



The Public Defense of the Doctoral Dissertation of

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on

**Competence and Competitvity of the Byzantine Intellectual: The
Case of Theodore Prodromos**

will be held on

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Competence and competitiveness are mutually intertwined. While competence provides individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to be superior in competitive situations, competitiveness is a motivational force that urges individuals to strive for competence. Thus, in the highly competitive intellectual environment of twelfth-century Byzantium, in which learned people without an aristocratic background struggled to acquire salaried posts in the bureaucracy, private or state-funded teaching positions, wealthy patrons who would finance their literary or artistic production, or the support of other private individuals who could hire them for their proficiency in their respective skills and disciplines, the display of one's competence was crucial. One of these learned men was Theodore Prodromos (ca. 1100 - ca. 1158), renowned court poet and an important public figure. The Byzantine polymath procured his fame not only through his poetic endeavors but also as a teacher, rhetorician, and philosopher. Prodromos's intellectual and literary versatility is attested in the enormous corpus of his works, which includes poetry, panegyric orations, monodies, theological writings, letters, and satirical, philosophical, astrological, and grammatical works.

This thesis examines some of Prodromos's satirical, polemical, and philosophical works in which he, by fighting on behalf of the truth, conducts an examination that serves to expose either social follies, errors in knowledge and expertise, or both. By assuming the superior position of an examiner in these works, Prodromos not only expresses his criticisms in a competitive spirit but also displays his authoritative intellectual presence and competence. Additionally, a closer reading of these works provides deeper insight into the anxieties and struggles, as well as the ethical and intellectual criteria, of a Byzantine teacher, rhetor, and philosopher in twelfth-century Byzantium.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I explore how Prodromos employed the Lucianic authorial alter-ego Frank-speaker (Παρρησιάζης) and its main allies Truth (Αλήθεια) and Examination/Refutation (Έλεγχος) in order to strategically display his own competence and knowledge. The chapter opens with an analysis of Prodromos's satirical work *Sale of Poetical and Political Lives* to demonstrate how Prodromos assumes the Lucianic alter-ego Frank-speaker in the first place. This type of authorial self-identification, as I argue, allows Prodromos to clearly signal to his audience the main intention behind his satirical and polemical literary endeavor: the criticism of inept intellectuals, unskilled professionals, and people unfit for their societal roles. The chapter further analyzes the apologetic poem *Against*

Barys, three satirical prose pieces—*Philoplaton*, *The Executioner or Doctor*, and *The Ignorant or Self-Proclaimed Grammarian*—as well as the polemical text *To the Caesar or For the Color Green*, which has a strong invective tone. Through close analysis of all these works, I reveal how Prodromos managed to create a unique authorial voice to express his criticisms as well as his intellectual expertise as a grammarian, teacher, and philosopher. This can particularly be seen, for instance, in the case of *The Ignorant or Self-Proclaimed Grammarian*, where he displayed his teaching and grammatical expertise, or in the polemical treatise *For the Color Green*, where his knowledge of Aristotle's theory of colors came to the fore. Additionally, the close analysis of all these works has shed light on what Prodromos's standards were for an ideal intellectual, expert, and polymath with whom he identified himself.

The second chapter of the present work focuses on Prodromos's Platonic dialogue Xenedemos. In this chapter, I argue that Prodromos's primary objective is not merely to deliver a critique of Porphyry's *Isagoge*, but rather of a more complex nature. First, it delivers a subtly embedded examination/refutation of an ignorant teacher who is unable to properly comprehend, interpret, and convey the correct understanding of Porphyry's *Isagoge* to his students. Secondly, by emphasizing the essential role that a good teacher plays in shaping young minds, Prodromos not only reflects his ethical and intellectual concerns but also his anxiety as an instructor whose livelihood depends on attracting fee-paying students. Thus, through the representation of an ideal teacher, rhetorician, and philosopher inspired by Plato's *Phaedrus*, Prodromos creates a self-promotional manifesto and implicitly reveals what kind of intellectual he aspired to be or considered himself to be. This is also reflected in the perfect blend of rhetoric and philosophy in the text, which aligns with the intellectual tendencies of that time. Thirdly, the series of logical aporias that, at first glance, seem nonsensical actually attest to Prodromos's exceptional rhetorical competence and in-depth knowledge of logic that goes far beyond the basic text of *Isagoge*. These aporias reveal Prodromos's interpretative concerns about the *Isagoge* and underline the potential errors that less educated instructors might make in teaching practice. Additionally, I demonstrate in this chapter that through these aporias, Prodromos reflects upon the same challenges faced by Neoplatonic and Byzantine commentators when interpreting the text of *Isagoge*. Finally, the results of this analysis suggest that the text was also intended for advanced students who would require a deeper understanding of logic to solve these complex problems. This implies that another function of this text was to serve as a unique didactic tool for students, allowing them to check their skills and improve their

knowledge.

In the third chapter, I examine Prodromos's treatise *On Great and Small*. In this philosophical work, Prodromos's criticism extends beyond merely addressing the inadequate skills and incompetence of his contemporaries; it focuses on rectifying inconsistencies in the works of an ancient author. I have demonstrated that Prodromos's critique of Aristotle's perspective on the great and small is a unique example in the late antique, Neoplatonic, and Byzantine commentary tradition on Aristotle's *Categories*. Although some authors have expressed similar views regarding great and small (e.g., Plotinus) or noted the same contradictions (e.g., Olympiodorus), none of them addressed the problem of the great and small in the same manner as Prodromos. In his treatise, Prodromos tries to demonstrate that propria of relatives are not applicable to great and small. Additionally, contrary to his Neoplatonic and Byzantine predecessors, Prodromos regards the great and the small, the many and the few as an indefinite quantity only in their absolute sense. Moreover, Prodromos, with one of his counterarguments, implicitly rejects one of the common propria of relatives, i.e., the ability to admit of a more and a less. Finally, by trying to prove that these items are not only quantities, but also opposed to each other as contraries, he implicitly refutes one of the common propria of quantity according to which there is no contrariety in this category. Consequently, this implies that the same common proprium of substance according to which there is nothing contrary to substance would become the proprium in the strict sense. Although this was not Prodromos's primary intention, his refutation bears greater implications towards the understanding of the *Categories* in its entirety. Moreover, considering the Byzantine scholarly production on Aristotle's logic, it is not inconceivable that Prodromos, as a teacher, encountered the issue of the great and small in an academic setting and felt compelled to share his perspective on the matter. Although the treatise was addressed to Michael Italikos, Prodromos's teacher and friend, it is unlikely that Italikos was the sole audience for this work. Most likely, Prodromos's work was read and discussed in private intellectual circles comprising his peers, students, and learned friends. Additionally, in light of the revival of Aristotelian scholarship in eleventh- and twelfth-century Byzantium, Prodromos's displays of competence in logic did not merely serve to incite discussion on this specific subject matter in learned circles; they were also part of his self-promotional strategies.

Keywords: Theodore Prodromos, Byzantine intellectual history, frankness, satire, logic, philosophy, rhetoric, intellectual competence

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