

---

*Jasmina Šaranac Stamenković*  
(Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš)

## IN PRAISE OF THE CAPITAL – PSELLOS' IMPERIAL SPEECH TO ROMANOS IV DIOGENES

*Abstract:* This paper analyzes Imperial Speech No. 20 by Michael Psellos, as published in the critical edition by George Dennis, addressed to Emperor Romanos IV Diogenes. Since the main theme of the imperial speech is the relationship between Constantinople and the ruler striving to protect it, the aim of this study is to interpret the speech – considered a valuable testimony to Byzantine political, ideological, and civilizational heritage – within the context of 11th-century political and social history and to provide a professional translation into English. The paper sheds light on the exceptionally important motif of the capital in imperial orations, which were an essential part of Byzantine court ceremonial used for political propaganda.

*Keywords:* imperial speeches, *motif of Constantinople*, Emperor Romanos IV Diogenes, Michael Psellos, 11th century

### *Introductory Remarks*

The imperial speech (*basilikos logos*) or *encomium* (*enkōmion*) represents the most potent ideological weapon of the ruling Byzantine government. Imperial speeches were an indispensable part of the Byzantine court ceremonial. One of the most valuable compositional segments of imperial speeches – a specific type of epideictic rhetoric whose rules were first established by Menander Rhetor at the turn of the 3rd century – was *the motif of the capital*, namely, *the motif of Constantinople*.<sup>1</sup> The unquestionable importance of imperial speeches on the

---

<sup>1</sup> Prepared as a part of the project *History Today, Challenges and Temptations*, conducted at the University of Niš – Faculty of Philosophy (No. 423/1-3-01). This study was supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovations of the Republic of Serbia (Contract No. 451-03-137/2025-03/ 200165). L. Previale, *Teoria e prassi del panegirico bizantino*, Emerita 17 (1949), 72–105; L. Previale, *Teoria e prassi del panegirico bizantino*, Emerita 18 (1950), 340–366; H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner* I-II, München 1978, 120–132; E. Jeffreys, *Rhetoric*, The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies, ed. E. Jeffreys, J. Haldon and R. Cormack, Oxford University Press 2008, 831–833; F. Lauritzen, *I panegirici bizantini dal VII al XV secolo. Il modello*

ideological-political and socio-cultural levels of the Byzantine Empire was evident as early as the speeches of Eusebius of Caesarea dedicated to Constantine the Great (324–337).<sup>2</sup> However, Eusebius, as a bishop from the provinces, paid more attention in his laudatory speeches to Nicomedia, Jerusalem, and Antioch than to the new capital – Constantinople. In contrast, Constantinople would become an obligatory topos of praise and a central feature of Byzantine emperors in the speeches of later orators.<sup>3</sup> Constantinople – the capital from which they ruled – became the symbolic birthplace of all Byzantine *basileis*, regardless of the actual city in which the emperors had been born.<sup>4</sup>

Libanius and the Caesar Julian, pagan intellectuals of the 4th century, in their imperial speeches addressed to Constantius (337–361), the son of Constantine the Great, praised his father for founding Constantinople. The first Christian ruler also received criticism precisely because of Constantinople – the city may have borne his name, but its construction and development belonged to emperors like Constantius, or later Valens (364–378) and Theodosius (379–395).<sup>5</sup>

*The motif of the Byzantine capital* is also present in the laudatory speeches dedicated to the rulers of the Empire of Nicaea. After Constantinople fell into Latin hands in 1204, Niketas Choniates and George Akropolites, Byzantine authors of the 13th century, in imperial speeches dedicated to Theodore Laskaris (1204–1222) and John III Vatatzes (1222–1254), compared Nicaea – a city named after the Greek word for victory (*nikē*) – with the New Constantinople.<sup>6</sup> Finally, during the time of the Palaiologos dynasty (1259–1453), praise of Constantinople remained a ubiquitous compositional element of imperial orations.<sup>7</sup>

\*

This paper examines the imperial speech No. 20 by Michael Psellos, from George Dennis's critical edition, composed for Emperor Romanos IV Diogenes.<sup>8</sup> It is well known that Michael Psellos was one of the greatest in-

---

*costantiniano alla corte di Costantinopoli*, in: AA. VV. *Enciclopedia Costantiniana*, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, vol. II, Roma 2013, 309–319.

<sup>2</sup> A. Kazhdan, *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* II, Oxford 1991, 751–752; J. Vanderspoel, *Themistius and the Imperial Court Oratory, Civic Duty and Paideia from Constantius to Theodosius*, Michigan 1995; F. Lauritzen, *Sul nesso tra stile e contenuti negli encomi di Psello*, *Medioevo Greco* 7 (2007), 1–10.

<sup>3</sup> N. Radošević, *Konstantin Veliki u vizantijskim carskim govorima*, ZRVI 33 (1994), 9 and note 8 (Serbian Cyrillic).

<sup>4</sup> Idem, *Pohvalna slova caru Androniku II Paleologu*, ZRVI 21 (1982), 70 and note 21 (Serbian Cyrillic).

<sup>5</sup> Idem, *Konstantin Veliki u vizantijskim carskim govorima*, ZRVI 33 (1994), 11–13 (Serbian Cyrillic).

<sup>6</sup> Idem, *Nikejski carevi u savremenoj im retorici*, ZRVI 26 (1987), 72–73, 82 (Serbian Cyrillic).

<sup>7</sup> Idem, *Pohvalna slova caru Androniku II Paleologu*, ZRVI 21 (1982), 70–72 (Serbian Cyrillic).

<sup>8</sup> Michaelis Pselli, *Orationes panagyricae*, ed. G. T. Dennis, Stuttgart-Leipzig 1994, no. 20, 182–184.

tellectuals of the 11th-century Byzantine Empire.<sup>9</sup> The speech he authored contains 49 verses and was delivered before Emperor Romanos IV Diogenes during a formal banquet at court, held prior to his campaign against the Turks (*Προσφώνησις πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα κῦρ Ῥωμανὸν τὸν Διογένην παρὰ τῶν πολιτῶν ἐν κλητορίῳ*).<sup>10</sup> Psellos composed the *encomium* either in February/March of 1069 or between January 1070 and the end of March 1071, during a pause between military campaigns – i.e., when Emperor Romanos Diogenes was present in the capital.<sup>11</sup> The central theme of the imperial speech is the relationship between the capital and the emperor who strives to protect it and defend the borders of the Byzantine Empire from the Seljuk Turks. This paper presents the first translation of the imperial speech dedicated to Romanos Diogenes into a modern language – English. Additionally, by drawing on source material about Constantinople from other imperial speeches by Psellos dedicated to Romanos Diogenes, the paper explores the use of *the capital motif* during his reign.

#### *A Short Biography of Romanos Diogenes and the Historical Context*

It is known that Romanos Diogenes was a prominent Byzantine general. He held the title of *vestarches* and served as the *doux* of Serdica toward the end of Emperor Constantine X Doukas's reign (1059–1067).<sup>12</sup> Due to his attempt to claim the throne after Constantine X's death, Diogenes was exiled to his native Cappadocia. He remained there until he was recalled to Constantinople by the imperial government, headed by Augusta Eudokia Makrembolitissa, the widow of Constantine Doukas. The Augusta subsequently granted him the title of *magistros* and appointed him as *stratelates* (commander-in-chief).<sup>13</sup> On January 1, 1068, Empress Eudokia Makrembolitissa married Romanos Diogenes.<sup>14</sup> As her consort, Romanos IV Diogenes became emperor.

<sup>9</sup> Я. Н. Любарский, *Михаил Пселл. Личность и творчество. К истории византийского предгуманизма*, Москва 1978, 22–35; A. Kaldellis, *Mothers and sons, Fathers and Daughters. The Byzantine Family of Michael Psellos*, Notre Dame, Indiana 2006, 3–16; S. Papaioannou, *Michael Psellos. Rhetoric and authorship in Byzantium*, Cambridge 2013, 4–13; F. Lauritzen, *Michael Psellos. Bibliography (2000–2020)*, *Theologia Orthodoxa* 66/1 (2021), 249–268.

<sup>10</sup> Psellus, *Orationes panegyricae*, no. 20, 182.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, no. 20, 182.

<sup>12</sup> Miguel Atalíates *Historia*, ed. P. I. Martín, Madrid 2002, 73–75; Byzantium in the Time of Troubles. The Continuation of the Chronicle of John Skylitzes (1057–1079), ed. W. J. Nesbitt – E. McGeer, Leiden–Boston 2020, 76; Ioannis Zonarae epitome historiarum III, ed. Th. Büttner-Wobst, Bonnae 1897, 684; J. C. Cheynet, *Mantzikert: un désastre militaire?*, *Byz* 50 (1980), 436; J. C. Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963–1210)*, Paris 1990, 74–75; J. C. Cheynet, *La politique militaire byzantine de Basile II à Alexis Comnène*, *ZRVI* 29/30 (1991), 69 and note 37.

<sup>13</sup> Miguel Atalíates *Historia*, 75–76; The Continuation of the Chronicle of John Skylitzes, 78; Ioannis Zonarae epitome historiarum III, 685.

<sup>14</sup> N. Oikonomidès, *Le serment de l'impératrice Eudocie (1067). Un épisode de l'histoire dynastique de Byzance*, *REB* 21 (1963), 125.

After the death of Emperor Constantine X, members of the Doukas dynasty, led by Caesar John Doukas, considered their positions threatened by Eudokia's marriage to Diogenes. Michael Psellos – a philosopher, orator, and statesman – placed all his knowledge and influence in the service of the new emperor, Romanos Diogenes, becoming one of his trusted advisors.<sup>15</sup> Caesar John Doukas was visibly disappointed by his actions.<sup>16</sup>

During Diogenes's reign, the Seljuk Turks launched almost constant attacks on Syria and Armenia. Romanos Diogenes personally led three military campaigns against the Turks. His final military operation ended in the Byzantine defeat at the Battle of Manzikert on August 26, 1071.<sup>17</sup> This defeat opened the way for the Turks into Asia Minor.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the Normans captured Bari, the last Byzantine stronghold in Italy, in 1071, and began attacking the Balkans.<sup>19</sup>

### *Translation of the Imperial Speech*

Addressed to the Basileus, Lord Romanos Diogenes, Before the Citizens  
During a Ceremonial Banquet in the Imperial Palace

Now, for the first time, I behold a hoplite and at the same time a king; for the first time I see a general who is also an emperor. A golden crown shines upon your head, and no less, a fearsome spear is in your right hand. Upon us citizens your gaze falls gently, while the barbarians tremble before your terrifying look. Toward us, your voice is sweet; toward your enemies, it is a sharp roar. You look upon us with a joyful face, while your opponents dread your strategic fury.

O ruler, bearer of ranks and titles, and of every other radiant name. O vessel of all virtues, both political and military. O common good, to both citizens and soldiers, and great benefit to the Empress among cities – [Constantinople], who was once cast down to her knees, but now, unex-

<sup>15</sup> E. Vries de – van der Velden, *Psellos, Romain IV Diogénès et Manzikert*. *Byzantinoslavica* 58/2 (1997), 293; J. Šaranac Stamenković, *Pselov odgovor na optužbe Evdokije Makremvolitise*, Vranjski glasnik, Tematski zbornik povodom 60 godina Narodnog muzeja u Vranju, ur. D. Antić – I. Becić, Vranje 2021, 36 (Serbian Cyrillic); J. Šaranac Stamenković, *Igre oko carigradskog prestola. Dolazak na vlast Konstantina X Duke*, Niš 2022, 211 (Serbian Cyrillic).

<sup>16</sup> J. Šaranac Stamenković, *Igre oko carigradskog prestola. Dolazak na vlast Konstantina X Duke*, Niš 2022, 207–209 (Serbian Cyrillic).

<sup>17</sup> E. Vries de – van der Velden, *Psellos, Romain IV Diogénès et Manzikert*. *Byzantinoslavica* 58/2 (1997), 274–310; J. C. Cheynet, *La résistance aux Turcs en Asie Mineure entre Mantzikert et la Première Croisade*, *Mélanges offerts à Hélène Ahrweiler* (Byzantina Sorbonensia 16), Paris 1998, 131–147.

<sup>18</sup> J. C. Cheynet, *Mantzikert: un désastre militaire?*, *Byz* 50 (1980), 410–438; M. Angold, *The Byzantine Empire 1025–1204 (A political history)*, London – New York 1984, 21–26; J. C. Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963–1210)*, Paris 1990, 348.

<sup>19</sup> M. Angold, *The Byzantine Empire 1025–1204 (A political history)*, London – New York 1984, 32.

pectedly, stands tall again and watches over you with great care, O master and sovereign. Because of your victories, she wears the crown of triumph and rejoices in your deeds, and soon she shall proclaim your praise aloud. O radiant Sun, with infinite light you have shone upon me. O brightest Sun, setting out from the East you have reached the southern zenith [in the sky] and illuminated the whole earth with blinding flashes.

Where have you returned again, O lamp of the Empire, you who have visited me for years? Seeing the Empire wither, you have made it bloom again; you have restored its youthful beauty and grandeur. Therefore, [the Empire] showers with kisses the eyes that have often stayed awake for its sake, it kisses the hands you have stained many times with the blood of barbarians, and it leans upon your chest, still bearing scars from wounds suffered in sacrifice for it. And to you it brings noble men, its loyal children – yes, the citizens – and speaks these words: “These I entrust to your care, O emperor; I bring them to you as both petitioners and friends. Embrace them kindly and tenderly, be generous with your right hand; they will love and praise you, and you shall repay them with a manifold reward.”

With these words, divine Basileus, the capital [Constantinople] cries out to you. Lift her up, she who lies low; improve her worsening condition, restore her lost beauty through your struggles, gladden her who has faded – divine lover and beloved – who has shown the strength of the Romans more brilliant than that of the barbarians, who has revived the ancient state of the Empire. That you now experience happiness for the sake of its name – O king of kings and general above generals – and for this great city, more renowned than all others, is indeed the most wondrous reality and idea.

### *The Structure of the Imperial Speech and Historical Analysis*

The structure of the imperial speech is as follows: Psellos begins the introductory segment of the encomium directly, without a ceremonial address to the emperor, highlighting Diogenes’ military virtues while simultaneously pointing to his love and mercy toward the inhabitants of the capital.<sup>20</sup> In the central part, Michael Psellos emphasizes that the Empire and its people benefit greatly from having Roman Diogenes as emperor. The philosopher directly compares the emperor to the Sun. In this regard, Psellos skillfully uses the term *δαδοῦχε*, borrowed from the Eleusinian Mysteries. One of the most important roles of the mystagogue was to serve as a guide to the initiates – he symbolically held a lit torch and was therefore called a *δαδοῦχος*. The philosopher thus compares Roman IV to a mystagogic enlightener, and himself to the initiate – the one who receives the light of the mysteries.<sup>21</sup>

Michael Psellos masterfully illustrates how Diogenes personally elevated the capital’s reputation among foreign political enemies, a reputation that had

<sup>20</sup> Psellus, *Orationes panegyricae*, no. 20, 182<sup>3-4</sup> – 183<sup>5-11</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, no. 20, 183<sup>12-23</sup>.

been shaken in previous times. Psellos underlines that the capital and its citizens respond with love and respect toward Roman Diogenes.<sup>22</sup> In the concluding part, pointing to the divine origin of the Byzantine emperor's authority, the philosopher offers advice to Diogenes: to continue restoring Constantinople's rightful glory in the world. Psellos once again stresses the dire condition in which the capital had been prior to Diogenes' rise to power.<sup>23</sup>

Michael Psellos also uses *the motif of Constantinople* in two other imperial speeches dedicated to Roman Diogenes – namely, encomia 18 and 19 in George Dennis's edition.<sup>24</sup> In one instance, the orator tells the emperor that his "homeland is the most beautiful of all cities" (*πατρίς ἡ καλλίστη τῶν πόλεων*).<sup>25</sup> Describing Diogenes' departure on a campaign against the Turks, Michael Psellos admiringly addresses Roman IV, emphasizing that the emperor's desire for a liberated capital of the Byzantine Empire exceeded his fear of the enemy.<sup>26</sup> Presenting the emperor's decisions as the pinnacle of wisdom, the philosopher narrates that Roman Diogenes did not wait for stable, sunny weather but departed Constantinople under very unfavorable atmospheric conditions – strong winds, harsh winter, and bitter cold.<sup>27</sup>

In the second part of the *Chronographia*, his historiographical work describing the period from Roman Diogenes' accession to his defeat at Manzikert, Michael Psellos mentions Constantinople in only two places – during Diogenes' third military campaign. The philosopher states that the emperor set out from the capital to confront the enemy, leading with him a much larger army than in his previous campaigns, including both allied forces and his own.<sup>28</sup> It is also evident that Psellos expresses himself very negatively regarding Diogenes' military policy in the *Chronographia*.<sup>29</sup> Psellos' accounts of Roman IV Diogenes' military achievements and skills show, on the one hand, that the emperor was uneducated in military affairs and had no success on the battlefield (*Chronographia*), and on the other hand, that Diogenes possessed remarkable military training, accomplished significant feats in war like no hero previously praised by Psellos, and restored the Empire's former glory on the battlefield (according to the four imperial speeches dedicated to Roman IV Diogenes).

One possible explanation for Psellos' contradictory accounts lies in the fact that when composing the second part of the *Chronographia*, he aimed to highlight the importance and achievements of the Doukas dynasty, and thus portrayed Roman Diogenes in the worst possible light. In contrast, Psellos wrote the imperial speeches addressed to Roman IV Diogenes during the emperor's

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, no. 20, 183<sub>24–26</sub> – 184<sub>27–38</sub>.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, no. 20, 184<sub>39–49</sub>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, no. 18, 175–179; no. 19, 180–182.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, no. 18, 176<sub>26</sub>.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, no. 19, 180<sub>2–9</sub>.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, no. 19, 181<sub>18–24</sub>.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Psellus, *Leben der Byzantinischen Kaiser (976–1075) Chronographia*, ed. R. D. Reinsch, Berlin – München – Boston 2015, 746.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, 740, 742, 748.

reign – possibly even at Diogenes’ own request – in honor and celebration of the emperor’s accomplishments. It is therefore logical that he praised and often exaggerated the emperor’s military prowess and overestimated his military policy.

Nevertheless, one should not dismiss the possibility that Michael Psellos, acutely aware of the extremely difficult foreign-political situation facing Byzantium, was genuinely enthusiastic about the rise of an experienced and renowned Byzantine general to the throne. Put simply, perhaps Psellos placed his hopes for the Empire’s recovery in Roman Diogenes, and for that reason, exalted his military campaigns in the imperial speeches. At the time when Psellos was writing the *Chronographia*, however, it was already clear that Diogenes’ military policy had not made any significant contribution to Byzantium. Therefore, one should leave open the possibility that Psellos was sincere in his historical work and that his writings reflect the perspective of a disillusioned 11th-century intellectual.

### Conclusion

Considering that the choice of topic for an imperial speech was left to the orator, although the emperor-patron could influence it,<sup>30</sup> Michael Psellos wove the *motif of Constantinople* throughout the entire encomium under discussion, evidently judging it to be highly appropriate for the political situation of the time. However, it is evident that the *motif of the capital* represents an almost indispensable topos in Psellos’s imperial speeches dedicated to Romanos Diogenes, around which the rest of the praise developed.<sup>31</sup> The reason for this most likely lies in the time of their composition. Although the testimonies of Byzantine writers from the 11th and 12th centuries (*Chronographia* by Michael Psellos, *History* by Michael Attaleiates, the *Chronicle* of Scylitzes Continuatus, and the *Chronicle* of John Zonaras) do not indicate a drastic deterioration of conditions in the Byzantine provinces during the seven-month period between the death of Constantine X Doukas (May 1067) and Eudokia’s marriage to Romanos Diogenes (January 1, 1068), it cannot be stated with certainty how the foreign policy troubles of the Empire during Diogenes’ reign were perceived in the consciousness of the Byzantines.<sup>32</sup> One must not lose sight of the fact that these same Byzantine sources, to a greater or lesser extent, indicate that the foreign policy situation in which Byzantium found itself was one of the reasons that prompted Augusta Eudokia Makrembolitissa to remarry.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> V. Stanković, *Komnini u Carigradu (1057–1185). Evolucija jedne vladarske porodice*, Beograd 2006, 235–254 (Serbian Cyrillic).

<sup>31</sup> J. Šaranac Stamenković, *Motiv Carigrada u Pselovim enkomionima pisanim za Romana IV Diogena*, Godišnjak Pedagoškog fakulteta u Vranju (2016), 73 (Serbian Cyrillic).

<sup>32</sup> J. Šaranac Stamenković, *Zakletva na vernost avguste Evdokije Makremvolitise romejskom caru Konstantinu X Duki*, Crkvene studije 17 (2020), 109 (Serbian Cyrillic).

<sup>33</sup> Psellos, *Chronographia*, 734; Miguel Attalates *Historia*, 75–76; The Continuation of the Chronicle of John Skylitzes, 78–80; Ioannis Zonarae epitome historiarum III, 683; N. Oikonomidès, *Le serment de l’impératrice Eudocie (1067). Un épisode de l’histoire dynastique de Byzance*, REB 21 (1963), 124; J. C. Cheynet, *Mantzikert: un désastre militaire?*, Byz 50 (1980), 412–413; E. Vries de – van der Velden, *Psellos, Romain IV Diogénès et Manzikert*.

Skillfully maneuvering rhetoric for propagandistic purposes, Michael Psellos used Romanos Diogenes' military interventions against the Turks to at least somewhat reinforce the weakened ideology of the Byzantine Empire in the face of serious external political pressure. With *the motif of Constantinople*, the experienced orator masterfully heightened the drama of the moment that he was witness to. In doing so, it was emphasized that Romanos Diogenes was truly the rightful successor of Constantine the Great, the first Christian ruler and founder of Constantinople. In this way, the tradition of Byzantine state ideology was upheld, a tradition which holds that the Byzantine emperor is God's chosen one and the sole legitimate ruler on earth.<sup>34</sup>

Јасмина Шаранац Стаменковић

(Филозофски факултет, Универзитет у Нишу)

#### ПОХВАЛА ПРЕСТОНИЦИ – ПСЕЛОВ ЦАРСКИ ГОВОР РОМАНУ IV ДИОГЕНУ

У раду се анализира царски говор Михаила Псела број 20 из критичког издања Џорџа Дениса упућен цару Роману IV Диогену. Псел је саставио енкомион или фебруара/марта 1069. године, или у периоду од јануара 1070. године до краја марта 1071. године, у предању између војних похода, односно, када се цар Роман Диоген налазио у престоници. Основна тема царског говора јесте однос Цариграда према цару који улаже напор да заштити престоницу и одбрани границе Византијског царства од Турака-Селџука. Рад доноси први превод царског говора Роману Диогену на енглески језик. Вешто маневришући реториком у пропагандне сврхе, Михаило Псел је користио војне интервенције Романа IV Диогена против Турака како би учврстио пољуљану идеологију Византијског царства пред озбиљним спољно-политичким притиском. *Мотивом Цариграда* искусни оратор је маестрално појачавао драматику тренутка коме сведочи. Тиме је наглашавано да је Роман Диоген неспорни наследник Константина Великог, првог хришћанског владара и оснивача Константинопоља.

Byzantinoslavica 58/2 (1997), 274; J. Šaranac Stamenković, *Zakletva na vernost avguste Evdokije Makremvolitise romejskom caru Konstantinu X Duki*, Crkvene studije 17 (2020), 109 (Serbian Cyrillic).

<sup>34</sup> G. Ostrogorski, *Avtokrator i samodržac*, Vizantija i Sloveni, Sabrana dela Georgija Ostrogorskog IV, ur. Ž. Stojković, Beograd 1970, 281–364 (Serbian Cyrillic).