



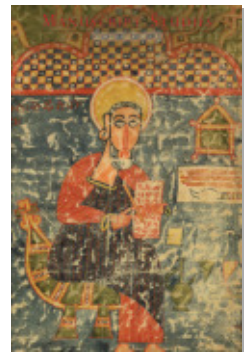
PROJECT MUSE®

---

*Toward a History of Byzantine Psalters, ca. 850–1350 AD* by  
Georgi R. Parpulov (review)

Barbara Crostini

Manuscript Studies: A Journal of the Schoenberg Institute for  
Manuscript Studies, Volume 3, Number 2, Fall 2018, pp. 492–494  
(Review)



Published by University of Pennsylvania Press  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mns.2018.0026>

➔ *For additional information about this article*  
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/707789>

Georgi R. Parpulov. *Toward a History of Byzantine Psalters, ca. 850–1350 AD*. Plovdiv, 2014. 320 pp. Open source licensed publication: <https://archive.org/details/ByzPsalterns>.

BARBARA CROSTINI  
*Uppsala University*

GEORGI PARPULOV'S E-BOOK ON Byzantine psalters is a groundbreaking work that has tackled, singlehanded and courageously, a vast field, like a David before a Goliath. All the information provided is firsthand: Parpulov's acute examination of the manuscripts across their current repositories in different libraries has given him precious insights and a unique expertise in presenting this material. The pioneering character of his research should be emphasized. Through this publication, the author has offered the nuggets of his sharp scholarship together with a mass of raw materials for further research.

The book is structured in three parts: a discursive portion divided into five "chapters" (pp. 49–140), eight spreadsheets (Appendixes B1–C6, unnumbered pages, omitted at the open source address; these are available at Parpulov's academia.edu page), and nineteen further appendixes, some consisting of lists of texts or incipits and others of single unpublished texts chosen for their relevance to the topic (Appendix A, p. 141, and Appendixes D1–H, pp. 142–320). The list of 614 manuscripts examined is available at Appendix B1, "Greek Psalters written on Parchment," as a table in fifty-one columns comprising all relevant characteristics including detailed contents. The table is necessarily highly abbreviated, and an explanation for its use is provided on pages 4–6. The initial pages also give, besides the table of contents and a one-page preface, a list of abbreviations of the main repertoires and one of manuscript repositories, so that shortened shelfmarks for the manuscripts are used in the text. Finally, a list of captions and thirty-nine illustrations are "printed" together in the unnumbered initial pages before the beginning of the text proper. The criteria for the selection of these images are unclear,

and placing the images within the text might have been a better option. No final index or bibliography is provided. Already from the description of the structure, it is apparent that this is no ordinary book. The decision to produce it, as far as I understand, only electronically (now registering 1,865 views) was probably also dictated by its unwieldy contents. We will return below to evaluating this aspect.

Chapter 5 is a one-page self-evaluation entitled “What remains to be done.” Parpulov’s conclusion, that “a proper, comprehensive and systematic history of Byzantine Psalters remains to be written,” betrays the notion that writing such a history was probably the intended initial aim of this work, together with the author’s awareness that *Towards a History* has not yet fulfilled such a desideratum. Understandably. But one may wonder further about the wisdom of such a pursuit, not only in terms of feasibility, but also in terms of usefulness. Although one biblical book is suggestive for such a continuous theme, it is not a priori clear that its diachronic examination would yield any coherent picture of its evolution (or lack of it). Rather, from Parpulov’s own soundings, different “psalmic” worlds emerge: of personal devotion, of monastic regulation, of desert rhythms, of music, of silent reading, of recitation, of learning, of liturgy, of prayer. Letting all these aspects emerge from the primary evidence of the extant manuscripts that are here examined is clearly the book’s achievement. It is not immediately obvious that these aspects could ever be ordered along a temporal line, and nowhere does a historical background surface to provide likely motivations for specific choices.

A grassroots interdisciplinary perspective, meaning, by this, an inquisitive eye that will not let itself be bound within academic boxes, is Parpulov’s greatest strength. It allows, or even compels, him to delve into a wide-ranging world of texts, both those found in psalters and those talking about the psalms. The reader might perhaps have expected his analysis to stop at describing painterly brushstrokes, which he also does well, given that the antecedent to the book is a 2004 dissertation in art history from the University of Chicago. But this multiform approach is also the greatest challenge for the reader. As a result, Parpulov’s book is hardly reader-friendly. His choice of titles does not always appropriately reflect the breadth of the

analysis, his text is dense with coded references to the appendixes, his footnotes often take up the best part of a page, and his phrasing is strangely elliptical, as if he is hesitant to enter into detail. The reader needs to pry into the surroundings or use cross-references for the key to the meaning, which makes reading cumbersome. Many of the chapters lack a conclusion. These shortcomings, which better copyediting could have avoided, make the work difficult to access even for the fairly expert scholar. The electronic format is both an aid and a hindrance to fruition. The risk is that the work will be cannibalized for specific uses, such as reference to those paratexts Parpulov has extracted from the sources and tagged, for the first time, coherently, and that have since become a focus of scholarship. (When using the Search function, the short entries displayed scramble the Greek text and some other letters too.) In this respect, it is hard not to think that Parpulov should have constructed a database that would have made retrieval of basic information easier and more effective than the spreadsheets. However, his work rather deserves to be appreciated for the mine of important suggestions it offers. In particular, Parpulov's analysis of the working methods of scribes and painters through a range of examples (chapter 4), and his pointing out additional clues for provenance based on contents, structure, and liturgy (p. 54, pp. 101–102 for the use of “hagiopolite” rubrics), certainly deserve to be noted and used further by scholars.

In conclusion, Parpulov avoids the repetitious nature of a list of manuscripts and texts by confining much of this information to spreadsheets and appendixes, but in so doing creates a split in the book's contents that can be baffling to the reader. Such division does not readily allow for a comprehensive overview of the evidence unearthed. Especially missing is a discussion of datings for codices that seem to appear in the spreadsheet with different dates (in century) than those attributed to them in previous publications. While the technical character of such analyses might have been considered unappealing, the absence of an open discussion means that readers need to take the author on trust on a number of points. Articulating more fully the richness of this study will certainly generate fruitful scholarly discussions. Parpulov's work has laid a sure foundation for progress in this field.