

BYZANTINE TREBIZOND: A PROVINCIAL LITERARY LANDSCAPE

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In his *Anabasis Kyrou*, Xenophon of Athens tells of an episode that is hardly ever forgotten by anyone who once read it. It takes place when Xenophon's exhausted Greek troops are on their way home from their adventure as mercenaries of the Persian insurgent Kyros, marching from Mesopotamia through the mountains of east Anatolia. Under great difficulties they are climbing a mountain ridge when a message is shouted from the vanguard to the rear ranks: *Thalatta, thalatta!* ("The sea, the sea!").¹ It is the Black Sea that is visible from the mountain, and in the situation in which the Greeks found themselves, nothing could inspire more hope than the sea.

Exactly where Xenophon's soldiers were at this moment — that can be dated to shortly after the battle of Kounaxa in 401 BC where Kyros was killed — is difficult to say. However, immediately after the passage quoted above we learn that they arrived at a city whose Greek name is Trapezoûs, and which in English is known as Trebizond. This indicates that they had reached the mountain ridge to the south of that city which is sometimes called the Pontic Alps, and which was known as Paryadrís in the Middle Ages (the modern Turkish name is Soganlı dağları). As far as I know, this is the first time that Trebizond appears in Greek literature with more than its

¹ Xenophon, *Anabasis Kyrou* 4.7.24.4.

bare name.² The information Xenophon gives about the city is very meagre: it was a Greek town colonized from Sinope further west on the Pontic coast, and it had — unsurprisingly — a market place where provisions for the westbound march of Xenophon's troops could be bought; that is practically all.³ However, the fact that Trebizond is mentioned by one of the classics in such an honourable context was remembered into the late Middle Ages. When a writer in fourteenth-century Trebizond (see below) wished to demonstrate that his city was famous already among the ancient Greeks, he referred to this passage by Xenophon — and nothing else! In a way this is typical of much of Trebizond's history: the sources — not least the written ones — are meagre, and what is available has to be exploited as far as permissible.

In such a situation the lack of factual knowledge is apt to be compensated for with something else than facts. Partly due to the scarcity of the sources, therefore, Trebizond, the Pontos and the neighbouring lands have become the subject of legends and fairy tales. This is true for popular imagination, but also for historiography in Antiquity, in the Middle Ages and in the Modern era. This is the context in which we find the tale of the Argonauts and the Golden Fleece, which takes place, if not in Trebizond, at least in the surrounding region of the eastern Black Sea, the land which the ancient Greeks called "Kolchis". Besides the lack of sources for long periods, the faraway geographic situation is an especially important factor here. For the popular imagination, the latter is probably decisive. A person occupying a geographically more central position at the Mediterranean is likely to find the Pontos a remote and foreign region, alien in character also as far as climate and vegetation are concerned. Actually, what we find in the Pontos is more reminiscent of Baltic and Nordic conditions than of the Mediterranean world. The Pontic summer is moist and cool, the rains are as heavy as in western Norway, olives do not grow in the region (although hazelnuts do), and the hillsides are covered by thick dark forests.

² Aristotle mentions (*Mir.* 831b22) that honey with a heavy odour was produced from a plant called πύθος in Trebizond, which made healthy people insane whereas it cured epileptics completely. This reflects the information given from experience by Xenophon, *Anabasis* 4.8.20–21. Bryer & Winfield (1985: 4) suppose that this honey rather derived from the flower of the azalea, to which πύθος might refer.

³ *Anabasis* *Kyrou* 4.8.22.2.



Fig. 1. Location of the Pontos and Trebizond (mod. Trabzon) within present-day Turkey; after Bryer & Winfield (1985).

There are also examples of scholarly legends and fairy tales about the Pontos. For instance, we sometimes meet the idea that Medieval Trebizond was a centre of learning and science, especially during the more than two hundred and fifty years (1204–1461) when the city was the capital of a small principality that called itself an empire. If we briefly consider this idea, we will probably feel a little surprised. First, Trebizond never was a big city. Estimates of the population add up to about 4.000 at the end of the imperial period, but to these 4.000 must be added a fairly large number of travelling merchants and others who stayed for limited periods of time.⁴ And here we have another critical point for the idea of the city as a cultural centre: Trebizond was, in the Middle Ages and later, primarily a centre of trade, a station on the caravan route from Persia to Constantinople. It is difficult to reconcile these known facts with the idea of the city as a centre of science and learning. So probably we will have to consider this too, with some few exceptions, as belonging to the world of fairy tales.

⁴ See Bryer & Winfield 1985: 179 f.



Fig. 2. Trebizond from the sea. Steel engraving
by J. Schroeder, Paris *ca.* 1850.

In making a survey of the Byzantine literature and culture of Trebizond it is suitable to divide the Byzantine millennium into two parts. The first will reach up to 1204 or the years shortly after, i.e. up to the time when the Empire of Trebizond was created; the second will cover the subsequent period up to the year 1461 when this tiny independent state was swallowed by the Ottomans. The existence of this state was a consequence of the fall of the Byzantine empire to the Crusaders. When they took Constantinople in 1204 and the Empire fell apart, Trebizond was one of the resulting mini-states. As we will see, the new political status of the area had consequences for the literary production, as well.

So let us begin with the period before 1204. The first time that Trebizond appears in a literary context during the Byzantine period is difficult to date and anonymous in more than one way. I am referring to a so-called Martyr's Passion about the city patron Eugenios. It describes how, around AD 300, the young Eugenios and his three companions, who had recently been converted to Christianity, were seized by the Roman authorities,

condemned to death, and sent to execution.⁵ As usual with such texts we have no information about the author, and if we take a close look at its contents we will discover that it relies, to a large extent, on other texts of a similar kind. It is difficult to date such a text, but I would guess that it belongs in the sixth century. It is rather unimportant from literary and historical points of view, and it will not be further considered here. However, it should be noted that it is the city patron, the martyr Eugenios, who stands at the very beginning of Byzantine Trebizond's literary history. In fact, as will soon appear, St Eugenios is a constantly recurring theme in Trapezuntine literature.

The first figure that we can really grasp appears in the seventh century, some time after 619. He was not a writer, at least not as far as we know, but a famous scholar and professor. His name was Tychikos and he taught in, or at, the church of St Eugenios in Trebizond. He had been the pupil of a certain Stephanos of Athens, who shortly after AD 600 had taught mathematics, astronomy and medicine in Constantinople. When Stephanos died, Tychikos was called by the emperor to succeed to the chair that his teacher had occupied. But Tychikos preferred to remain in his home city where he had a big library. Then gifted young Constantinopolitans with intellectual interests were sent by the emperor to Tychikos in Trebizond to study. Others were drawn there by his fame, and among these there was a young Armenian called Ananias of Širak. Perhaps Ananias found Tychikos an especially suitable teacher for him, because he knew the Armenian language. At any rate Ananias eventually wrote a short piece describing the formative years of his youth (a piece that is often misleadingly called "autobiography"), and that is our most important source of information about Tychikos.⁶

The connection existing between Tychikos and the church of Eugenios could possibly be taken to indicate that Eugenios' monastery (to which the church belonged) was an intellectual centre in a more general sense. However, there is actually no evidence for such an idea, and it is quite possible that Tychikos simply used the church or the monastery as the physical shelter for his teaching. Whatever the truth in this matter, it seems

⁵ This Passion has been edited by Martin-Hisard (1981) and, independently, by Lampsidis (1984b).

⁶ See the English translation in Conybeare 1906: 572–574. An in-depth discussion of the role of Tychikos in the history of Byzantine learning will be found in the classical study by Lemerle (1971: 81–85).

likely that Tychikos pursued his teaching on a private basis, not commissioned by or representing an institution that would have provided a measure of stability for his activities. In spite of the obscurity surrounding him, he is certainly one of the very last scholars of the ancient type we meet in Byzantium before the so-called Dark Ages, and it is remarkable that this happens in Trebizond. The story about him shows how scarce learning was in this period. It depended on some few individuals, and it could even be necessary to go from Constantinople to a distant province to find a good teacher.

The “Dark Ages” — to use a problematic designation for the period *ca.* AD 650–800 — were no less dark in Trebizond than in other parts of the Byzantine world. Thus, from the early seventh century till the end of the tenth century we find practically no traces of literature there. But if we consider cultural activities and production more generally, there are signs in the ninth century — the early part of the period that is often called “the Macedonian renaissance” — that Trebizond was not a completely forgotten corner of the Byzantine world. The oldest church of the city is dedicated to St Anne, and according to an extant inscription it was “re-built” by a provincial governor, a so-called theme general, under the emperors Basil I (died 886) and his sons Leo (VI) and Alexander. Since this church seems to be built in one piece rather than being the result of a restoration, the “re-building” is likely to have come close to the replacement of a totally ruined structure. Basil I is known to have initiated large building projects, especially, of course, in Constantinople, and many of these consisted of the restoration of churches and monasteries in decay. Very probably St Anne in Trebizond is somehow connected to these activities.⁷

However, even from this period we have a few written pieces from Trebizond. Again, the city patron Eugenios is involved, and this time he is the protagonist in a number of miracle stories. These texts have been preserved, sometimes rather poorly, in collections that were created much later, after the mid-fourteenth century. In general the individual stories are difficult to date, but there are signs that most of them, at least, belong in the period from the end of the ninth century to the mid-tenth century.⁸ They are good examples of the miracle-genre and some are extremely interesting as

⁷ Bryer & Winfield 1985: 218–219.

⁸ This material will be found, with translation and commentary, in Rosenqvist 1996.

historical documents. But as the entire result of the literary endeavors of almost four hundred years they are hardly an impressive achievement.

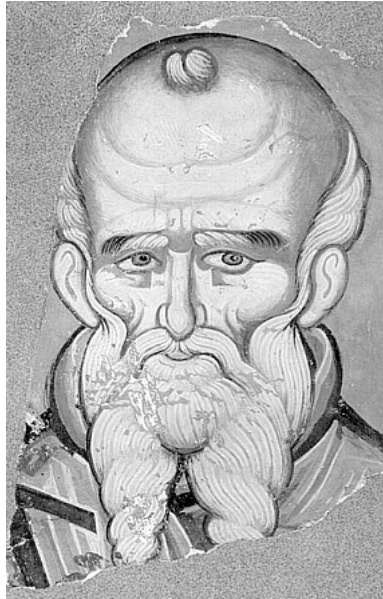


Fig. 3. Athanasios of Athos. Fresco painted 1447,
St Paul's monastery, Mount Athos.

It is not until the end of the tenth century that we meet, again, a sharp literary profile: Athanasios, the founder of the first real monastery of Mount Athos, a man born in Trebizond. He has not left behind any writings of his own, but he was regarded as a holy man and therefore was the subject of two biographies. Athanasios died *ca.* 1001 and his biographies were written soon after his death. One of them, the so-called *Vita A*, belongs to the most extensive examples of the hagiographic genre. Stylistically it is very ambitious, which means that it is sometimes quite difficult to understand. The other biography, called *Vita B*, is shorter and more simple in style. In content, the two texts largely overlap.

As a child Athanasios, or Abraham (Abraamios) as he was originally called, was taught reading and writing by a *grammatistēs*. From boyhood he had a lively interest in letters, so he was sent to Constantinople to receive a more advanced education. Eventually he became a teacher in Constan-

tinople.⁹ Clearly, little more than a very elementary education was available in his native city, so the obvious solution for young people to quench their thirst for learning was to leave Trebizond for Constantinople rather than the opposite, as had been the case in the days of Tychikos in the early seventh century.

An obscure passage in the *Vita A of Athanasios* gives information about Athanasios' mother. Her family came from the Pontos and the passage has been interpreted to the effect that this family figured in something that the writer calls *historiai*.¹⁰ Some scholars have hypothesized that these *historiai* were a kind of epic poetry, a rather short heroic song about a Pontic family.¹¹ It could be compared with the so-called Akritic songs, a literature in the vernacular which has been orally transmitted exactly in the Pontos, although mainly in the post-Byzantine period. This is a fascinating idea, but it is probably wrong. The passage in the *Vita* is difficult, but what it says seems rather to be that the Pontos itself figures in literary works. Then it would primarily refer to descriptions not in Byzantine, but in ancient literature, such as the passage in Xenophon's *Anabasis* mentioned at the beginning of this paper, or rather, perhaps — since Kolchis is mentioned — the tale of the Argonauts.

However, when talking of epic poetry concerning a specific family there is a case that must be mentioned here. In the eleventh and twelfth century we meet some members of the Gabras family about whom such orally transmitted poetry seems to have existed. Two members of the family are especially important, both playing their roles when the Byzantine central power had lost most of its ability to control the eastern provinces. First there was Theodore Gabras, who died fighting the invading Seljuk Turks in 1098 and soon was hailed as a martyr by the Byzantine church. Second there was Constantine Gabras, who ruled a local, independent principality up to some time after 1140.¹² Unfortunately, whereas there is good reason to believe that a genuine epic tradition about the Gabras family and the exploits of some of its members existed in the Middle Ages, this tradition was destroyed by later additions and fabrications (the most important was created as recently as the late nineteenth century).¹³

⁹ *Vita A of Athanasios*, ed. by Noret (1982), ch. 5, 10–12.

¹⁰ *Ed. cit.*, ch. 5, 10–12 (p. 5).

¹¹ Cf. Bryer & Winfield 1985: 105.

¹² See Bryer 1970: 175–177.

¹³ See Bryer 1970: 168 f.

The Byzantine “national epic”, the *Digenis Akritas*, also belongs in this context. As we have it, it was probably written down in the twelfth century, although it rather reflects the historical situation of the ninth and tenth centuries. It is true that the roots of the *Digenis* poem are to be sought not specifically in Trebizond or the Pontos, but rather more generally in the eastern parts of the empire, around the river Euphrates, regions that formed an unstable border zone between them and their oriental neighbours (as is well-known, the term *akritas* means “border-soldier”). One of the versions of the *Digenis* poem that we have is found in a late (sixteenth-century) manuscript copied in Trebizond,¹⁴ and it is only natural to think that exactly there an audience could be found with an interest in poetry of this kind. It reflects relations to the Muslim neighbours, warlike as well as peaceful, in a way in which it must have been easy for people in Trebizond to feel at home.

A few years after the death of the monastic founder Athanasios, a real star on the literary firmament of Trebizond was born: John Xiphilinos, philosopher and professor of law in Constantinople. He belonged to the intellectual circle in the centre of which we find the philosopher and historian Michael Psellos. Eventually he became patriarch of Constantinople, a position that he held in the years 1064–1075. A gifted young man with intellectual interests like Athanasios, Xiphilinos too had to leave Trebizond to be able to pursue the advanced studies that were to found his career.¹⁵

Perhaps, however, some rhetorical training was available in Trebizond. Those of Xiphilinos’ literary works that have a connection to his native city were probably produced before he left Trebizond, or at least while he still had contacts there, because he seems to refer to himself as reading his works to a local audience;¹⁶ and these works display considerable rhetorical skill. The first of them is a new version of the piece that introduces the literary history of Byzantine Trebizond, the Passion of the ubiquitous city patron Eugenios (see above). Xiphilinos has given the text the stylistic facelift it needed and updated some of its contents. The second is a small collection of stories about ten miracles that Eugenios is supposed to have

¹⁴ For the versions and the manuscript tradition of the *Digenis* poem, see Jeffreys 1998: xviii–xxx. The Trebizond manuscript belonged to the Sumela monastery but is now apparently lost.

¹⁵ On Xiphilinos’ life and works, see the (sometimes disappointing) study by Bonis (1937).

¹⁶ See the comment in Rosenqvist 1996: 373.

performed while Xiphilinos still lived in Trebizond, i.e. between *ca.* 1010–1030.¹⁷ The miracles are rich in interesting details of life in Trebizond in the early eleventh century. Especially interesting to Baltic–Nordic readers, perhaps, are stories about three Varangian soldiers – two possessed by demons, the third one deaf – included in a company that is mustering on a plain near the town. Xiphilinos uses the antiquated literary term *Scythians* about them, but a copyist who added chapter headings in the oldest manuscript of these texts has transposed this into the demotic level by using the term *Rhōs* instead. In the case of one of the two demoniacs, Xiphilinos seems to tell us that he remained at the monastery, in whatever capacity. It would be tempting to connect this piece of evidence with the presence of the family name Varangos in documents of fourteenth-century Trebizond.¹⁸

Of literature from the period before 1204 not much remains to be mentioned. As far as I know, there are only another few anonymous miracle stories about St Eugenios. They are difficult to date, but it seems likely that few of them were written later than the 1060s–70s. That was the time when the Seljuk Turks invaded Anatolia, and one of the consequences of this – certainly a minor one – was that travelling became more difficult. This must have meant a drawback to the cult of Eugenios, which in part relied on pilgrimage, and this in turn is reflected as a break in the tradition of the miracles after this period.¹⁹

So now we are entering the so-called Empire of Trebizond. It was founded under somewhat obscure circumstances. It is clear that queen Tamar(a) of Georgia played an active role in placing a certain Alexios Komnenos, perhaps her nephew, on the throne of this new state.²⁰ Alexios belonged to the old imperial family of Constantinople, but strong links connected him to the kingdoms of the Caucasus. These two facts give a peculiar character to the entire history of this little empire: on the one hand it claimed to represent the legitimate imperial power of Byzantium, a claim that was symbolized by the name Komnenos, especially in the combination Megas Komnenos (“Grand Komnenos”), which eventually became an imperial title rather than a name. On the other hand, this state was clearly oriented to the

¹⁷ The Miracles are edited in Rosenqvist 1996.

¹⁸ *PLP* No. 2151, 2152.

¹⁹ See further Rosenqvist 2002.

²⁰ On the history of the Empire of Trebizond more generally, see Fallmerayer 1827, and Miller 1926.

East, towards the Caucasus and Armenia, and several features in the lifestyle and structure of its society pointed to the Caucasus rather than Constantinople.

The fact that a state was established that was at least locally important soon had consequences for literary and artistic production. The state apparatus needed certain kinds of literature for practical use, such as formal rhetoric for court and church, and historiography. Connected to this was the production of books, which were also needed in ecclesiastical contexts. But development was slow, and it was not until the early fourteenth century that attempts were made to satisfy these needs by establishing something like a cultural infrastructure rather than an irregular series of *ad hoc* solutions. One of the successors of Alexios I, Alexios II, was the first to make serious efforts in order to develop this aspect of public life by gathering around him a group of culturally productive people and giving them favourable positions at court or in the civil service. He was followed in his ambitions by Alexios III (died 1390).

In rhetoric, profane as well as ecclesiastical, a certain Constantine Loukites is the first of them. Loukites was from Constantinople and was educated there, but he made his career at the court of the Grand Komnenoi in Trebizond, where the title *protovestiaros* was conferred upon him. He is known to have corresponded with some of the best known literary figures of this period, such as Theodore Hyrtakenos, who was his teacher, and Nikephoros Gregoras. He apparently enjoyed a high reputation in the city. One of his younger contemporaries, the later metropolitan John Lazaropoulos, describing how the festival of the Transfiguration was solemnized at the imperial monastery of St Sophia on an occasion that might have occurred a couple of years before 1330, refers to Loukites as "the crowning glory of our banquet".²¹ This is likely to reflect realistically his position within the cultural and political élite of Alexios II's Trebizond.

What we have by Loukites' hand is just two rhetorical works: an encomium on the city patron Eugenios,²² and a discourse in memory of his patron, the Grand Komnenos Alexios II who died in 1330.²³ The former is a rewriting of an earlier rewriting: the one — just mentioned — by John Xiphilinos of the Passion of St Eugenios. It represents, in a typical way,

²¹ τῆς ἐστιάσεως ἡμῶν ἐκείνης κορωνίς: Rosenqvist 1996: 336, line 1627.

²² Ed. in Rosenqvist 1996: 114–168.

²³ Ed. in Papadopoulos-Keramefs 1891: 421–430 (the end is lacking in the unique manuscript).

something that is common especially in Byzantine hagiography, namely texts which in the course of their history are moved between various linguistic and stylistic levels in order to be able to function properly under changing circumstances and to changing audiences. Here Loukites displays considerable rhetorical inventiveness. In fact, a work of this kind may give more room for literary creativity than has often been assumed.²⁴

Loukites' second rhetorical work, the funeral speech on Alexios II, may strike a modern reader as somewhat artificial in its display of the writer's boundless admiration and love for the dead ruler and his distress at his death. However, as is often the case with texts of this kind, it yields interesting information on something that one would perhaps not expect to find there. Here, if I am not mistaken, the information concerns the interior of the most important of Trebizond's churches, the cathedral church which was dedicated to "The Virgin of the Golden Head" (*Theotokos Chrysokephalos*). This church contained the tombs of several Trapezuntine emperors.²⁵ It seems also to have had wall paintings consisting of portraits of members of the imperial family. Loukites describes these paintings in a way that is not quite easy to interpret, but his description helps us to reconstruct at least in part the interior of the church in which, among other things, a typically Trapezuntine decorative pattern of dynastic images seems to have been applied.²⁶

A little older than Loukites was one of his correspondents, a certain Gregory Chioniades. Like Loukites, he was born in Constantinople (*ca.* 1250) but stayed in Trebizond time and again, and lived there permanently during his last years.²⁷ He has become more famous than any one of the native intellectuals in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, primarily as an astronomer, even if he also wrote a few non-astronomic works, for example a now lost text — or possibly two texts — on the martyr Eugenios (it might seem that the composition of texts on the city patron was a duty that fell to every literate person in Trebizond). Chioniades seems to have become a monk at an early stage and then begun to entertain contacts in Trebizond. From there he went to Tabriz in Persia, which was then governed by Mongols, the so-called Ilkhans. He learnt Persian, began to study astronomy,

²⁴ See Talbot 1991 for an insightful survey of such works from the Late Byzantine period.

²⁵ See the comprehensive entry in Bryer & Winfield 1985: 238–243.

²⁶ Rosenqvist 1993: 294 ff.

²⁷ On Chioniades, see Pingree 1964. For his correspondence, see Papadopoulos 1927.

and translated some well-known astronomical works into Greek. He went back to Trebizond and Constantinople but was soon appointed bishop of Tabriz, a position that he kept for about five years. Finally he returned to Trebizond and lived in a monastery there till his death in *ca.* 1320. During those years he may have had one or two pupils with an interest in astronomy, but such an idea, although it may seem reasonable, is unsubstantiated. In any case, he is a very rare example of a renowned scientist active in Trebizond, and his fame as an astronomer must be seen as an exception, not as typical of the scientific standards prevailing here.

Two minor writers of the same century should also be mentioned. One is Andrew Libadenos, a Constantinopolitan who made a certainly less brilliant career than Loukites in Trebizond. He has left a number of various writings that fill some two hundred pages in the modern edition,²⁸ which is considerably more than the two extant, more elegant, pieces by Loukites. The most important work by Libadenos is known as *Periegesis*, an autobiographical piece dominated by an account of a journey to Egypt in which the writer took part as a young boy and in which also a pilgrimage to Jerusalem was included. Somewhat surprisingly, what occupies most of the space is descriptions of illnesses from which Libadenos suffered and the more or less miraculous ways in which he was cured from them. He may seem, in this work, as a hypochondriac of little literary import, but as such Libadenos is not a unique example in the late Byzantine period. Perhaps the obsession with one's own health that we encounter several times in late Byzantine literature is a phenomenon that has wider implications than those which have to do with individual psychology.

The second of these minor writers was a certain Stephen (Stephanos) Sgouropoulos. He belonged to a well-known family and occupied a position at the court of the Grand Komnenos Alexios III, to whom he dedicated a series of poems.²⁹ They are uniformly written in the common eight-syllable verse that is often called Byzantine Anacreontics. The most striking feature in these poems is the repeated glorifications of various aspects of Alexios' person. For example, Sgouropoulos calls him "a flower from a holy meadow, a fragrant bouquet, a perfumed rose, an Indian apple from the orchard, the great spring of my soul, my firm comfort". He also praises Alexios' "wetted sword of iron from Damascus, his lucky hands, his well-formed fingers, his broad speech, his deep words, and the way in which he

²⁸ Lampsidis 1975.

²⁹ Ed. in Papatheodoridis 1954.

makes a fool of philosophers and scholars.” The person to whom this refers is one of the very few Trapezuntines that we can visualize from an extant portrait. This portrait of Alexios — and of his wife Theodora — is found in a famous donation act to the Dionysiou monastery on Mount Athos (see Fig. 4), a Trapezuntine foundation which in September 1374 was granted the imperial support that is documented in this act.



Fig. 4. Alexios III Grand Komnenos and his wife Theodora. Donation act dated 1374; Dionysiou monastery, Mount Athos.

Historiography has been mentioned among those literary genres that a new state such as the empire of Trebizond would need. The one who eventually, in a rather unusual way, was to satisfy this need was a man called Michael Panaretos. He held the position of a *protonotarios* at the court of Trebizond and died towards the end of the fourteenth century. His historical work comprises no more than about twenty printed pages in the modern

edition.³⁰ It is often called a chronicle, but compared to normal Byzantine chronicles it is surprisingly meagre. It gives us the impression of a series of dry, annalistic notes, in which chronological accuracy seems to have been of primary interest to the writer. The title of the work also seems to indicate rather humble ambitions; it runs like this: "About the emperors, the Grand Komnenoi of Trebizond, how and when each of them became emperor, and how long he reigned."

The contents of the text is clearly in accordance with its stated purpose, and a paragraph by Panaretos may read as follows:

In the month of August the same year, 1355, John Kabazites, duke of Chaldia, marched away and captured Cheriana. Then Sorogaina was also liberated and incorporated among the imperial domains. The same year Sir Michael Grand Komnenos marched out of the city and came to Soulchation and then returned. In October, of the 10th indiction, in the year 1355, the Grand Domestic Meizomates and the Grand Stratopedarch Sampson marched toward Tripolis as far as Kenchrina and seized Scholaris and his men, and returned, and peace was made.³¹

It is obvious that the chronology is detailed, and it is generally regarded as reliable. How reliable it is cannot be easily judged, however, since almost no parallel sources exist. To anyone who is used to "normal" Greek texts, ancient or Byzantine, historiographic or other, Panaretos makes rather exotic reading. The primary reason for this is that Trebizond's neighbours to the south and the east are present in the text to such a high degree. Their presence takes the form of Turkish and Caucasian personal names, exactly as expected, but also — and this is more surprising — of loanwords from the languages of these peoples. A striking example is the fact that the medieval marketplace of Trebizond (which is thought to be identical with the ancient agora) is designated by the Greek form of the Arabic word *meydan*, τὸ Μαϊτάνιν. This indicates that, as a writer, Panaretos was completely foreign to the puristic conventions of classicizing Byzantine literature, in which exactly the use of un-classical loanwords was a reliable indication of the lack of formal literary education, or the lack of motivation to use it. Since Panaretos has left no other writings, it is difficult to know which explanation applies to his work. Actually, he might deliberately have

³⁰ Ed. Lampsidis 1958 (the text covers only pp. 61–81).

³¹ Ed. Lampsidis 1958: 71, 16–25.

chosen an informal style since he did not intend the work he was writing to be a piece of formal literature.

Sometimes Panaretos' brief notes make the impression of having been copied directly from the material of an archive. What exactly could this material have looked like? The historian Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer, who was the first who seriously tried to write the history of the Empire of Trebizond,³² gave a tentative answer to this question. In a later work, he put forth the idea that Panaretos' sources were mainly historical paintings and the inscriptions attached to them which were found in the imperial palace of the city.³³ This idea may seem odd, but in its context it is not unreasonable. In fact we know both from literary sources — such as the funerary oration on Alexios II by Constantine Loukites (on which see above) — and from archaeological remains — largely no longer extant but recorded in earlier publications —, that historical and dynastic paintings were rather common in Trebizond, and that inscriptions were found together with them.

To one of the first events mentioned by Panaretos we have, in fact, a parallel source. He devotes only a short sentence to it:

*In the year 6731 [of the Creation of the World; i.e., 1222/23], in the second year of Gidon's reign, the Sultan Melik attacked Trebizond, and their entire number were destroyed.*³⁴

This laconic comment by Panaretos has a fascinating and intriguing complement in the most extensive of all the miracle stories about St Eugenios.³⁵ Here, in thirteen dense pages, we are fully compensated for Panaretos' two meagre lines. In fact, no other event in the entire history of Trebizond has been described in such detail as this one. All that happens is far too much to be summarized here. It must suffice to briefly describe the background of the events.

A Trapezuntine ship was crossing the Black Sea from Cherson in the Crimea to Trebizond with tributes (for a short period Cherson was controlled by the empire of Trebizond). On the coast off Sinope the ship ran ashore and was plundered by the governor of the city, an Armenian called Hetum, who was the Sultan's vassal. Hetum also sent his own ships to

³² This happened in response to a so-called prize question issued by the Danish Academy of Sciences in Copenhagen in 1822; for the printed result, see Fallmerayer 1827.

³³ Fallmerayer 1844: 9.

³⁴ Ed. Lampsidis 1958: 61, 8–10.

³⁵ Ed. with English translation in Rosenqvist 1996: 308–334.

Cherson and ravaged several towns there. Emperor Andronikos Gidos of Trebizond (Gidon in Panaretos; the origin is probably Ital. Guido) responded by attacking Sinope and plundering the neighbouring coast. When the Sultan in Konya heard about this, he marched with his army against Trebizond, penetrated its territory and besieged the city. The siege and the events connected to it are broadly described, and a central role in all this is played by the city patron, St Eugenios, who efficiently intervenes to save his city. Eventually the Sultan is captured and forced to accept a treaty with emperor Andronikos, in which he is enjoined to pay an annual tribute to Trebizond.

This is not only a fascinating story; the narrative also presents us with a number of interesting problems, among which questions about the sources — unfashionable though they may be — are the most intriguing ones. The events told took place in 1222/23, but the text in which we read about them was not written until the 1360s, in a collection of miracle stories compiled by the above mentioned John Lazaropoulos, later Metropolitan Joseph of Trebizond. What did the story look like before that? How had it been transmitted over the 150 years up to that time? How can it be that Panaretos does not seem to know about it? I once attempted some rather speculative answers to these questions, and although I am far from certain about them, I think there is at least *some* support for my ideas.³⁶

I imagine that there were two sources describing the same events from different points of view. One was an epic poem in which the emperor was the hero. It was written in the so-called political, fifteen-syllable verse, and in part perhaps orally transmitted up to the mid-fourteenth century. The second source was a hagiographic text in which the martyr Eugenios played the main role as miracle worker. It is likely to have shared most characteristics of the miracle genre, except for its unusual length. The most economic solution to the problem how the two pieces were put together would be that Lazaropoulos was the one who united them. Otherwise we would have to suppose a stage in the transmission of the texts which has been lost without leaving any discernible traces. There is also some positive support for conferring an active role here on Lazaropoulos, because the method of literary composition involved in the Melik's story — the fusing of two completely different texts into a new unity — can be paralleled elsewhere in his miracle collections.

³⁶ See further Rosenqvist 1996: 50–63.

If my own ideas about these things are right, Lazaropoulos' sources, had they been preserved, would have added some fascinating points to the literary landscape of Trebizond. If my ideas are wrong, the question of how and in what form some very detailed information was transmitted over the almost 150 years from the 1220s to the 1350s remains an unsolved problem of considerable interest in the history of Trapezuntine literature.

If, finally, we take a look at the fifteenth century, we encounter one of the most famous figures in Trebizond's literary history. Here is a man who in a typical way is absent from his hometown and instead is present, and very much so, somewhere else. I am referring to a certain John, who is better known as Bessarion, scholar, theologian, and eventually cardinal in the Roman church. He was born *ca.* 1400 but seems to have left Trebizond early. What he was looking for was an opportunity of advanced studies, something that Trebizond of the fifteenth century could not provide. Bessarion left, first for Constantinople, then for Mistra in the Peloponnese. Constantinople was, of course, a natural place to go for education, but so was Mistra. In the thirteenth century it became the capital of the Frankish principality of Morea, which was shortlived and soon returned into Byzantine hands. From 1348 it was governed by a more or less independent so-called despot (*despotes*), and after that the Morea saw a cultural development in which, among others, the philosopher and admirer of antiquity George Gemistos Plethon was an active force.

Bessarion began an ecclesiastical career by first becoming a monk, then a monastic leader and priest and eventually metropolitan of Nicaea in Bithynia. In that capacity he participated in the council of Ferrara and Florence in 1437, when a union between the Roman and the Byzantine church was discussed. Bessarion himself was in favour of the union, but as is well known, that idea came to nothing. A couple of years later he converted to Roman catholicism, was appointed cardinal, and as such twice nominated to be elected pope. He died in Ravenna in 1472.

Bessarion was a prolific writer, in Greek as well as in Latin. In the present context the most important of his works is an *enkomyion* of his native city Trebizond.³⁷ It satisfies all demands that a highly stylized rhetorical product can be expected to satisfy. As usual in a Byzantine context this means that what we would call the information proper is diluted with masses of words in a way that sometimes makes the

³⁷ Ed. in Lampsidis 1984a: 20–72.

“informative value” — which is not the author’s main concern — seem rather slight. Still Bessarion’s work has much to add to our knowledge of such features in the urban landscape of Trebizond as the interior of the imperial palace,³⁸ the orientally flavoured marketplace in the eastern suburb, etc., facts that are useful to anyone interested in the topography of a Greek city in eastern Anatolia.



Fig. 5. Bessarion as Cardinal. Painting by Joos van Gent, *ca.* 1470 (Louvre, Paris).

In 1461 Trebizond was taken by the army of Mehmet II. In the short run this surely meant exactly what might be expected in such a situation: devastation, plunder, murders, etc. But in the long run, the consequences were hardly disastrous. Greek culture in the Pontos survived into the twentieth century, when it disappeared at last in the wake of World War I. But the past is still present in the Pontos, both in the form of a number of

³⁸ The important section about the palace has been translated in Mango 1972.

extant monuments — many of which, admittedly, are sadly in decay —, and in the form of certain elements in people's lifestyle: the latter is a timeless feature, determined by the Pontic nature, the form of the landscape and the climate rather than by the inhabitants' cultural and ethnic background.

I have tried to trace the outline of a literary and cultural landscape that in general was a rather remote corner of the Byzantine world. It was never near to the real Byzantium, even in periods when it tried to make people think so. This becomes overwhelmingly clear when we consider the literary output of Trebizond in these periods, a confirmation of the well-known fact that in the Byzantine Middle Ages, Constantinople was everything in terms of culture, while the province, with a slight exaggeration, was nothing. That is to say that Medieval Byzantine culture was an extremely centralized affair, reflecting the equally centralized political structure. That is why the loss of the capital in 1204 became such a heavy blow to the Empire.

However, this centralized character is especially pronounced in the fields of learning and literature. In these fields, competition with the capital would only be possible if a complex and expensive infrastructure were present, including libraries and other means of higher education. Things were a little different in the early period, up to the seventh century. Then Constantinople had to compete with other cultural centres such as Antioch and Alexandria. In difficult times this was a situation in which even a small remote town like Trebizond could achieve some renown, if just for a short time and due to a private initiative, such as that of the otherwise unknown scholar Tychikos.

The impression created by a survey of Trapezuntine art and architecture would be rather different. Here we would find a surprisingly rich variety of wall paintings, in books and in documents — such as that found in Fig. 3, obviously produced in the imperial chancery of Trebizond —, as well as exciting examples of profane and ecclesiastical architecture, many of which are unfortunately destroyed or in decay. However, in this point a philologist is in the happy situation of having an excellent work of reference, namely the book, often cited above, on the Byzantine monuments and topography of the Pontos by Anthony Bryer and David Winfield.

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Summary

Greek-speaking populations and Greek culture have ancient roots in the Pontic region. None the less, this part of north-east Anatolia was felt to be a remote and foreign country by the ancient Greeks. The attitude of the medieval Byzantines was similar. An obvious explanation for this is the geographical situation of the region and the conditions created by its cool and moist climate, so different from what we find around the Mediterranean. In addition there are the strong cultural links to the east and the south, to the Caucasus and Armenia, rather than to the old Hellenic centres in western Asia Minor and the Balkans. Trebizond — the most important city on the Pontic coast, the capital of the little empire that existed there in the Late Byzantine period — derived its importance mainly from the fact that it was a station on the caravan route between Persia and Constantinople. It relied on trade for its prosperity, and literature, learning and artistic production were of marginal

interest. Normally, those of its inhabitants who wished to pursue higher studies had to leave for Constantinople. But a few periods were exceptions, even though cultural initiatives of relevance for the intellectual life were taken on a small scale and often on a personal and private basis. This article gives some glimpses of the literary landscape that emerged during these exceptional periods. Thus, in the early 7th century a shadowy figure called Tychikos was famed as a scholar attracting far away students who would rather go to Trebizond than to Constantinople in order to find a good teacher. In the early and mid-14th century there was imperial support for literary, scholarly and artistic activities aimed at making Trebizond competitive in a larger Byzantine context. Although shortlived and limited in scope, and relying on intellectuals imported from Constantinople, the result was a production of literary and scientific texts, manuscripts and imperial documents of sometimes surprisingly high quality. Behind this development was the ambition of some Trapezuntine sovereigns to appear as the real Byzantine emperors, a belated and unrealistic answer to the situation in which the fragmented Byzantine empire found itself after the loss of Constantinople in 1204. For a short time it became possible to make a reasonable career as a rhetorically educated writer in Trebizond. But for various reasons the situation soon deteriorated. The most famous Trapezuntine intellectual, the cardinal Bessarion, gained his fame far from his homeland, in Constantinople, Florence and Rome. When he died, in 1472, Trebizond had been in Ottoman hands for several years. However, the Greek population lived on in the area until the 1920s.