



IN MEMORIAM
MIROSLAW JERZY LESZKA
(1963–2024)



Photo by Andrzej R. Hołasek



Prof. dr hab. Mirosław Jerzy Leszka, a distinguished scholar and university lecturer from the Department of Byzantine Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy and History of the University of Lodz, passed away after a short illness on the morning of 24 August 2024. Professor Leszka was one of the founders of the Waldemar Ceran Research Centre for the History and Culture of the Mediterranean Area and South-East Europe, *Ceraneum* and a member of the International Scientific Council of this institution.

Born on 4 April 1963 in Zgierz, Mirosław J. Leszka passed his high school exams in 1982 at the Stanisław Staszic High School located in Zgierz. It was in high school when he felt drawn to history. Following this interest, he studied history at the University of Lodz, and on 30 June 1987, he obtained a master's degree in history based on his work which was devoted to the enthronements of early Byzantine emperors. This work was written under the supervision of Professor Waldemar Ceran (1936–2009), the founder of the Łódź school of Byzantine research. Studying under Waldemar Ceran, Mirosław J. Leszka became an expert on the history of the Eastern Roman and Byzantine Empire in the late Antiquity and early Middle Ages.

In the years that followed, Mirosław J. Leszka worked on his doctoral thesis entitled: *Usurpations in Byzantine Empire from the 4th to the mid-9th centuries*. After being awarded a doctorate on 14 December 1995, he became a member of the Department of Byzantine Studies at the University of Lodz, where he worked until the end of his life. Throughout his scholarly career, Mirosław J. Leszka remained faithful to classically understood Byzantine studies. His scholarly interests included a wide range of issues, covering both the Late Antiquity and Middle Ages.

The first book by Mirosław J. Leszka, based on his doctoral dissertation (which appeared in print in 1999 as the fourth volume of the series of “Byzantina Lodziensia”, founded two years earlier by Waldemar Ceran) was devoted to the struggle for power in Byzantium. This was the first monograph on the Polish market to touch upon this issue. Synthetic in nature, it did not present the reader with a detailed account of political upheavals, aiming to grasp various elements typical of all usurpations understood as a specific phenomenon. It covered the period of five centuries and of thirty usurpations. Unlike many scholars, the author did not regard these usurpations as a purely destructive force: some of them served to remove inept rulers, and even if these usurpations failed, they often had the effect of modifying the policy pursued by the emperor.

The author continued to deal with the topic of the rise to power in the Byzantine empire in a number of articles, focusing both on usurpers and usurpations (the usurpations of Marcian, Basiliscus, and Phocas) and on various related issues (the legalization of the power of particular usurpers, religious themes in usurpers' propaganda, the appraisal of the policy of Phocas). Standing out in this line

of research are texts devoted to the Isaurians and their participation in the struggle for power in Byzantium.

Professor Mirosław J. Leszka's interests were also concentrated around Byzantium's rulers, military leaders, and politicians. He was one of the contributors to the *Dictionary of Roman Emperors* (*Słownik cesarzy rzymskich*, Poznań 2001), and his articles published in scholarly journals presented such figures as Flavius Patricius, Leontius, Illus and his brother Lilingis, and Flavius Areobind.

Mirosław J. Leszka's attention was drawn especially to Byzantine empresses. He wrote a series of articles on some of those empresses, including Verina, Pulcheria, Aelia Eudocia, Constantina, Zoe Karbonopsina, and Theophano. His focus was also on other influential women in Byzantium such as Anicia Juliana. Along with his wife, Małgorzata B. Leszka, he published a book devoted to Byzantine empresses (*Bazyliśa. Świat bizantyńskich cesarzowych. IV–XV w.*, Łódź 2017).

Another area of research that drew Mirosław J. Leszka's attention was Constantinople. The first research project, of which he was in charge and which was funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, concerned the history of the city. The project yielded a monograph (*Konstantynopol – Nowy Rzym. Miasto i ludzie w okresie wczesnobizantyńskim*, Warszawa 2011). Mirosław J. Leszka wrote a few chapters of the work (concerning such issues as the circumstances of the city's rise, the city's urban layout, and the organization of the imperial court). In later years, he returned to this topic, publishing texts devoted to social unrest in Constantinople, natural disasters suffered by Byzantium's capital, Constantinopolitan harbours, and the city's image in the letters of Theophylact of Ohrid.

Although Professor Mirosław J. Leszka insisted that he had no interest in the history of Islam, he was persuaded to participate in the project that culminated in the publication of a bibliographical guide to Byzantine sources and their Church Slavic translations (Z.A. Brzozowska, T. Wolińska, M.J. Leszka, *Muhammad and the Origin of Islam in the Byzantine-Slavic Literary Context. A Bibliographical History*, Łódź–Kraków 2020). He also wrote articles on Quran in the Slavic tradition (along with Zofia A. Brzozowska), the Arab-Byzantine struggle in light of the *Chronicle* by Constantine Manasses, and the image of the Arabs found in the same source. His studies also included research into Arab themes in the Bulgarian-Byzantine relations from the 7th to the 10th centuries.

In recent years Mirosław J. Leszka worked closely with Szymon Wierzbński. Their collaboration yielded a monograph: *Wodzowie Zenona (474–491) i Anastazjusza I (491–518)* (Łódź 2024). The book, which also appeared in English (*Strategoí: Early Byzantine Military Commanders in the Times of Zeno and Anastasius (474–518)*, Łódź–Kraków 2024), provides biographical notes on military commanders about whom Mirosław J. Leszka had already published various articles as well as about those whom he had not dealt with in his works before.

The two scholars also published a book titled *Komes Marcellin, vir clarissimus. Historyk i jego dzieło* (Łódź 2022). The book contains Marcellinus Comes's original text and its translation into Polish. Szymon Wierzbński translated the text while Mirosław J. Leszka provided it with his comments. He wrote key fragments of a comprehensive introduction to Marcellinus Comes's biography as well as to his images of eastern Roman rulers and the chronicler's view of Constantinople's role.

Professor Mirosław J. Leszka served as co-editor of a significant number of books published in Łódź. This was the case with two publications that provided his research into the history of the capital of the Byzantine empire. *Mieszkańcy stolicy świata. Konstantynopolitańczycy między starożytnością a średniowieczem* (Łódź 2014); *Miasto na skrzyżowaniu mórz i kontynentów: wczesno- i średnio-bizantyński Konstantynopol jako miasto portowe* (Łódź 2016) and *Z badań nad wczesnobizantyńskim Konstantynopolem* (Łódź 2011). Mirosław J. Leszka also co-edited works dedicated to Professor Waldemar Ceran: *Cesarstwo bizantyńskie: dzieje, religia, kultura. Studia ofiarowane prof. Waldemarowi Ceranowi przez uczniów na 70-lecie jego urodzin*, eds. P. Krupczyński, M.J. Leszka (Łask-Łódź 2006); *Byzantina Europaea: księga jubileuszowa ofiarowana prof. Waldemarowi Ceranowi*, eds. M. Kokoszko, M.J. Leszka (Łódź 2007), and several volumes of conference proceedings. To the above, one must also add Professor Mirosław J. Leszka's numerous reviews, review articles and bibliographical notes.

Mirosław J. Leszka was also involved in popularizing historical knowledge, with some of his works intended for a broader audience beyond scholars. Examples include his work on a monograph devoted to the Palaeologue dynasty and his work on the history of the Byzantine Empire and the Balkans, which was published in *Pomocnik historyczny*, issued by the weekly *Polityka*, as well as articles published in the journal *Mówią Wieki*. His research tour of Russian libraries gave him the opportunity to co-write a book (with Zofia A. Brzozowska) devoted to Novgorod the Great (*Nowogród Wielki. Historyczno-kulturowy przewodnik po średniowiecznej republice*, Łódź 2019).

Although Professor Mirosław J. Leszka was most at home in his research and scholarly work, one should not forget his didactic activity. He taught various classes covering a wide range of topics such as medieval history, religious studies, religious tourism, archaeological tourism, the history and culture of medieval Balkans, history's great military leaders, female rulers in Byzantine and Slavic world, medieval diplomacy, usurpations in Byzantium from the 4th to 12th centuries, and the Slavs in the Balkans from the 6th to 12th centuries. To these, one should add proseminars, undergraduate seminars, master's seminars, and doctoral seminars. He also made his mark as a promoter for doctoral dissertations and as a reviewer of bachelor's and master's theses, doctorates, habilitations and professorships.

A separate area of Mirosław J. Leszka's scholarly interests, closely related to the history of Byzantium, was Bulgaria in the early Middle Ages. Bulgarian themes began to appear in his research when he was working on his habilitation dissertation titled: *The image of the first Bulgarian state rulers shown in the Byzantine sources of the period from the 8th to the first half of the 12th century*. Published as a monograph by the Łódź University Press in 2003 (as the seventh volume of the series of "Byzantina Lodziensia"), the work was grounds for awarding him a habilitation degree on 19 February 2004. Later, this enabled him to advance to the position of Professor at the University of Lodz (15 September 2006). This dissertation, like most works by Mirosław J. Leszka, is marked by a very comprehensive perspective from which it approaches its topic. Based on Byzantine sources, it presents the picture of Bulgarian rulers from the pre-Christian era (from Asparuh to Presian, focusing in particular on Krum) and from the years following the official adoption of Christianity: Boris-Michael, Symeon, and Peter.

In regard to Bulgarian studies, it should be mentioned that in 2001 Mirosław J. Leszka undertook a scholarly collaboration with Kirił Marinow (who was working on his doctoral thesis at that time). Later on, Professor Marinow initiated many projects devoted to the history of medieval Bulgaria. Both scholars worked on these projects together, using a wide range of both Byzantine as well as archaeological and Slavic sources.

In the years that followed, Professor Leszka's research focused mainly on Symeon I the Great (893–927). The reign of Symeon, who is generally regarded as the greatest ruler of medieval Bulgaria, saw the exponential growth of the Old Bulgarian culture, including Old Church Slavic literature. The monograph (*Symeon I Wielki a Bizancjum. Z dziejów stosunków bułgarsko-bizantyńskich w latach 893–927*) offered a detailed reconstruction of the life of this ruler, for whom Mirosław J. Leszka had a special fondness. He outlined the situation of the Bulgarian state at the turn of the 10th century, including in particular its relations with Byzantium. It was published in 2013 as part of the renewed series "Byzantina Lodziensia" (in the years 2012–2024 Professor Mirosław J. Leszka was in charge of this series, which thrived thanks to his sustained and remarkable effort; 34 volumes of the series appeared during his tenure). This monograph – along with a great number of other publications: contributions to multi-author monographs and various texts collections, articles, reviews, and conference papers – paved the way for the title of Professor, which Mirosław J. Leszka was awarded on 22 January 2016. It is worth noting that the work found a warm acceptance among scholars in the Balkans and received good reviews in scholarly journals abroad. It was also translated into Bulgarian and published by the prestigious academic publisher in Sofia. The findings of Mirosław J. Leszka's research into the epoch of Symeon the Great were also successively presented in scholarly articles.

2011 was an important year for Byzantine studies in Łódź. The Waldemar Ceran Research Centre for the History and Culture of the Mediterranean Area and South-East Europe, *Ceraneum* was established within the University of Lodz. Mirosław J. Leszka was one of the Centre's most active founders, engaged especially in creating a scholarly journal of international character and, in time, of international scope: „*Studia Ceranea. Journal of the Waldemar Ceran Research Centre for the History and Culture of the Mediterranean Area and South-East Europe*”. He was also engaged in creating the “Series Ceranea”, a primary sources series. Mirosław J. Leszka and Kiril Marinow also assembled the Centre *Ceraneum*'s team of scholars who conducted research into Byzantine-Slavic relations, focusing in particular on the history of medieval Bulgaria. The group's first significant initiative focused on the history of the first Bulgarian state, from its Christianization to its collapse (*Carstwo bułgarskie. Polityka, społeczeństwo, gospodarka, kultura. 866–971*, Warszawa 2015). This work was published by Polish Scientific Publishers PWN. Apart from Mirosław J. Leszka and Kiril Marinow, who were among the work's authors, two young scholars (one freshly awarded a doctorate and the other still undergoing Ph.D. study) were given the chance to contribute: Zofia A. Brzozowska (now a member of the Department of the Slavic Philology of the University of Lodz) and Jan M. Wolski (now working at the Centre *Ceraneum*).

In the years 2015–2018, the group carried out its most ambitious international project. Financed by the National Science Centre, it was titled: *The Bulgarian State in 927–969. The Epoch of Tsar Peter I*. Mirosław J. Leszka was in charge of the project, which was put forward by Kiril Marinow. Aside from Jan M. Wolski and Zofia A. Brzozowska, the group included Bulgarian scholars from the St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia (Miliana Kaimakamova, Georgi N. Nikolov, Angel Nikolov) and the St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo (Nikolay Hrisimov). The project yielded three monographs and over 20 articles. The most important of them was the collective monograph, edited by Mirosław J. Leszka and Kiril Marinow. All of the authors involved in carrying out the project made contributions. Published in 2018 in co-edition with the Jagiellonian University Press, which ensured its international distribution via the Columbia University Press, the monograph remains the most extensive volume in the series of “Byzantina Lodziensia”. Running to almost 700 pages, not only does it provide an account of political history in the years 927–969, but it also covers a wide range of other issues such as Bulgaria's geographical conditions, economy, administration, everyday life, political system, the army, culture, the official Church, and the heterodox movement (Bogomilism) that spread across the Balkans in the 10th century.

A separate part of the book is devoted to the analysis of Peter I's image in medieval sources and in modern historiography, Peter's cult as a saint, and the medieval view of the Byzantine-Bulgarian peace of 927. The Polish and abridged version of the book appeared in the renowned biographic series published by the Kraków publishing house, Avalon (Z.A. Brzozowska, M.J. Leszka, K. Marinow, *Piotr I Święty, car bułgarski (ok. 912–969). Maria Lekapena, caryca bułgarska (ok. 912–963)*, Kraków 2018). Along with Zofia A. Brzozowska, Mirosław J. Leszka also co-authored a biography of Peter's wife, Maria Lekapene (*Maria Lekapene, Empress of the Bulgarians. Neither a Saint nor a Malefactress*, Łódź 2017). In writing the book, he drew on his research into the role of Byzantine empresses in Byzantium's political system.

Professor Mirosław J. Leszka remained faithful to Bulgarian and Byzantine studies until the end of his life. Apart from the issues mentioned above, he also dealt with the pagan period in the history of Bulgaria as well as the reigns of tsar Samuel and his successors, which preceded the collapse of the Bulgarian state in 1018. He also kept himself closely familiar with scholarly literature on the history of Byzantium and the Slavic world, reviewing numerous works published by different scholarly centres throughout the world. For his contribution to popularizing the history and culture of Bulgaria, he received the Golden Age Award from the Ministry of Culture of Bulgaria. Mirosław J. Leszka's scholarly accomplishments were also recognized by his own *Alma Mater*. He received scholarly awards of the first and second degree, both individually and collectively, including the Gold Badge of the University of Lodz. In recognition of his scholarship and contributions to the study of medieval Bulgaria, he was invited to join the editorial council of the renowned historical journal *Epohi* issued by the St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo in Bulgaria. Professor Leszka's contacts with Bulgarian scholars were long, lasting and numerous.

Mirosław J. Leszka's thriving career was unexpectedly and untimely disrupted. He passed away while working with Rafał Kosiński from the University of Białystok on the new edition of the chronicle of George the Monk, drawing on the hitherto unpublished Greek manuscript *Codex Coislinianus 305* and Church Slavic sources. Unfortunately, Professor Leszka did not live long enough to carry out a number of other projects that he had in mind, such as the synthesis of the history of Bulgaria in the pre-Christian era and the lexicon of the rulers of medieval Bulgaria.

Professor Mirosław J. Leszka will be remembered by his colleagues, collaborators and students as an excellent and creative scholar, an adept and prolific author, a popular and respected lecturer, and calm, kind and helpful man. His composure and common sense, as well as his good advice and extraordinary wit, coupled with the ability not to take himself and the world too seriously, will be deeply missed.

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