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THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE TWO PALACES: THE COMPOSITION OF *THE SONG OF DIGENIS AKRITAS* AND THE CLAIM FOR THE ANATOLIC HEGEMONY OF ALEXIUS KOMNENOS

ABSTRACT: The arrival of the Komnenos-Doukas faction at the imperial throne, with the rising of Alexius Komnenos in 1081, represents a strong change in the rhetoric and sharing of power in Byzantium. However, while the propaganda works of this emperor’s son and grandson are well known, the literary circles related to Alexius I himself are almost unknown. Therefore, in this article, we propose that the *Song of Digenis Akritas* was a literary construction to legitimate the supremacy claims of Alexius I Komnenos related with Anatolia, which was menaced by the Turks and the Crusaders. We base our hypothesis on three buildings, both material and discursive: the Blachernae Palace in Constantinople, the Treaty imposed by Alexius I to the Seljuk sultan Malik-Shah in 1116 and the Digenis’ palace by the Euphrates’ banks.

KEY-WORDS: Byzantium, Song of Digenis Akritas, Alexius I Komnenos, Building, Aristocracy, Palace, Anatolia, Turks.

“Assim, aos poucos, ia se formando no meu sangue o projeto de eu mesmo erguer, de novo, poeticamente, meu Castelo pedregoso e amuralhado. Tirando daqui e dali, juntando o que acontecera com o que ia sonhando, terminaria com um Castelo afortalezado, de pedra, com as duas torres centradas no coração do meu Império.”

“So, little by little, it was forming in my blood the project of building, all by myself, again, poetically, my rocky and walled Castle. Taking from here and there, putting together what happened with what I was dreaming, I would finish with a strong Castle, made of stones, with two towers centred at the heart of my Empire.”

(Ariana Suassuna, *O Romance da Pedra do Reino e o Príncipe do Sangue do Vai-e-Volta*, folheto XIV)

1. - THE ANALYSIS INITIAL MARK

This article is based on the investigations carried out along the Masters Degree program in History, in the research line of *Culture and Power* at Universidade Federal do Paraná (Brazil), entitled “*From the Frontier to Constantinople: the insertion of the Song of Digenis Akritas in the byzantine political scene (11th and 12th Centuries)*”. In

the dissertation we approached the debate, developed around the *Song of Digenis Akritas* – work that represents the foundation of a new fictional genre, blossomed at the court of the Komneni – and around the foundation of Alexius Komnenos' reign, which reformed the Byzantines' political institutions, as well as the division of power. This emperor enabled the arise of a familiar court that created and appreciated this Byzantine romances. However, it is not believable that the innovations related to the *Song of Digenis Akritas* and Alexius Komnenos may have arisen independently. Therefore, we focused our analysis in three “constructions”: the palace of Blachernae, the palace which Digenis Akritas, built in the end of his life on the banks of Euphrates, and the treaty imposed by Alexius I to the Seljuk sultan Malik Shah at the year 1116.

2. – THE RISE OF ALEXIUS I KOMNENOS AND FOUNDATION OF THE KOMNENOS-DUKAS ARISTOCRATIC REGIME.

Although what seemed to be an aristocratic usurpation among many others known by Byzantium since the second part of the 11th Century, the enthronement of Alexius Komnenos in 1081 represented a deep change in the discourse, maybe the most remarkable of this civilization's political history. Even though Alexius I was, in fact, the heir of the political Roman tradition, the Caesars' successor and the head of the Orthodox Christianity, his rise to the imperial throne changed the court and, mainly, the division of power.¹

When he rose to the imperial purple, Alexius Komnenos was not alone, he relied on his family and other lineages from the same origin and related directly or indirectly with him, such as Doukas, Diogenes, Tornikes, Tatikios and Paleologos. The Komnenos, as most of the lineages that supported them, belonged to the military, land-owner and Anatolian aristocracy. Alexius' grandfather, Manuel Komnenos Erotikos, defended the city of Nicaea in the name of the Emperor Basil II (976-1025) during the Bardas-Skleros revolt, conquering the emperor's respect. Basil II promoted the political rise of this lineage from the city of Kastamouni, in Paphlagonia.² Despite being from

¹ About the rising, establishment and the characteristics of the Komnenos regime, cf. W. TREADGOLD, *History of the Byzantine State and Society*, California: Stanford, 1999, pp. 612-666; P. MAGALINO, *The Empire of Manuel Komnenos: 1143-1180*, Cambridge 1993, pp. 413-488; A. KAZHDAN, “The Aristocracy and the Imperial Ideal”, in: *The Byzantine Aristocracy: IX to XIII Century*, ed. M. ANGOLD, Oxford 1984, pp. 43-58. A better developed perspective in A. KAZHDAN – A. W. EPSTEIN, *Changes in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Berkeley 1985, pp. 104-117.

² J. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir ET contestations à Bizance (963-1210)*, Paris 1996, p. 219.

aristocratic origins, the Komneni were not among the elite highest ranks, held by families which had been noticeable since the 9th century, such as the Argyroi, Maleinoi, Skleroi and Phokades.

Hence Basil II supported the Komnenos, as he did with other aristocratic families, in order to counterbalance the influence of the most traditional lineages. The rise of the Komnenos was so fast that the son of Manuel Komnenos Erotikos, Isaac, became emperor for a few years, between 1057 and 1059.

The meteoric rise of the Komneni was interrupted by the consequences of the Manzikert defeat against the Seljuk Turks, in 1071. As most of the provincial byzantine aristocracy, the Komneni were obliged to immigrate to Constantinople due to the Seljuk and other Turkish groups' invasion that followed the defeat.³ Defeated and not in possession of their properties, since their lands in Kastamouni were **taken over** by the Turkish invaders, the Komneni had to quickly articulate alliances with other aristocratic houses in order to find protection. So, Anna Dalassena, a person of great political intelligence, who became the chief of the Komnenos' house after the death of her husband, John Komnenos, created a series of family alliances through matrimonies, which the most important was the alliance with the Doukas. They were a great and traditional aristocratic lineage that could designate two emperors in the last decades, Constantine X (1059-1067) and Michael VII (1067-1078). Despite having lost their power with the ascent of Nikephoros Botaneiates to the imperial throne in 1078, the Doukas were powerful enough to make Nikephoros promise to honor the son of Michael VII, Constantine, as his successor. On the other hand, the sons of Anna Dalassena, Isaac and Alexius Komnenos, became Nikephoro's favorite ones, and this increased the family's influence. Therefore, the alliance between these two family branches, which resulted by the marriage of Alexius Komnenos, the *domestikos* of the West, and Irene Doukas, the granddaughter of the *caesar* John Doukas, was beneficial for both families, since the Doukas would be protected by the increasing importance of the Komnenos, and the Komnenos would improve their blood with the association with this traditional lineage.

This confluence of interests and the political intelligence that the new emperor inherited from his mother are the factors that distinguish the rise of Alexius Komnenos to the imperial throne from previous usurpers. I do not intend to discuss the theme of the

³ About the battle of Manzikert, cf. W. TREADGOLD, *History...* pp. 602-603; M. ANGOLD, *Byzantine Empire, 1025-1204: a Political History*, London 1997, pp. 44-48.

reforms that Alexius conducted ⁴, but along his reign it was fostered, if we may say, an aristocratic “supremacy”, for, as he rose to the imperial purple, Alexius created new titles that superimposed the ancient ones and granted his fellows with them. They were mainly given to the aristocracy and members of his family, but not the entire elite, because many families of the military aristocracy were left behind, as well as most of the civilian aristocracy. The most important functions in the Byzantine administration and army were reserved to the ones granted by Alexius I with the new titles. This created a familiar political system of aristocratic *ethos*, changing the meritocratic character which dominated the imperial government since the Diocletian’s reforms.

3. – THE PROPAGANDISTIC LITERATURE OF ALEXIUS KOMNENOS’ REIGN AND THE SONG OF DIGENIS AKRITAS

In Byzantium, as well as in any other civilization, each ruler, regime or dynasty change often was followed by the rise of an artistic and literary production, with a propagandist character, in order to justify the existence of the new regime. However, if in John II Komnenos (1118-1143) and Manuel I Komnenos (1143-1180) reigns it is documented a wide range of manuscripts and authors, the literary environment of Alexius I court is not easy to analyze. This emperor is usually seen under the stereotype of soldier-emperor, always fighting battles and with little or no literary interest. In fact, due to the happenings of his time, Alexius spent most of his reign under campaign outside Constantinople, it does not mean, however, he was a rustic soldier without any sophistication. Alexius was a pragmatic governor, who was aware of the importance of his image construction and the publicity of his government to consolidate himself in the Byzantine imperial tradition, that the reason why he kept rhetoricians in his court, such as Ciril Phileotes and Theofilact of Achrid⁵. Likewise, Alexius Komnenos himself is the author of some works, among which the main one is a compendium of advices to his son and successor, John II, known as *Muses*. In this manuscript it is perceptible the defense of his performance as emperor and his concern about the afterlife and the coming reign of his son⁶. Despite the evidence of a real literary interest from Alexius I, our perspective about the literary production in relation to his reign is scarce and

⁴ Cf. P. MAGDALINO, *The Empire...*, pp. 180-227; P. MAGDALINO, “Innovations in Government”, in: *Alexius Komnenos: Papers*, ed. M. MULLET – D.SMYTHE, Belfast 1996, pp.146-166.

⁵ About the eulogistic discourse of Alexius I, cf. M. MULLET, “The Imperial Vocabulary of Alexius I Komnenos”, in: *Alexios Komnenos: Papers*, pp. 359-397.

⁶ About Alexius I’s *Muses*, cf. P. MAGDALINO, *The Empire...*, pp. 27-30.

fragmented. However, in the last years many works that until now had an uncertain dating are beginning to point to Alexius Komnenos' reign. Historical works such as the *Synoptic History* by Skilitzes or the *Historia* by Ataliates and literary works such as *Timarion* and the *Song of Digenis Akritas*⁷, which were long comprehended independently from one another, as works of a moment between the end of the 11th and the beginning of the 12th centuries, are however, in the last years, being seen more as a part of the literary environment of Alexius I Komnenos' court, the beginning of the Komnenos' aristocratic regime and new Byzantine literary trends.

4. – THE SONG OF DIGENIS AKRITAS AND ITS MANY CONTEXTUALIZATIONS

In the specific case of the *Song of Digenis Akritas*⁸ the dating process took a long time. First this work was comprehended as a result of a transition process from an oral tradition to a literary one, at the Eastern Byzantine frontiers between the 9th and 11th Centuries. This position was based on references in the *Song* about characters and places related to this context. Nevertheless, as Elizabeth Jeffreys demonstrated, this perception seems to be more based on coincidences rather than on historical evidences. A good example is the description of the ascendancy of the Emir, the father of Digenis Akritas: among his ancestors are Crisocheir and Carbeas, which were names of Paulician leaders from the 9th century, who had nothing to do with the Muslim aristocracy from which the Emir belonged to.

The *Song of Digenis* is a narrative in verse about the deeds of a hero who was born from the union of a damsel from the Doukas, a byzantine aristocratic family, and the Emir of Syria, who converted himself to the Christian faith and changed his loyalty to the Byzantine Empire for the love of the damsel he had kidnapped. Digenis, likewise many other epic frontier heroes, matures fast. At the age of twelve he hunts great beasts, kidnaps his fiancée from the general's palace, who was her father, and after the matrimony moves to the frontiers with his wife, where he faces thieves, an Amazon

⁷ R. BEATON, "Cappadocians at Court: Digenes and Timarion", in: *Alexius Komnenos: Papers...*, pp. 262-320.

⁸ In the article we will analyze the Escorial and the Grottaferrata versions of the *Song of Digenis Akritas* in the following editions: i) Βασιλείου Διγενους Ακρίτου, *Texto del manuscrito de Grottaferrata*, introduction, bibliography, notes and traslation By J.V. Garrido, Barcelona 1981 (Dig. Akr. G); ii) *El poema de Digenis Akritas* (manuscrito Escorial), translated by M. Castillo Didier, in: M. CASTILLO DIDIER, *Poesia heroica bizantina: epopeya de Digenis Akirtas, cantares de Armuris y Andronico*, Santiago 1994 (Dig. Akr. E).

warrior and beasts, who want to steal his wife from him. After pacifying the frontiers, the hero builds a mansion on the river Euphrates, where he dies young.

This song came to us in a few manuscripts produced in a posterior period from the date established by the specialists for narrative itself, being the earlier ones analyzed in this article: the Escorial (XVI) and the Grotaferrata (XIV) manuscripts. There is a big scholarly debate over which of the two versions is the oldest and the most “historical”, in other words, which one is closest to a still unknown original version. Elizabeth Jeffreys affirmed that this discussion reached the levels of partisanship. The partisans of the Escorial manuscript impeccably exposed the flaws of the Grotaferrata manuscript, and vice versa: both versions have fragmented narratives, with blanks due to missing sheets and versification mistakes, etc. Both manuscripts are, at least, two paces distant from the original manuscript, because Grotaferrata and the Escorial versions, for their individual characteristics, could not have had the same source. So surely there were “*Paleoescorialensis*” and “*Paleocriptoferrensis*” manuscripts.⁹ However, in the first reading becomes evident, as Jeffreys says, that both versions have the same history, the same economy (despite some particular episodes) and many parts in common. It is on those coincidences that this analysis of the *Song*’s text is based, because in those parts we find the trails for an original lost manuscript.

Nowadays, the most accepted opinion is that the *Song of Digenis Akritas* is not a work of transition from an oral environment to a literary one, developed in a long period in the Byzantine frontiers before the defeat in the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, but an unique and integral literary initiative of a time after the defeat, related to the court and the literature of the Komneni. Jeffreys proposes that the composition of the *Song* was in the middle of the XII century, when Manuel I Komnenos (1146-1180) was the first Byzantine emperor, since the battle of Manzikert in 1071, to reach the bounds of the Euphrates¹⁰. This date was established through a comparison between the language in the *Song* – mainly the text in the Escorial manuscript – and a very similar language used by the byzantine authors from the 12th Century, which formed the renaissance of the vernacular Greek language and through the references on Digenis Akritas that we find in those works. These references are scarce, being the most important the ones in the

⁹ Ibidem. PP. xviii-xxx

¹⁰ E. JEFFREYS, *Digenis Akritis...*, PP.Ivi-Ivii; IDEM, “Akritis and Outsiders”, in: *Strangers to themselves: The byzantine outsider*, ed. D.SMYTHE, Aldershot 2000, pp. 201-202.

songs known as *Ptocolprodromic* attributed to Theodore Prodromos, which compare the emperor Manuel Komnenos (1143-1180) with Digenis Akritas:

“Manouel Komnenos, the offspring of the purple,
Happy victor, and great performer of exploits,
sturdy commander, the new Akritas”

In another poem there is a sorrow over the gluttony of some monks.

“Would that a second Akritas had been there
To tuck his tunic, take his club
And to smash them, these hateful dishes”¹¹

Theodore Prodromos is a typical representative of the new position that philosophers and men of letters reached during the Komneni's regime. Through his verses he intends to conquer favour from certain supporters, mainly the emperor¹². In both excerpts above, as David Ricks observes, the noun *Akritas* is definitely a proper name, which belongs to a specific person or to a specific character. Therefore, when he praises the emperor Manuel Komnenos associating him with Digenis, the author brings back a hero, who should be popular among the Komneni lords, to please his potential supporter. It does not mean that the *Song of Digenis Akritas* was written during this emperor's reign, but the hero had a well established fame in the aristocratic court of Manuel I. So, the drawers of the emperor's political image, the group in which the author of those verses intended to be part, appropriated the hero. It also means that the *Song of Digenis Akritas* was written in an earlier date before the reign of Manuel I, since Theodore Prodromos only writes – what do means he probably lived – until the first half of his reign. For that reason, we follow Roderick Beaton, who more than once affirms that this work is a production of Alexius I Komnenos' reign. This author defends that it is a eulogy to the emperor's relatives of the Doukas lineage and mainly a nostalgic anthem, which reminds an ancient time before the defeat in Manzikert, when the Byzantine frontiers were at the Euphrates and controlled by the aristocratic families now exiled in Constantinople¹³. However, if we leave apart the traumatic events – for Byzantium – in the mid-11th Century and focus on the changes brought by the

¹¹ D. RICKS, *Byzantine Heroic Poetry*, Bristol 1990, p.7.

¹² P. MAGDALINO, “Byzantine Snobbery”, in: *The Byzantine Aristocracy*, pp. 68-69

¹³ R. BEATON, *The Medieval Greek Romance*, London, 1996², p.49; “Cappadocians at Court: Digenes and Timarion”.

ascension of Alexius I, contrasting with this emperor's government policies and project, we have a different perspective, certainly not nostalgic, in relation to *the Song of Digenis Akritas*.

5. DIGENIS AKRITAS AND THE *ALEXIAD*: AN INDIRECT RELATION

Anna Komnene's *Alexiad* is a work that follows the Greek and Roman historiography models. The daughter of Alexius I, as she affirms in her preface, had a traditional high level Byzantine education. She studied the arts of the *Quadrivium* (geometry, arithmetic and music), she read Plato, Aristotle, Christian authors and knew by memory long fragments of *Iliad* and *Odissey*.¹⁴ However, the author, before being a thinker according to classical models, was a Komnene, a lady of the aristocracy, for her classical education did not eliminate her aristocratic identity and her work, though loyal to the historical tradition of Herodotus, do not dissemble the military elite values which were cherished by the Komneni. This characteristic is observable in the primer words of *Alexiad*:

*"The Emperor Alexius, my father, even before He seized the throne had been of great service to the Roman Empire. In fact, his military career began in the time of Diogenes Romanus (...). On that occasion, he was only fourteen years old, he wanted to serve on campaign under Diogenes, who was leading an expedition against the Persians (...) and this ambition of the young Alexius threatened the barbarians: he made it clear that one day he would come to grips with them, and when that happened his sword would have its fill of blood. Despite the youth's warlike fervour the emperor did not let him go on this campaign, because his mother had suffered a grievous loss. She was mourning the recent death of her eldest son Manuel, whose great and heroic deeds had made him famous in the Empire. (...) So he was left by his comrades against his will, but the future gradually opened up to him a fine opportunity for brave exploits."*¹⁵

This is a very interesting episode, for the theme of precocious maturing, followed by a will of leaving the maternal house to accomplish heroic deeds, is the most common *topos* of the Byzantine frontier epic cycle. The idea of *topos* developed here is related to certain patterns found in the songs that formed the epic cycle which *Digenis Akritas* is a part. Nevertheless, these patterns do not refer to names and locations, but in

¹⁴ Ana Comnena, *Alex*, pref. p. 17.

¹⁵ Ana Comnena, lib. I, i (our translation)

a similar manner to the conjectures of W. Propp, who outlined the morphology of folk tales¹⁶, about the actions and behaviors that are common in all Byzantine epic songs.

The *topos* of the hero's maturing in the Byzantine epic is a good example that demonstrates our point of view. In *The Song of Androniko's son*¹⁷ the hero grows up at an impressive speed, at the age of three he is capable of riding a horse and bear weapons. At this age he decides to abandon the women and the captivity in Syria to search for his father. In the *Song of Armouris*¹⁸ the hero take his father's weapons and horse at the age of twelve in order to rescue him from captivity in Syria, his mother only allows him to go after he succeeds in a test. We also find this *topos* in the *Song of Digenis Akritas*. The narrative of his deeds starts when the hero, at the age of twelve, decides to hunt great beasts, but his father and mother do not allow him, for he was still young. After a short process of convincing, his father, the Emir, decides to take Digenis to a hunt with his uncles. Being the hero he was Digenis exerts himself in the combat against bears and lions. After the hunt, the hero changes his child clothes to an adult's one. After this episode it begins the narrative of the Akritas' exploits. The first one happens when he is heading home after the hunt, when he is passing by the General's house, the hero gets to know his daughter and both fall in love.¹⁹

Sadly the available material for comparison, the byzantine epic *corpus* that has come to us, is too small to establish once and for all the existence of a literary *topos*. However, the observation of the same narrative patterns in the whole *corpus*, small and limited as it is, is a strong evidence of its existence. It is similar, thus, to the evidentiary paradigm of Carlo Ginzburg²⁰ Using the same metaphor of the author, to historically analyze the *Song of Digenis Akritas*, is similar to a detective's work that has to find an author of an "almost perfect crime", without witnesses and with ambiguous evidences that points at the same time to many and no suspects. In its two versions, the *Song of Digenis* is our only ambiguous evidence of a work with almost no testimonies: the original version of the Song. Nonetheless, as Ginzburg affirms, the investigation work, based in deduction and indirect relations, is a valid way to reach the truth, or at least to reach *one truth*. This is what this article proposes. Thus this *topos* is clearly a transition

¹⁶ W. PROPP, *Morfologia do Conto Maravilhoso*, Rio de Janeiro: ed. Forense, 1984.

¹⁷ *Cantar del Hijo de Andrónico*, trad. De M. Castillo Didier, en: M. Castillo Didier, *Poesia Heroica Bizantina*.

¹⁸ *Cantar de Armouris*, trad. de M. Castillo Didier, en: M. Castillo Didier, *Poesia Heroica Bizantina*.

¹⁹ *Dig. Akr. E. 707-791, Dig. Akr. G. IV, 1-370*.

²⁰ C. GINZBURG, «Sinai: raízes de um paradigma indiciário», in *Mitos, emblemas e sinais. Morfologia e história*, translation by Federico Carotti, São Paulo: Cia das Letras, 1989, pp. 143-179.

rite to the adult age present in mythologies from all around the world, that often introduced plots in the Greek, Roman and Byzantine historiographical tradition. It was common to begin the deeds' narration of a remarkable character with the search for the first signs of his (or her) exceptionality. The age of twelve, the same age of the first hunt of Digenis, was the same which Christ got lost from his parents and revealed to the Wise-Men at the Temple that He had come to fulfill the Will of his Father.²¹ Thus, we perceive that some characteristics of this *topos* are older and come from other literature. Nonetheless, the *topos* of the passage to the adult age in the byzantine epic cycle has clear specificities. It is divided in five phases: i) the self-affirmation as a grown up: Armouris tired of his family's long mourn; the Son of Andronikos wish to go after his father. Digenis Akritas tired of hunting small animals and willing to kill wild beasts; ii) convincing the parents of the hero's maturity; iii) their resistance to accept that iv) the maturity tests: Digenis hunting big animals and Armouris bearing his father weapons; and v) at the end, the rite itself, which is arm oneself or dress up with adult clothes.

In the upper described passage of *Alexiad* it is observable a passage rite with four out of five of the mentioned phases of the *topos*: the self-affirmation as a grown up, in his decision of going under campaign along with the other young nobles (i); the discussion with his mother and her resistance to the idea (ii and iii), which, although not narrated, Anna Komnene suggests that happened; the maturity test (iv) when young Alexius armed himself and went to the Emperor. Despite Alexius Komnenos was sent back, the episode was an introduction of his deeds, as this same rite introduced the Byzantine heroes' exploits.

I do not affirm, however, that the song of Digenis and the *Alexiad* are direct related works, simply because when Anna Komnene initiates the recounting of the deeds of her father, follow the classic models and gives a sample of his great destiny. While doing it, she uses a form which is familiar to the aristocratic milieu that she or the person who described this scene to her – probably her husband Nikephoros Bryennios²² - is originated: the model of the frontier heroes, the mythic ancestors of the Byzantine

²¹ Luke, 2: 40-52.

²² Howard-Johnston affirms that the unique source of Anna Komnene was her husband the general Nikephoros Bryennios, who has sketched the *Alexiad*, but had no time to finish it because of his death. For marital faithfulness, Anna Komnene organized the sketches and gave the form that had come to us. In spite of not being the only source of Anna Komnene, we cannot deny the importance of Nikephoros in the *Alexiad*'s existence, for Anna Komnene herself openly declares the importance of her late husband at the narrative construction and often eulogizes his historian abilities. Cf. J. HOWARD-JOHNSTON, «Anna Komnene and the *Alexiad*», en: *Alexios Komnenos: Papers*, pp. 262-302.

military elite. This is evidence that after the defeat of Manzikert the heroic song mixed with the courtesan literature and the imperial ideal of Alexius Komnenos' figure: thus the analysis here developed intends to show how the Byzantine art and literary models opened to the tastes of the aristocracy that had conquered power with the rise of the Komneni faction. In the case of Anna Komnene, the encounter happened between the classical historiographical models, the epic genealogy of the Anatolian aristocracy and the idealized ideal of Alexius I and his government projects. In the case of the *Song of Digenis*, Alexius' imperial propaganda mixed with the epic literature, which is clear in many points of this work. Nevertheless, this article will limit itself only in the study of two buildings, one real and another literary

6 - "CONSTANTINOPOLIZATION" OF THE ARISTOCRACY AND THE "ARISTOCRATIZATION" OF CONSTANTINOPLE.

A movement which we will call "constantinopolization" of the Anatolian aristocracy is related to the change that many of those families made to establish themselves at the imperial capital, leaving their properties behind in the provinces. This change took place for many reasons: by choice, to be close to the nucleus of power, as it probably happened with the Doukas family; by imperial orders, who demanded that some individuals and their families to move to Constantinople, so that the emperor could keep an eye on them, as it happened with the Dalassenoi during the reign of Michael IV (1034- 1040)²³; or for lifesaving situations, being the most remarkable and known the Turkish invasion: as it occurred with the Komneni and other lineages of Anatolia, of which, in spite of their power and big personal retinues, were incapable in resisting the Turks without the help of the imperial authority that, by the end of 11th Century was entirely focused in internal conflicts.

This aristocratic emigration is, on the other hand, a part of a less known and less studied historical process which is the "frontierization" of Constantinople. A decade after the beginning of the Turkish infiltration in Anatolia almost all of it was controlled by the Turks and they had already established a Sultanate with its capital in Nicaea, less than a hundred kilometers from Constantinople.²⁴ So, in a short period of time, the

²³ About the "constantinopolization" of the aristocracy cf. A. P. KAZHDAN-A. W. EPSTEIN, *Change in Byzantine Culture...*, p. 65.

²⁴ About the changes caused by the turkish presence in the Byzantine Anatolia, cf. H. AHRWEILER, «La frontière et les frontières de Byzance en Orient», en: Actes du XVIe. Congrès International des Études Byzantines, Bucarest 1974, pp. 228-230; S. VRYONIS, «Nomadization and Islamization in Asia Minor»,

frontier moved from the far regions of Armenia, Syria and Euphrates to the territories outside the capital's walls. Constantinople turned, thus and at the same time, capital and frontier, phenomena that carried with it changes in the physical, social, cultural and political aspects of the city.

Paul Magdalino makes an interesting description of how Constantinople would be during the reign of Manuel I Komnenos (1143-1180).²⁵ According to this author, although the city had maintained its urban structures practically unchanged since the 5th Century, Constantinople's skyline wouldn't be imprinted by the public buildings and imperial churches built by Constantine I, Constantius II and Justinian I, but by many palaces and monasteries erected under the sponsorship of the Komnenian emperors or their relatives. The patrimonial regime and the supremacy of the Komnenos-Doukas Faction turned Constantinople, the New Rome, in a predominantly aristocratic city and this reflected at the urban sociability. The people of Constantinople was not a body of citizens represented by the Emperor anymore, it was fragmented in groups inserted among many aristocratic *oikoi*, or through the palaces retinue or through the assistance works of the family monasteries. Maybe the massive uprisings that reinstalled in the throne the *porphirogenete* Zoe, in 1042, was the last sample of the civic spirit of the polis that Constantinople saw.²⁶

The *oikos* was the basic Byzantine social unit during a large period. After the end of the public sociability promoted by the greek *polis*, approximately in the 6th and 7th Century, the main Byzantine social unit was the nuclear family, but the expansion to the East after the 9th Century inserted clan-based societies in the Byzantine world, as the Armenians, Georgians and Arabs. This gave place to a change in the concept of Byzantine family, which expanded. The *oikos* is described by Evelyne Platagean as a “core of relatives, but the group include the ‘family’ (*oikeîoi*), ‘servants’, slaves or not (*oiketai*), even ‘men’ (*ánthropoi*) and ‘friends’ (*philoi*) [...] The *oikos* meets only part of the clan, that is, the group that thinks simphatetic because of their kinship ties. From the 9th Century and even by the end of the 8th, [...] these groups start to have transmissible lineage names”²⁷

DOP 29 (1979); W. TREADGOLD, History of the Byzantine State and Society..., pp. 668-670; M. ANGOLD, Byzantine Empire, 1025-1204..., pp. 117-120.

²⁵ About the aspect and the urban life in Constantinople during the Komneni Regime. cf. P. MAGDALINO, The Empire of Manuel Komnenos..., pp. 109-123.

²⁶ Michael Psellos, Chronographia, translated by E. R. A. SEWTERS, Yale, 1953, lib. 5, xxxix-il.

²⁷ E. PLATAGEAN, «Bizâncio séculos X-XI», in *História da Vida Privada*, vol. I, ed. P. ARIES, São Paulo 1990, pp. 548-549. For more information about the *oikoi* and the development of the family units in

The *oikos* was extended all over the Empire and to all social strata, for all the legal reforms of the 9th and 10th centuries considered it as juridical entities, and its heads (*oikodespotai*) as legally responsible for it. The Byzantine tax offices understood them as fiscal units and divided them by their civilian and military character. The second group had the obligation of yielding one family member, with equipment and weapons, to the *thémata* army. However, the aristocratic *oikoi* had a wider importance, because they were larger, richer and overall represented relatively unified political projects

Considering the aforementioned changes, it's evident that not only the aristocracy changed their practices and values to establish in Constantinople, but the whole city underwent a transformation when it was conquered by this elite. This historical process, thus, is at the same time an urbanization of an aristocracy as it is its transference to the new frontier, that is, the Anatolian elite, implanted in the capital, is still in a frontier. So, taking their social and political practices to Constantinople, both related to the concept of *oikos*, the aristocracy changed even its physical space. In a similar way of what they have done in the provinces, the elite erected buildings of a completely aristocratic character, like palaces and monasteries, founded and maintained by family sponsorship, adapting them, however, to their surroundings, lessening their defensive aspect and raising their luxury. The highest expression of the aristocratic urban intervention in the Komnenian period was the Blachernae imperial palace.

7 – THE CONSTRUCTION OF TWO PALACES: ALEXIUS', IN BLACHERNAE, AND OF DIGENIS', IN EUPHRATES.

When Alexius I arose to power, instead of living in the palace constructed by Constantine I when he “inaugurated” the city, he decided that the imperial residence should be the imperial palace at the aristocratic district of Blachernae. Alexius and his successors expanded the palace, building a big complex of apartments, churches, chapels, baths, polo fields and pavilions, making a paradigmatic aristocratic mansion to an aristocratic regime. Meanwhile, the old imperial palace was abandoned little by little. The similarities between the palace in Blachernae and the one that Digenis edified at the end of his life has already been pointed by another studies and it would be repetitive to do in this work again. It is sufficient to say that the retreat that the Akritas erected by the

Byzantium, cf. E. PLATAGEAN, «Famílias e Parentelas em Bizâncio: séculos XII e XV», en: *História da Família. Tempos Medievais: Ocidente, Oriente*, ed. A. BURGUIÈRE, Lisboa, 1997, pp. 139-158; A. KAZHDAN-G. CONSTABLE, *People and Power in Byzantium*, Washington 1982; A. P. KAZHDAN-A. W. EPSTEIN, *Change in Byzantine Culture...*, pp. 99-104.

Euphrates' banks with his marble buildings, rich mosaics made of gold and precious stones and gardens with trees and birds brought from all part of the world is more similar to the palatine architecture style developed by the *árchontes Komnenoi* so criticized by Zonaras, than to the frontier lords' mansions of the 10th and 11th century.²⁸

The character of the aristocratic mansions in the provinces and frontiers is a widely debated question. There was ostentation, but the fortification aspect of their dwellings is defended by some and contested by others. Leonora Neville defends that the main difference between the feudal western Christianity and Byzantium is the relation between State and Society, for the imperial power had a greater authority over the society and, thus, the aristocracy was not permitted to have personal fortresses²⁹. Others, like James Crow, perceive in the kastro of Çavusin (Cappadocia), Atras (Pontus) and Kastamouni (Paphlagon) evidences of aristocratic mansions of respectively the Phocas, Gavrades and Komneni lineages.³⁰ The most reasonable answer to this discussion is that, in fact, there were imperial prohibitions for the construction of personal fortresses and thereby most of the provincial aristocracy did not have them – although the constant menace of enemy attacks at the frontiers made necessary some defensive structure -, but the construction of such fortifications appeared probably as an aristocratic insubordination form, very common at the 10th and most frequently 11th Century. So it is not strange that the kastro cited by James Crow were related to families with a long history of revolts and insubordination against the imperial crown.

Independently of the discussed character of the aristocratic mansions at the byzantine provinces, Digenis' palace is more similar to a Komnenian dwelling. Without the eventual defensive function and without the necessary economic porpoise, for the provincial mansions were the economic center of the aristocratic *oikoi*, the home of Digenis has apparently only a recreative function. Digenis Akritas does not build his mansion because he conquered lands at the Euphrates or to defend himself against his enemies, but to confirm his power over the frontiers, in the same way that Alexius I did when he decided to change the imperial residence to Blachernae. In both cases the palaces are marks of a new power. Therefore, all those "buildings" contradicts those

²⁸ For the Digenis Akritas' palace description, Dig. Akr. G. VII, 1-105 y Dig. Akr. E. 1610- 1694. For comparisons between Digenis' palace and the ones of the Komnenian elite, cf. L. HUNT, «Komnenian Aristocratic Palace Decoration: Description and Islamic Connection», en: *The Byzantine Aristocracy...*, pp. 138-156; A. P. KAZHDAN-A. W. EPSTEIN, *Change in Byzantine Culture...*, p. 118.

²⁹ L. NEVILLE, *Authority in Byzantine Provincial Society, 950-1100*, Cambridge 2004, pp. 42-43.

³⁰ J. CROW, «Alexios I and Kastamon: castle and settlement in middle Byzantine Paphlagonia», en: *Alexios Komnenos: Papers...*, pp. 12-36.

who find nostalgic traits in *the Song of Digenis*. Those edifications express a manifest and an aggressive behavior, they confirm that, although in the turning from the 11th Century to the 12th the imperial authority was far from recovering those regions, sooner or later the emperor, that now was also an Akritas – a frontier warrior, like the hero – would recover it up to Euphrates to the Roman domain. This will is observed at Alexius' spirit until a time very near to his death.

8 – THE TREATY OF 1116 AND THE BYZANTINE HEGEMONY IN ANATOLIA.

At the beginning of his reign Alexius I Komnenos showed little or no interest for Anatolia, dedicating himself only to repel invasions at the western provinces, meanwhile he set treaties with the Turks, who were free to continue conquering territories and establishing in the region. However, the arrival of the First Crusade in Byzantium in 1096 made Alexius change his Eastern policies.³¹ The new Frankish effort of conquering territories in Syria and Palestine worried the Byzantine emperor. Thus, when the crusader leaders arrived at Constantinople, Alexius I forced them to firm an agreement that established they had to hand all cities and lands which they had conquered in Anatolia to the emperor. At the same time he organized parallel expeditions to take advantage of the Turkish frailty, being the most important campaign lead by John Doukas, Alexius' I brother-in-law, in 1098, in a offensive by sea and land against the emirate established by Tzachas in Smyrna and region. John Doukas' expedition was a great success, he defeated the Turks in a series of battles and retrieved the cities of Smyrna, Ephesus, Sardis, Philadelphia and Polibotos, and he did not go ahead for lack of men. Alexius' opportunism managed to recreate a solid Byzantine domain at the west of Anatolia, which, in the following reigns of his son and grandson, was extended for almost all the region, in exception of the mountainous countryside, dominated by the Seljuk Sultanate of Rûm.³²

³¹ For a general perspective for the Crusades, cf. F. R. FERNANDES, «Cruzadas na Idade Média», en: *História das Guerras*, ed. D. MAGNOLI, São Paulo 2006, pp. 99-130. For the byzantine perspective of the First Crusade, cf. Ana Comnena, *Alex.* 10-11; M. ANGOLD, *Byzantine Empire, 1025-1204...*, pp. 157-167; P. MAGDALINO, «The Byzantine Background to the First Crusade», en: *Canadian Institute of Balkan Studies*, 1996.

³² About the Anatolic conquests of Alexius I, cf. Anna Komnene, *Alex.*, 11, v-vi; W. TREADGOLD, *History of the Byzantine State and Society...*, pp. 619-629; S. VRYONIS, «Nomadization and Islamization in Asia Minor...», p. 44. P. MAGDALINO, *The Empire of Manuel Komnenos*, pp. 123-132; M. WHITTOW, «How the East was lost: the Background to the Komnenian Reconquista», en: *Alexios Komnenos: Papers...*, pp. 55-67.

In 1116, Alexius Komnenos lead his last expedition to face the forces of the Seljuk sultan of Rûm, Malik Shah (1110-1116), who attacked and ransacked some recaptured cities in Anatolia. At the end of the campaign Alexius was the victor and impose the following treaty to the defeated.

“If you are willing (...) to yield to authority of Rome and to put an end to your raids on the Christians, you will enjoy favours and honour, living in freedom in the lands set aside for you. I refer to the lands where you used to dwell before Romanos Diogenes became emperor and before he met the Sultan in battle – an unfortunate and notorious clash which ended in the Roman’s defeat and capture. It would be wise, therefore, to choose peace rather war, to refrain from crossing the frontiers of the Empire and to be content with your own territories. The advice I give is in your interests and if you listen to it you will never be sorry; in fact, you will receive liberal gifts. On the other hand, if you reject it, you can be sure of this: I will exterminate your race”³³

The sultan and his emirs accepted the terms immediately. Meanwhile, Alexius Komnenos came back to Constantinople and passed away two years after. If it was not for Malik-Shah, that, when he came back to his domains, was again defeated, captured and strangled with a bow chord by the order of his brother Masoud in 1117, and for him, as Malik-shah’s successor, had not rejected the treaty that his brother has firmed with Alexius, the end of the emperor’s life would be similar to the one of Digenis Akritas: he would have recover to the Byzantine domain the lands up to the Euphrates, the ancient Eastern frontier before the arriving of the Turks. So, or Alexius was mistaken about how the power structures functioned in Seljuk world, for imposing a treaty that practically abolished the Sultanate of Rûm, he was condemning Malik-shah to deposition, or the emperor, knowing that such imposition was impracticable, wanted that the sultan of the Seljuk Turks to recognize that the regions which they occupied in Anatolia were, by law and tradition, Byzantine. Knowing Alexius’ political abilities and the clear impossibilities of recovering all that territory back to Byzantine authority for lack of men and resources, the second possibility seems most probable, for, after firming the agreement, Alexius Komnenos did not go on in his campaign in Anatolia to accomplish it, but he preferred to come back to Constantinople with a multitude of Anatolian Christians who decided to follow him. If, in fact, this treaty was only a legitimization tool for the Byzantine supremacy in Anatolia, we should not disdain it for with this agreement, Alexius I created a metaphoric palace, that is, a political

³³ Anna Komnene, *Alex.* 15, vi.

construction that legitimized his successor's claims on the ancient Eastern Byzantine frontiers.

9- CONCLUSIONS

Alexius created, thus, a great range discourse, so his successors would continue his conquering project, as the *Song of Digenis Akritas* had probably done. Therefore, one should not search in the literary character of Digenis Akritas a true historical figure that really dominated the Eastern frontiers in Anatolia in ancient times, but another that intended and believed to have right to do so. Thus, the *Song of Digenis Akritas* has a unity, a proposition and a will, for this “historical figure” existed in the individual of the emperor who reigned in the period which the original version was composed: Alexius I Komnenos. Therefore, even without contemporary relations, it is possible to affirm with some security that this literary work has some relation levels with the individual and reign of Alexius, for his actions – if not to its ends, but to its means – were the same of the ones of Digenis: the providential man who fights alone the barbarians, expels them out of the frontiers and built there his palace, which could be the physical one of Blachernae, in the “frontier capital” of Constantinople, or the symbolical one of the treaty imposed to Malik-Shah in 1116. The *Song of Digenis Akritas* is also a construction, a symbolical, literary and political palace, which legitimize the Byzantine supremacy over its ancient frontiers: a building which is suitable and contemporary to Alexius Komnenos' reign, who is in many ways a “frontier emperor”. Because from the frontier came his origins (for the castle of Kastamouni, the old house of his lineage, however not located at the frontier, was not very far from it), in the frontier was located his capital and in the frontier was his reign. Alexius Komnenos could be perceived as an incarnation of Digenis Akritas, in the same way the hero could be understood as this emperor's representation. If this relation did not existed in any way, a poet as Ptochoprodromos would never have compared Manuel I Komnenos, Alexius' grandson, with the hero, precisely when Manuel dedicated himself, between the years of 1152 and 1153, to a recovering project of the territories at the Southeast of Anatolia.³⁴

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³⁴ E. JEFFREYS, *Akritis and Outsiders...*, pp. 201-202.