On reviewing and Bogdanović’s new book

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Before explaining my enthusiasm for this remarkable new book, I shall inflict on readers a few musings about process which it has inspired and provide a disclaimer. Those who are impatient should scroll ahead or look for the “delete” button.

Reviewing is arguably the most consequential and demanding of all the tasks in which we academics engage. We probably wrote our first “book reviews” in school, to prove to the teacher we had read the assignment. In subsequent education, if so fortunate, we might have acquired a clearer idea of how serious an obligation it is to summarize effectively, yea even pass judgment on someone else’s work. But probably it was only by having to do it in our professional lives that we came to understand that “reviewing” might mean a number of things beyond just writing a few hundred words for the back pages of an academic journal. The ideal which has been instilled in us is to be dispassionately objective. Yet how many times in writing letters of recommendation (a.k.a. “reviews”), reading and discussing them as part of a fellowship application or a promotion file, have we come to recognize that objective criticism may fatally damage someone whom we wish to support or how unabashed enthusiasm may seem suspect?

In methods seminars for both undergraduates and graduate students, I used to give an assignment asking them not simply to write a review, but to read multiple reviews of a book that they might have read and/or which may have provoked considerable controversy. The whole point was to get them to realize that academics often are not dispassionate and objective, and one therefore always should exercise critical judgment in deciding from a single review whether a book would be worth reading. Part of this exercise was to make the students aware of how reviews are solicited and published, where in the ideal world, self-selection of a book one might wish to review (for the right or wrong reasons) would be considered a no-no. In actual fact, a lot of reviewing in respectable academic places is the result some request or personal connection, and, alas, too often reviews, even if solicited in proper fashion, may end up telling us more about the reviewer than about his/her subject. Think of some of the peer review comments you may have received for something you submitted…. Worse yet, in our new electronic age, the ability to blog or otherwise reach a large and unsuspecting audience with what may be a very personal take on someone else’s work is unlimited.

In writing so many “book notices” for this list (I rarely consider them to be “reviews” in the proper sense), naturally I self-select work that interests me personally, about whose subject occasionally I may know a bit, and which I like to think might not otherwise always come to the attention of those who are on EarlySlavic. Generally I avoid scholarship in English, on the assumption that it is likely to be properly reviewed in one of journals we all at least should be reading. Occasionally I have had my knuckles rapped for ill-informed enthusiasms.

Which brings me to my disclaimer: Jelena Bogdanović sent me a copy of her book because I contributed a few photos for it. On beginning to read, I was carried away by enthusiasm and
volunteered to write something about it, even if I am far from the most competent judge of its merits. I am not aware that I have ever met her; in fact this involvement resulted, if my memory serves, as a result of offering on this list to share some of my “Byzantine” photos.

Now teaching in architecture at Iowa State University, she defended her Princeton dissertation on this subject in 2008, and, as one might expect, the research goes back well before that time. From the title, some readers of EarlySlavic might immediately wonder why they should want to read the result, especially since, as they would discover, the complexity of what she has accomplished makes a lot of demands on readers. I readily admit to not having plumbed all the depths here. The canopies in question, as she makes clear in her opening chapter on the varied terminology used to describe them and in her next chapter examining the archaeological and architectural evidence for them, assume a number of forms, but share the fact that they mark sacred space, not just in a physical sense but more abstractly as expressions of core Christian belief. (For both the textual and archaeological evidence, note the summary tables in her several appendices.) Probably most readers here will never have paid much attention to canopies, as “micro-architectural” features of churches, in part because so few of the oldest ones have survived to the present except as fragments which may be displayed but not properly identified in a museum or in archaeologically documented evidence from churches where the original structures once stood. At very least, we may think of images, such as that of the Eucharist in the apse mosaic of Hagia Sophia in Kiev, depicting a canopy over the altar, one of the most important of the locations within a church where historically there would have been a canopy. An important part of her task here has been to survey and catalog the more than two hundred instances she knows where there is archaeological or architectural evidence about canopies across the Byzantine world. Her purview indeed is broad, encompassing not just altar canopies, but ones placed over baptismal fonts, receptacles for holy water, tombs or pulpits, and ones that may frame in relief holy images. She reminds us of what ultimately might become a much larger canvas — a lot has been written on canopies in Western contexts; what one finds in the Islamic world is also relevant here, and not simply because canopy remains were sometimes recycled in mosques.

As Bogdanović emphasizes, most studies of church architecture in the world of Slavia Orthodoxa and Byzantium have said little about these micro-architectural structures, concentrating instead on discussion of the plan and architecture of the buildings in which they were contained. And the theological, philosophical and ritual aspects of what they represented, something the educated Byzantines she quotes clearly understood, has then naturally also received too little attention. Even though over the years when teaching, I would always try to incorporate into my courses on early Russia (and in the occasional ones I taught on Byzantium) material on art and architecture (some of it still, embarrassingly, out on the Internet in old web pages I wrote and illustrated), on reading her book, I can begin to see now how limited my understanding of such material really was. Yes, I had read some of Krautheimer, or Demus, or Kitzinger, not to mention Lazarev, but there is a new world of scholarship since those classics were written.

Moreover, in being so fortunate to have visited a number of the sites she discusses and illustrates (think Kiev, Studenica, Nerezi, Ohrid, Istanbul, Ephesus/Selçuk, or more obscure ones, some of which I photographed), too much of what she highlights here totally escaped my attention, as I looked at what was in front of me through eyes conditioned to see it very differently. Examples in Istanbul include the Church of Christ Chora in Istanbul, where it is too easy to be carried away by the stunning mosaics but not see what frames them, or the sculpted fragments arguably from Hagia
Euphemia and Hagios Polyeuktos, now displayed out of context in the Archaeological Museum there. Only a few months ago, having only begun her book but not as a consequence of doing so, I had the opportunity to visit the Cathedral of Panagia Ekatontapuliani on the Greek island of Paros, which occupies a place of distinction in her analysis, given the fact that it contains one of the earliest and best preserved of the altar canopies. It was only after entering the church at the end of the service and responding emotionally to the almost miraculous vision of the altar with its canopy, backlit by the morning sun streaming in through the windows of the apse, that I could begin to fathom the significance of what I was seeing and, however imperfectly, understand what that experience might mean for a believer.

One of the important emphases in the book is how the canopied installations relate not just to scripture but to liturgical performance, a subject that, as she points out, is a focus of the prolific writing of Aleksei Lidov about sacred space under the term *hierotopy*. To attempt to explain here all the complexities of her discussion of sacred space would be impossible (readers can get a clear idea of her book from its introduction and conclusion). What I think may most impress many readers about the significance of her book is the way that toward the end she argues powerfully for a fundamentally new approach to understanding the development of Byzantine architecture. Canopies in both their physical and abstract senses in effect became modular elements in the way the buildings were conceived and constructed.

To the uninitiated, the canopy may seem to be a rather fragile structure on which to erect such far-reaching conclusions, but she sees it as embodying “the essence of a Byzantine-rite church...charged with the significance of sacred time, wherein the present moment recapitulates the total past, present, and future within the framework of a given church space.” “The canopy thus becomes a symbol for what is built, what is not built, and what cannot be built—the visible, the invisible and the un-representable to the eye of the beholder” (pp. 295-96, 299).

The book is beautifully produced and generously illustrated, though one might always wish for additional photos in order to see some of the examples. Not the least of the important contributions here are Zhengyang Hua’s exquisitely drawn plans and visualizations of the architecture and its components.

This is a book to savor, one that demands being re-read, and one which surely will contribute to your better appreciation of what you are experiencing the next time you enter an Orthodox church.