For instance, Eustathios of Thessalonike, while discussing the stress in the word γελοῖον, makes the following remark "However, most people use γελοῖον with a circumflex on the penultimate, referring to a jester, that is a mime [. . .]."[14]

figurata' of the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple (Athens, 2006), 42–43: "It is not acceptable to construct out of this material, ritual mummery and martial dances such as the misinterpreted 'Gothikon' (tenth century), a continuous tradition of mime lasting till the halosis, the fall of Constantinople in 1453 [. . .]."

10 Marc D. Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres: Texts and Contexts, vol. 2*, Wiener Byzantinische Studien 24/2 (Vienna, 2019), 129–133.

11 For a discussion on the attire of mimes/performers in the retinue of Michael III, see Eunice Maguire and Henry Maguire, *Other Icons: Art and Power in Byzantine Secular Culture* (Princeton, 2007), 112–113. In *On Those Who Insult Providence because of the Poverty*, Theodore Prodromos mentions midgets (*anthropiskoi*) disguised as black people with "ridiculous hair and even more ridiculous beard" who perform in theatres; *PG* 132, col. 1296.

12 Victoria Kepetzi, "Scenes of Performers in Byzantine Art, Iconography, Social, and Cultural Millieu: The Case of Acrobats," in *Medieval and Early Modern Performance in the Eastern Mediterranean*, eds. Evelyn Vitz and Arzu Öztürkmen (Turnhout, 2014), 345–384.

13 Zosimos, *New History*, ed. François Paschoud, *Histoire nouvelle*, vols. 1–3.2 (Paris, 1971–1989), 4.33. In fact, this is a very old expression, dating back to Demosthenes, *Olynth*. 2.19.7; see Demosthenes, *Orations*, ed. Samuel Henry Butcher, *Demosthenis orations*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1903, repr. 1966).

14 Eustathios of Thessalonike, ed. Martin van der Valk, *Eustathii archiepiscopi Thessalonicensis commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem pertinentes,* 4 vols. (Leiden, 1971–1991), 1:314.

Moreover, one Chalivoures mentioned by Niketas Choniates is in the same passage called μίμων ὁ χαριέστατος ("the most cheerful of the mimes") and ὁ γελωτοποιός ("a jester").[15] Perhaps it is also misleading to assume that throughout the centuries there was a clear and unchangeable division between various kinds of entertainers. However, to complicate matters even further, Psellos, in his hypomnema regarding the case of the dissolution of his adoptive daughter's engagement to a certain Elpidios, makes a clear distinction between mimes and jesters (γελοιαστῶν μὲν καὶ μίμων).[16] In other words, "mime" became a term with a blurred meaning, signifying a generic performer, and Byzantine authors seem to have used this term quite freely. Moreover, it is more accurate to use general terms such as "performers," since it would be difficult to specify an exact difference between various entertainers.

Equally unattainable is a reliable reconstruction of the precise mode of performance. Those who entertained people at fairs, religious festivals, and on the streets might have performed skits, attacking each other in an exaggerated and stylized way with comic slapstick.[17] Zonaras, when commenting on the fifty-first canon of the Council of Trullo, noted that mimes incited unseemly laughter with slaps to the head and loud noises.[18] The same information is repeated in his commentary on the forty-fifth canon of the Council of Carthage, which mentions performers (*skēnikoi*) who make people laugh with slaps to the head.[19] Canonists' testimonies are supported by a fragment from Theodoros Prodromos' satire *Amathes*, which describes what seems to be a performance of mimes:

> Ἢ πύθου μοι τῶν ἐπὶ σκηνῆς ὁπόσον ὑπέχουσι τὸν ἀγῶνα, ὡς αὐτοῖς ῥαπιζόμεναι ψοφεῖν ἐθισθεῖεν αἱ παπειαί καὶ ἡ φωνὴ νῦν θρενοῦντα, νῦν δὲ τὸ ἀπειλοῦντα, ἐνίοτε δὲ τὸν ἀνιώμενον ὑποκρίνοιτο, τά τε σφυρὰ καὶ οἱ πόδες εὐκατακλώμενοι καὶ καμπτόμενοι τῷ κόρδακι καὶ τὴν ἄλλην συνδιασκευάζοιεν ὄρχησιν.
>
> Or ask me about those who perform on the stage how much they endure the performance, how their cheeks, when slapped, became accustomed to making noise, how their voice at one moment imitates somebody wailing, at another somebody threatening and sometimes somebody grieving.

15 Niketas Choniates, *History*, ed. Jan-Louis van Dieten, *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, CFHB 11/1 (Berlin, 1975), 441–442.

16 Michael Psellos, *Legal Speeches*, ed. George T. Dennis, *Michaelis Pselli orationes forenses et acta* (Stuttgart, 1994), 4.109.

17 However, it is by no means certain if performances at the imperial or aristocratic courts differed very much.

18 *PG* 137, col. 693 (Zonaras uses exactly the same phrase in both texts). Similar information was handed down by Balsamon, in *PG* 138, col. 138.

19 *Σύνταγμα τῶν θείων καὶ ἱερῶν κανόνων τῶν τε ἁγίων καὶ πανευφήμων Ἀποστόλων καὶ τῶν ἱερῶν οἰκουμενικῶν καὶ τοπικῶν συνόδων*, eds. Georgios Rhalles and Michael Potles, 6 vols. (Athens, 1852–1856), 3:414.

> How their ankles and feet are well flexed and bent for *kordax* and how they prepare [every] other dance.[20]

And finally, these testimonies are corroborated by a passage from the *enkomion* penned by Nikephoros Kataphloron, which also mentions slapping in the forehead.[21] However, it seems that these descriptions are more than mere explanations of mimes' activities— there is also a hint of condemnation in them. In the *Vita St. Lucae Stylitae*, a passage recounts a story about a eunuch named Sergios and a mime. One day, their exchange of jokes and smacking led to a serious fight, which resulted in Sergios almost being killed.[22] According to Charis Messis, this story serves as a warning against jokes and mockery, for which eunuchs and their equivalents, mimes, had a marked inclination.[23] Although abuse and mockery were integral to Byzantine culture, the conduct of mimes—especially from the perspective of church writers—was seen as a striking example of excess that needed to be punished.

Much ink has been spilled to explain why early Christians treated theatre, actors, and mimes with disdain, if not hatred.[24] Understandably, the Middle and Late Byzantine periods' social, political, and religious circumstances were very different from earlier eras. Institutional theatre had ceased to exist centuries ago. Its remnants—street performers, dancers, jugglers, and musicians—were no longer any competition for the Church, and the extant sources do not mention any severe anti-religious accusations. What was left were concerns about the moral dangers that performers might pose to the viewers.[25] These accusations were centuries old and perpetuated not only by preachers: Zosimos, in his *New History*, underscored the relationship between mime, pantomime, and immorality (1.6; 4.33). Some time later, in the 6th century, Chorikios' speech in defense of the mime was triggered by similar accusations.[26] In the 12th century, Zonaras, when commenting on canon forty-five of the Council of Carthage, states that mimes and scenic performers should not be refused forgiveness (lit.

20 Theodore Prodromos, *Amathes or the Loves or an Old Man*, Gli scritti satirici. PhD Thesis, Tomasso Migliorini (Pisa, 2010), 32–33.

21 Marina Loukaki, *Les Grâces à Athènes: Éloge d'un gouverneur byzantine par Nikolaos Kataphlôron* (Berlin, 2019), ch. 15, 116.

22 *Vita St. Lucae Stylitae*, ch. 23, ed. Hippolyte Delehaye, *Les Saints Stylites* (Brussels, 1923, repr. 1989), p. 217.

23 Charis Messis, *Les Eunuques À Byzance. Entre Réalité et Imaginaire* (Paris, 2014), 174: "L'exemple de Serge sert à mettre en garde contre les plaisanteries, les propos insensés, les blagues et les railleries, pour lesquels les eunuques et leurs équivalents, les mimes, avaient une inclination bien marquée."

24 See, for instance, Ruth Webb, *Demons and Dancers: Performance in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2008).

25 See, for instance, Przemysław Marciniak, "Laughter on Display: Mimic Performances and the Danger of Laughing in Byzantium," in *Greek Laughter and Tears. Antiquity and After*, eds. Margaret Alexiou and Douglas Cairns (Edinburgh, 2017), 232–242.

26 See Ruth Webb, "Rhetorical and Theatrical Fictions in Chorikios of Gaza," in *Greek Literature in Antiquity: Dynamism, Didactisim, Classicims*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Washington, D.C., 2006).

reconciliation); otherwise, their way of life could corrupt others.[27] This old prejudice resonates even more resoundingly in his commentaries on the Council of Trullo, when he states that actions of mimes "incite unseemly laughter and, so to speak, arise to Bacchic frenzy the simplest or the most unrefined people" (γέλωτας ἀπρεπεῖς κινοῦσι, καὶ οἷον *ἐκβακχεύουσι* τοὺς ἀφελεστέρους ἢ ἀπροσεκτοτέρους).[28] Interestingly enough, the above-mentioned passage from the *Vita St. Lucae* uses similar vocabulary when describing the fight between the eunuch and a mime (ὡς καὶ μέθῃ *βεβακχευμένος* οἰνοφλυγίας).[29] Mimes' jokes and mockeries could have dangerous, palpable effects. They are described in terms related to drunkenness, Bacchic frenzy, and frivolousness (which is symbolized by the dance *kordax* mentioned by Prodromos in the *Amathes*).[30] Mimes were dangerous both because they led sinful lives and because they could re-enact sinfulness in their performances.

Before any attempt to discuss the Byzantine mime's marginalization, the term "marginalization" should be defined. It also remains to be determined whether Byzantine mimes and other performers—including actors and entertainers—occupied a genuinely marginalized position within society. Although the discussion about exclusion/marginalization is relatively new, the process itself pre-dates its conceptualization.[31] Interestingly enough, defining "marginality" raises issues in many disciplines. The subject of marginalization can be construed as an object, action, or person that is not widely accepted and popular with the majority due to conflict with moral, religious, or political norms. Moreover, marginalization may elicit notions of being insignificant and unimportant. However, in a social context, marginality may signify something or somebody who is unimportant and barely ('marginally') tolerated by the rest of society; therefore, they are seen negatively and suppressed by the majority. Thus, marginalization does not equal complete rejection. In other words, marginal is always ". . . at the edge (fringes, border)" of something.[32] In light of this context, can one reasonably assume that mimes constituted a distinctly marginalized group? If by "marginalized" we understand a group that existed at the fringes of society and was tolerated but suppressed, it is possible to construe mimes/performers as marginalized.

The main problem is that Byzantine sources project a contradictory and incoherent image. On the one hand, mimes are usually described in derogatory language, and comparisons to mimes are used to ridicule a given person. A good example is Michael III's biography, where allusions to mimic imagery were meant to project a negative

27 Rhalles and Potles, *Σύνταγμα*, 3:414.

28 Ralles and Potles, *Σύνταγμα,* 2:425.

29 *Vita St. Lucae Stylitae*, ch. 23.

30 On drunkenness and *kordax*, see Johannes Koder, "Kordax und Methe: Lasterhaftes Treiben in byzantinischer Zeit," *Zbornik Radova Vinatonolośkog Instituta* 50/2 (2013): 947–958.

31 See, for instance, Stanko Pelc, "Marginality and Marginalization," in *Societies, Social Inequalities and Marginalization*, eds. Raghubir Chand, Etienne Nel and Stanko Pelc (Springer, 2017), 13–28.

32 Pelc, *Marginality*, 13.

picture of the Emperor.[33] Similarly, a well-known passage from the life of the patriarch St. Euthymios (10th century) where Stylianos Zaoutzes, father of the second wife of Leo VI, bribes one of the mimes, Lampoudios, to attack the future patriarch with brutal insults, builds on stereotypes of mimes as being ready to speak/act out any lie or blasphemy.[34] On the other hand, performers are also portrayed in a positive light. *Patria of Constantinople* includes a story of mimes/jesters of the Hippodrome (οἱ παιγνιῶται τοὺ Ἱπποδρομίου) who helped a widow who was wronged by Theophilos' chamberlain Nikephoros.[35] In the *Vita St. Euthymi*, a performer (*skēnikos*) named Baannes (Vahan) suggests the location for a saint's monastery to the Emperor.[36] Interestingly enough, he is called Βαάννης, ὁ ἐξοχώτατος σκηνικός ("the most excellent performer"). Unlike the foul-mouthed Lampoudios, the other two performers in the *Vita* (Titlivakios and Baannes/Vahan) are not described in derogatory language.

Nicholas de Lange, in a paper on Jews in Justinian's time, makes an interesting remark about laws concerning Jewry as "often marked by insulting language, which is an indication of the process of marginalization."[37] In their compilation of earlier laws, both Michael Psellos and Michael Attaleiates repeat that the testimony of a depraved person should be rejected (Μάρτυς ἐστὶν ἀπόβλητος πᾶς ὁ *διεφθαρμένος*), and these people include mimes, musicians, and animal fighters.[38] Performers are to be treated similarly to adulterers, sycophants, and thieves. Whether or not this still held true in the 11th century is of little relevance here. What is essential is the language used by both writers, which is unambiguously insulting.

While the canon commentaries' language is perhaps less aggressive, it often underscores that mimes, or at least some of them, were not particularly well-received.

33 Jakov N. Ljubarskij, "Der Kaiser als Mime. Zum Problem der Gestalt des byzantinischen Kaisers Michael III," *JÖB* 37 (1987): 38–50; Ewald Kislinger, "Michael III. – Image und Realität," *EOS: Commentarii Societatis Philologae Polonorum* 75 (1978): 389–400.

34 *Vita St. Euthymii (Patr. 907–912)*, ed. and trans. Patricia Karlin-Hayter, *Byz* 25 (1955): 1–172, at 48–51: "[. . .] and Zaoutzes was so much enraged against Euthymios that he even urged actors who were, according to the custom, going into the royal dinner to say something against him: the first of them, whose name was Titlivakios, would not accept this evil proposal. But in the course of the dinner, such was the number of enormous and shocking insults that Lampoudios vomited from his ill-tempered heart against our blameless father that he made those dining that day with the emperor blush and the monarch angrily drove him out and dismissed him [. . .]."

35 *Patria of Constantinople*, ed. Thomas Preger, trans. Albrecht Berger, *Accounts of Medieval Constantinople: The Patria*, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 24 (Washington, D.C., 2013), 3.28. This story also raises the question of who these performers were: members of a faction, or entertainers formally licensed to appear in the Hippodrome?

36 *Vita St. Euthymii*, ed. Karlin-Hayter, p. 27.

37 Nicholas de Lange, "Jews in the Age of Justinian," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, ed. Michael Maas (Cambridge, 2005), 420.

38 Michael Psellos, *Synopsis of the Laws*, ed. Leenhert Westerink, *Michaelis Pselli poemata* (Stuttgart, 1992), no. 8, 921–922; Michael Attaleiates, *Ponema Nomikon*, in *Jus Graecoromanum*, eds. Ioannes Zepos and Panagiotes Zepos, vol. 7 (Athens, 1931), 15.5–6.

Both Zonaras and Balsamon create a distinct but not an entirely clear opposition between honored and unhonoured performers (ἔντιμοι – ἄτιμοι).[39] Interestingly enough, both canonists seem to differ as to what kind of performers belong to which category. Balsamon's division is relatively straightforward: he juxtaposes various types of musicians with other sorts of performers who impersonate women, slaves, and commanders.[40] The former group is described as ἄτιμοι ("unhonoured"). Zonaras' argument seems to be more nuanced, as he differentiates between performers who are somehow legalized and can perform before the Emperor and those of lesser standing, performing at festivals, who are, again, ἄτιμοι.[41] While we know nothing about specific laws regarding performances, testimonies suggest that some mimes enjoyed privileges at the imperial court. A passage from the *Vita St. Euthymii* states that performers customarily went to the royal banquet (ἐν τῷ βασιλικῷ ἀρίστῳ ἐξ ἔθους εἰσιόντας σκηνικοὺς).[42] This must mean that performances of some sort took place at the imperial court and that mimes were accepted within the imperial setting. Mimes were stillpart of the imperial retinue three hundred years later, as Choniates states that Isaac Angelos did not bar mimes and musicians from the palace.[43] Lynda Garland has even claimed that court jesters formed a professional elite of mimes.[44] While this is probably true to some extent, such a claim remains impossible to verify. Moreover, as always, sources project conflicting images: it is accepted that one Denderis was a jester and/or mime at the court of Emperor Theophilos (though he is never described as such). Denderis is portrayed as a pitiful fellow (ἀνδράριον), not unlike Homer's Therisites, speaking unintelligibly (most likely having a speech impediment).[45] Even

39 Rhalles and Potles, *Σύνταγμα*, 3:414.

40 Musicians perhaps enjoyed slightly better social standing and greater acceptance. Nikos Maliaras compiled dozens of examples of illustrations of such musicians in his book. This stands in striking contrast to a number of illustrations of other performers. See Nikos Maliaras, *Βυζαντινά Μουσικά Όργανα* (Athens, 2007). Viktoria Kepetzi discussed the imagery of acrobats and especially *kontopaiktes* (pole-mounted acrobats) in Byzantine art, but many of her examples are initial letters shaped like acrobats. While it would be rather difficult to establish to what extent these illustrations reflect actual reality, they at least signal that acrobats must still have been part of Byzantine performative culture, and this is confirmed by textual sources as well. See Kepetzi, "Scenes of Performers," 345–384.

41 Rhalles and Potles, *Σύνταγμα*, 3:414. See also Maroula Perisanidi, "Entertainment in the Twelfth-century Canonical Commentaries: Were Standards the Same for Byzantine Clerics and Laymen?," *BMGS* 38/2 (2014): 185–200, at 194–196.

42 *Vita St. Euthymii*, ch. 7, 43.

43 Niketas Choniates, *History*, 441. However, this time, mimes are mentioned together with parasites and knaves, so once again, they are a symbol of corruption.

44 Lynda Garland, "Imperial Women and Entertainment," in *Byzantine Women: Varieties of Experience, 800–1200*, ed. Lynda Garland, Publications for the Centre for Hellenic Studies, King's College London 8, (Aldershot, 2006), 175–189, at 178.

45 *Chronographiae quae Theophanis Continuati nomine fertur libri I–IV*, ed. and trans. Michael Featherstone and Juan Signes Codoñer, CFHB 53 (Boston, 2015), 4.6, at p. 132.

leaving aside the source's hostility towards Denderis, it is difficult to see him as a successful performer (if he was one).

The usual discourse involving mimes/scenic performers projects negative images based on wide-spread prejudices and uses unflattering vocabulary. Kekaumenos, who expresses a mix of disdain and outright hostility toward mimes in his *Strategikon*, refers to them five times, and in each instance the term is used pejoratively. At some point in his *Consilia et narrationes* (3.116), he says:

> σὺ δέ, ἐάν σοι δέδωκεν ὁ Θεός, μὴ εἶ κνιπός, ἀλλ' εὐμετάδοτος ἔσο συμμέτρως· πλὴν μὴ εἰς μίμους καὶ αἰσχρολόγους καὶ κόλακας, εἰς σεμνοὺς ἀνθρώπους, φίλους τε καὶ ὑστερημένους.[46]
>
> As for you, if God has given you anything, don't be miserly, but be generous, with moderation; only, not to mimes, and foul-mouthed people, and flatterers, but to respectable men, friends, and those in need.

In this sentence, Kekaumenos juxtaposes three pairs of oppositions: "foul-mouthed people – friends," "flatterers – those in need," and finally "mimes – respectable people." A similar view is expressed when the general describes mimes as unworthy of receiving honorific titles. Instead, they should be offered monetary gratification (if you wish to benefit [them], benefit them with a few coins, and not with honourable titles; for an honourable title, by its very name, points to honourable merit).[47] Therefore, mimes are perceived as not honorable, a descriptor that is deeply rooted in the Byzantine 'mimic discourse.'

For Kekaumenos, mimes are not trustworthy because they are not serious. When Kekaumenos advises, "Don't choose to be a public man; for you cannot be both a general and a mime," he probably means that a person cannot be both funny and serious at the same time. Kekaumenos explains this himself: "The man who converses and laughs without discipline is despised and criticised as undisciplined."[48] Kekaumenos, like many other Byzantine authors, criticizes uncontrollable and indecorous laughter. This is precisely the kind of laughter that resulted from mimic performances. Byzantine canonists, when discussing canons related to performances, always stress that performative laughter is improper.[49] Attaleiates, in his description of Constantine Monomachos, directly states that mimic entertainment is rooted in "the lower, corpo-

46 Greek text and translation after Kekaumenos, *Consilia et Narrationes*, ed., trans., and comm. Charlotte Roueché (SAWS [Sharing Ancient WisdomS] edition, 2013), https://ancientwisdoms.ac.uk/mss/viewer.html?viewColumns=greekLit%3Atlg3017.Syno298.sawsEng01%3Adiv1.o1&viewOffsets=82 (last accessed 20.05.2025).

47 Kekaumenos, *Consilia et Narrationes*, 8: ἐὰν θέλῃς εὐεργετῆσαι, διὰ νομισμάτων ὀλίγων αὐτοὺς εὐεργέτει καὶ μὴ δι'ἀξιωμάτων· τὸ γὰρ ἀξίωμα ἀπ'αὐτοῦ τοῦ ὀνόματος εἰς τὸ ἄξιον δηλοῖ.

48 Kekaumenos, *Consilia et Narrationes*.

49 For a more detailed analysis, see Marciniak, "Laughter on Display."

real part of the soul."[50] At the end of the Empire, Manuel II Palaiologos still evokes the same old prejudices when he notes in a letter to Makarios, former bishop of Ankyra, "This is living in sybaritic luxury, surrounded by obscenities uttered by parasites, mimes (μίμων ὀρχηστῶν), and dancers. So much for inciting laughter (γέλωτα ποιεῖν), assuming that the person being insulted should be capable of that."[51]

In a way, the history of Byzantine mimes is a victim of the dualism created by Church laws and literary tropes on the one hand and real life on the other. Church laws condemning, to a greater or lesser degree, mimic performances and inherited literary *topoi* project an image of the laughter-inciting mime, whose profession is to *imitate* and thereby to create lies.[52] Interestingly enough, in most stories, the presence of mimes is counterbalanced by the fact that what they do symbolizes something undesired and harmful. Lampoudios insults Euthymios, Monomachos' interest in mimes was a sign of his weak character, Chalivoures' well-known sexual joke, recorded by Niketas Choniates, is badly received by the Emperor.[53] Mimes and their behavior came to signify the margins of human behavior—corporeal, lower, uncontrollable urges such as laughter and buffoonery, which, as in the story about the eunuch Sergios, can ultimately lead to disaster. And yet, at the same time, sources confirm, as if

50 Michael Attaleiates, *History*, ed. Inmaculada Pérez Martín, *Miguel Ataliates*, *Historia*, Nueva Roma 15 (Madrid, 2002), ch. 2.11; *The History Michael Attaleiates*, trans. Anthony Kaldellis, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 16 (Washington, D.C., 2012), 85.

51 Manuel II Palaiologos, *Letters*, ed. G. T. Dennis, *Manuelis II Palaeologi Epistulae* (Washington, D.C., 1977), no. 65 (with my alteration).

52 See, for instance, the imagery of Stratokles, a character from Prodromos' dialogue *Amarantos or the Passions of an Old Man*, an older philosopher who marries a young girl and pretends to be someone he is not: a young groom. His extensive make-up and hair-cut make him look like a mime. This change not only conceals his age (which itself is a literary *topos*) but transforms him into mime, who performs and impersonates someone else, which underscores his lies and hypocrisy (Amarantos, the protagonist of the dialogue is deceived by Stratokles, whom he believed to be the real philosopher). The transformation of a "syllogizing philosopher" into a "mime" reveals the true character of Stratokles: he is a con-man. At first glance, Prodromos merely repeats old accusations and prejudices. Yet, the entire *Amarantos* is brimming with theatrical and dramatic vocabulary and imagery, and Prodromos uses these to express contemporary concerns and problems. In the *Amarantos*, the figure of a mime represents false teachers who only play/pretend to be philosophers. Prodromos conflates ancient prejudices regarding actors and his own contemporary preoccupations. For a fuller analysis of the issue of hypocrisy in Prodromos' writing, see Przemysław Marciniak, "It Is Not What It Appears to Be: A Note on Theodoros Prodromos' *Against a Lustful Old Woman*," *EOS: Commentarii Societatis Philologae Polonorum* 103 (2016): 109–115.

53 Niketas Choniates, *History*, 441; *O city of Byzantium. Annals of Niketas Choniates*, trans. Harry J. Magoulias (Detroit, 1984), 242: "Once at dinner Isaakios said, 'Bring me salt (ἅλας).' Standing nearby admiring the dance of the women made up of the emperor's concubines and kinswomen was Chalivoures, the wittiest of the mimes, who retorted, 'Let us first come to know these, O Emperor,' and then command others (ἄλλας) to be brought in. At this, everyone, both men and women, burst into loud laughter; the emperor's face darkened and only when he had chastened the jester's freedom of speech was his anger curbed."

incidentally, that mimes were to be found at the imperial court, at fairs, and on the streets, and that they could also exhibit positive qualities. This incoherence is continuously implied in the sources, but a full picture remains beyond our reach. The scarcity of the testimonies makes it impossible to formulate any decisive conclusions—ritual complaints recorded in Church documents both show the disdain towards performers and confirm their continuous presence. It is tempting to think that the frequent use of mimes as symbols of moral corruption would not make any sense if they had not been an everyday culture element. Unfortunately, as already said, we know nothing about this particular group's social structure, origins, and education. If we are to believe Choniates' testimony, Chalivoures must have been familiar with ancient Greek, as his joke is built on the similarity between the sounds of the words ἅλας (salt) and ἄλλας (others). In other words, people, whom we somewhat carelessly call mimes and jesters, might be very different in terms of their upbringing, social origins, and motivations. Already Spyridon Lambros in his pioneering article about Byzantine jesters pondered how certain men were chosen for this role.[54]

While it is reasonable to speak about the marginalization of mimes, perhaps it would be more helpful to see them as the *Others Within*. Performers (actors, mimes, and the like) became a group that both belonged and did not belong, rejected and stigmatized by some and partially socially excluded.[55] Byzantine mimes were (partly) tolerated but moved to the fringes of the society. And while it is difficult to describe them as a subculture in any meaning of this word, this group was certainly not seen, as we say today, as mainstream. It would be worthwhile to examine whether there is a consistent pattern in the way mimes are addressed—as individuals and as a nameless group. Individual mimes might be portrayed more positively (though there are clear exceptions, such as Lampoudios), whereas mimes as a group are almost always described in derogatory term. Perhaps a more careful reading of the extant sources will allow us to reconstruct the Byzantine mime's history and discover a more nuanced picture of people behind this label.

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54 Spyridon Lambros, "Οἱ γελωτοποιοὶ τῶν Βυζαντινῶν αὐτοκρατόρων," *Neos Ellenomnemon* 7 (1910): 372–398, at 393.

55 I follow here the definition of Yirmihay Yovel, *The Other Within. The Marranos. Split Identity and Emerging Modernity* (Princeton, 2009), xi.

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