

READING BETWEEN THE LINES OF A BYZANTINE 'PARAPHRASE': (RE)DISCOVERING ISAAC KOMNENOS AND THE LETTER OF ARISTEAS

VALERIA FLAVIA LOVATO

Introduction: the illustrated Octateuchs and Isaac Komnenos

In a recent study on the illuminated Octateuchs, Lowden has defined this group of luxurious manuscripts as a typically 'Byzantine phenomenon'.¹ The present paper focuses on one such manuscript, namely the Seraglio Octateuch, generally attributed to the patronage of the *sebastokratōr* Isaac Komnenos Porphyrogenetos, son of emperor Alexios I and brother of John II.² More specifically, in what follows I will focus on the so-called paraphrase of the *Letter of Aristeas*,³ a unique feature of the Seraglio manuscript. This short text, meant as a sort of introduction to the whole codex, was most likely penned by Isaac Komnenos himself.⁴ The

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- 1 J. LOWDEN, *Illustrated Octateuch Manuscripts: A Byzantine Phenomenon*, in: P. MAGDALINO – R. S. NELSON (eds), *The Old Testament in Byzantium*. Washington D.C. 2010, 107-152.
- 2 On Isaac Komnenos as the most likely commissioner of the Seraglio Octateuch see, most recently, K. LINARDOU, *Imperial Impersonations: Disguised Portraits of a Komnenian Prince and his Father*, in: A. BUCOSSÌ – A. RODRIGUEZ SUAREZ (eds), *John II Komnenos, Emperor of Byzantium. In the Shadow of Father and Son*. Abingdon/New York 2016, 155-182 (especially 173-178) and LOWDEN, *Octateuch Manuscripts* (cited n. 1), 111-114.
- 3 For simplicity's sake, in the present study I follow common usage and define Isaac's re-writing of the *Letter* as a 'paraphrase', even though a Byzantine audience would probably have called it otherwise. On Byzantine rewritings of earlier texts and the related terminology, see e.g. J. SIGNES CODOÑER, *Towards a Vocabulary for Rewriting in Byzantium*, in: J. SIGNES CODOÑER – I. PÉREZ MARTÍN (eds), *Textual Transmission in Byzantium: between Textual Criticism and Quellenforschung*. Turnhout 2014.
- 4 The most comprehensive account of Isaac's life remains K. VARZOS, *Ἡ γενεαλογία τῶν Κομνηνῶν*, I. Thessaloniki 1984, 238-254, which is bound to be enriched by MAXIMILIAN C.G. LAU's forthcoming monograph on the reign of John II. Shorter overviews of

few modern scholars who have dealt with it have been rather ungenerous in their assessments of Isaac's literary enterprise, defining it as a graceless, convoluted and verbose alteration of its model.⁵ Through an analysis of the structure of the paraphrase and a systematic comparison with the *Letter of Aristeas*, I intend to demonstrate that these appraisals do not do justice to Isaac's work, in that they fail to see both the reasons for the *sebastokratōr's* interest in this text and the rationale inspiring his rewriting. As I argue, far from being the fruit of Isaac's abstruse 'phantasies',⁶ the paraphrase opening the Seraglio Octateuch was carefully structured to fit his self-fashioning agenda, which, in turn, was deeply influenced by the sociopolitical and cultural climate of 12th-century Byzantium. In short, the Seraglio Octateuch will prove to be not just a 'Byzantine phenomenon' but a typically Komnenian one.

However, before focusing on the text of Isaac's paraphrase, it is worth briefly introducing the Seraglio Octateuch, considered in its connection with the other illuminated Octateuchs.⁷ As shown by codicological and iconographic studies, these lavish manuscripts shared a series of common features. For one, they were all decorated by hundreds of illuminations, probably stemming from a common source. Moreover, the text of the first seven books of the Bible was accompanied by the so-called catena, a marginal commentary to the Old Testament that incorporated excerpts from different authors, both named and anonymous. Most importantly, it seems that all illustrated Octateuchs were opened by the *Letter of*

Isaac's life can be found in F. CHALANDON, Jean II Comnène (1118-1143) et Manuel I^{er} Comnène (1143-1180). Paris 1912 (see especially 1-6; 17-18; 83-85; 152-153; 195-196) and O. JUREWICZ, Andronikos I. Komnenos. Amsterdam 1970, 27-38, both quoted and discussed by VARZOS. See also S. SINOS, Die Klosterkirche der Kosmosoteira in Bera (Vira) (*Byzantisches Archiv*, 16). Munich 1985, 8-18, who, given the scope of his study, focuses mainly on Isaac's last years. The attribution of the paraphrase to Isaac will be discussed further below.

- 5 A. PELLETIER's dismissive comments are particularly representative of this attitude: see e.g. A. PELLETIER, *Lettre d'Aristée à Philocrate*. Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes (SC, 89). Paris 1962 (Paris 2007), 12: "La lecture intégrale de cette paraphrase, encombrée de bavardages et de redites, donne l'impression que l'auteur a trouvé dans le texte d'Aristée plus de ténèbres qu'il n'y en a et qu'il n'a pas serré le texte de bien près". See also K. WEITZMANN – M. BERNABÒ, *The Byzantine Octateuchs*, I (*Illustrations in the Manuscripts of the Septuagint*, II). Princeton 1999, 326-327, where Isaac's paraphrase is defined as 'obscure' and is classified as a 'mere imitation of the Letter'.
- 6 See again PELLETIER, *Lettre* (cited n. 5), 12: "On voit quelle part de fantaisie admet ce prétendu résumé".
- 7 On the illuminated Octateuchs and their interconnections see at least the seminal studies by WEITZMANN – BERNABÒ, *Byzantine Octateuchs* (cited n. 5) and J. LOWDEN, *The Octateuchs*. University Park 1992.

Aristeas, which preceded the Old Testament and related catena. This text, probably composed around the beginning of the second century B.C.,⁸ recounts how the author of the *Letter* itself, a Greek Jew named Aristeas, took active part in the events that would lead to the famous Septuagint translation, sponsored by the Hellenistic king Ptolemy II. According to modern scholars, the *Letter of Aristeas* must have been particularly meaningful to the aristocratic and imperial commissioners of the luxurious Octateuchs, who seem to have interpreted it as a sort of *speculum principis*.⁹ Such a reading likely originated from the longest section of the text, which relates the lengthy conversations between the Jewish elders and Ptolemy himself.¹⁰ According to Aristeas' account, during these exchanges the Egyptian king questioned his guests on the principles that should guide the ideal ruler, thus learning how to govern his subjects with justice and piety.

The aristocratic and imperial flavor of the illustrated Octateuchs is confirmed by the illuminations that were meant to accompany and ornate the text of the *Letter*. As it has been demonstrated, these short decorative cycles, originally comprising six illuminations in total, show that the Egyptian Ptolemy was both imagined and depicted as a projection of the Byzantine emperor. Indeed, differently from the other characters featuring in the illuminations, the king is consistently clad in a typically Byzantine attire: his purple vest enriched by a precious *loros*, his throne covered in red cushions and his crown surrounded by a golden nimbus are all reminiscent of the canons of Constantinopolitan imperial iconography.¹¹

The description just outlined perfectly applies also to the Seraglio Octateuch. This manuscript equally bears hundreds of illuminations, includes the so-called catena and contains the *Letter of Aristeas*. However, as mentioned above, this lavish codex features an additional component that is nowhere to be found in the other Octateuchs, namely a short paraphrase of the *Letter of Aristeas*,¹² likely

8 On the dating of the *Letter of Aristeas*, see PELLETIER, *Lettre* (cited n. 5), 57-58.

9 On such a reading of the *Letter* and its relevance for aristocratic and imperial circles, see A. IACOBINI, La 'Lettera di Aristeo', Un prologo illustrato al ciclo degli Ottateuchi medio-bizantini. *Arte medievale* ser. II, VII.1 (1993) 79-95 (especially 90-91) and M. BERNABÒ, Mecenatismo imperiale e traduzione dei Settanta: l'illustrazione della 'Lettera di Aristeo' a Bisanzio. *Miniatura* 3-4 (1990-91) 11-20 (especially 15-16 and 19).

10 *Letter of Aristeas*, 187-300, ed. PELLETIER, 190-231.

11 See IACOBINI, Prologo illustrato (cited n. 9), 80. According to LINARDOU, Imperial impersonations (cited n. 2), 178, in the Seraglio Octateuch the representation of Ptolemy is reminiscent of some known portraits of emperor Alexios. In her opinion, this detail was the result of a deliberate choice by Isaac, who aimed at emphasizing both his relationship with his father and his own prominent position in the imperial family. For the paraphrase's insistence on Isaac's imperial lineage, see further below.

12 Since the scribe left five blank spaces for miniatures throughout the text of the paraphrase,

authored by the commissioner himself. While Isaac's name does not seem to appear in the partly illegible title introducing the paraphrase, we are nevertheless informed that the author was a *porphyrogennetos* ('born in the purple'), son of emperor Alexios.¹³ Given that Isaac was the only son of Alexios with marked literary interests and considering the similarities linking the paraphrase to his other works,¹⁴ we can quite safely conclude that the text opening the Seraglio Octateuch belongs to Isaac's learned production.

When it comes to the date of composition, matters become slightly more complicated. Codicological evidence suggests that the paraphrase was copied at the same time as the rest of the Octateuch.¹⁵ Despite some lingering doubts, this manuscript is now mostly dated to the mid-12th century and, more specifically, to a period ranging from 1138 to 1152.¹⁶ In 1138, Isaac had just returned

it seems that these folia too were originally meant to be illustrated. The position and size of such empty spaces may indicate that, if completed, the illuminations of the paraphrase would have been analogous to the illustrative cycle of the *Letter of Aristeas*. For more details on this hypothesis, see IACOBINI, Prologo illustrato (cited n. 9), 94, n. 61.

- 13 According to TH. USPENSKIJ, who is also the first and only editor of the paraphrase, the title can be reconstructed so as to include Isaac's name (see TH. USPENSKIJ, L'Octateuque de la Bibliothèque du Sérail à Constantinople. *IRAIK* 12 (1907) 1). This hypothesis has been accepted by all modern scholars except for LOWDEN, *Octateuch Manuscripts* (cited n. 1), 111, who argues that the lacuna is too short to accommodate the words κύρ Ἰσαάκιος reconstructed by USPENSKIJ.
- 14 A detailed analysis of the analogies between the paraphrase of the *Letter of Aristeas* and Isaac's other writings will be the subject of a dedicated study. Here, I can only provide a couple of significant examples. First, one may note Isaac's predilection for certain kinds of wordplays, such as the juxtaposition of words sharing the same root, one of which is generally an adverb. Cp. e.g. the locution δεξιῶς τῇ δεξιᾷ in the paraphrase (see below, p. 47) with the expressions ξένον ξένως and μεγαλοπρεπῶς μεγαλοπρεπεῖς featuring at l. 7 of Isaac's poem to the Virgin (ed. E. KURTZ, Ein Gedicht des Sebastokrator Isaac Komnenos. *BNJ* 5 (1926-27) 44-46) and in chapter 2, 26 of his *Kosmosoteira typikon* (ed. G. K. ΠΑΡΑΖΟΓΛΟΥ, Τυπικόν Ἰσαακίου Ἀλεξίου Κομνηνοῦ τῆς μονῆς Θεοτόκου τῆς Κοσμοσωτείρας Φερρών (1151/52). Komotini 1994 [Thessaloniki 2014]), respectively. Moreover, we may note the recurrence of similar ideas in the prologues of Isaac's writings, such as the likening of a work's scope with a 'fence' (θριγγός or θρίγκευμα). Compare for instance τὰ λογικά τοῦ προομίου θριγγεῦματα featuring in the first lines of his paraphrase with the introduction to the *De rebus ab Homero praetermissis*, 61, 13-21, ed. H. HINCK, Polemonis declamationes quae exstant duae. Accedunt excerpta e Callinici, Adriani, Jamblichii, Diodori libris et Isaaci Porphyrogenneti quae vulgo dicuntur scripta. Leipzig 1873.
- 15 See J. ANDERSON, The Seraglio Octateuch and the Kokkinobaphos Master. *DOP* 36 (1982) 83-114 (especially 84-85) and LOWDEN, *Octateuch Manuscripts* (cited n. 1), 113 and n. 22, with an overview of earlier scholarly discussions.
- 16 See ANDERSON, Seraglio Octateuch (cited n. 15), 86 and LINARDOU, Imperial impersonations (cited n. 2), 173.

to Constantinople following his long exile in the East, where he had fled after trying to dethrone his brother John. Apart from a short exile in Heraclea Pontica, Isaac would reside in the capital until 1152, when he would retire to Thrace for good. During these years, he would have had enough time to conceive both the Seraglio Octateuch and the related paraphrase of the *Letter of Aristeas*. Of course, this does not exclude that Isaac may have composed the paraphrase in his youth, when he was still in the capital, but had not yet devised the Octateuch project. Having subsequently decided to commission the lavish manuscript, he may have chosen to add a personal touch by ‘recycling’ a text that he had penned years earlier for some other occasion. This said, there seems to be some evidence pointing to a close connection between the commission of the manuscript and the composition of the paraphrase. For one, in the concluding lines of his work,¹⁷ Isaac proudly declares that he has managed to condense Aristeas’ long account in only seven φύλλα, which corresponds exactly to the number of pages that the paraphrase takes up in the Seraglio Octateuch. More significantly still, some passages of Isaac’s text seem to echo poems and orations that Theodore Prodromos composed soon after the *sebastokratōr*’s return from his exile in the East (1138). This interplay would have been more easily appreciated if the texts involved had been written – and performed – around the same time and not at a decade of distance between each other. Finally, given the traditional association between the *Letter of Aristeas* and Byzantine Octateuchs,¹⁸ it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that Isaac’s decision to paraphrase this text – a seemingly unique enterprise in Byzantine literature¹⁹ – was inspired by his very decision to commission this luxurious manuscript. While a decisive conclusion will probably remain out of our grasp, through my analysis of the paraphrase I will try to provide further arguments in support of a late dating of the text.

Before finally delving into Isaac’s rewriting of the *Letter of Aristeas*, a few words must be said about its current state of preservation and its most recent – and only – edition. Indeed, all issues related to both the dating and the inter-

17 See below, p. 43.

18 As noted by LOWDEN, Octateuch Manuscripts (cited n. 1), 114-115, the *Letter of Aristeas* was a “characteristic preface of Octateuch catena manuscripts”, no matter whether they were illuminated or not.

19 It should be noted that Isaac was not the first to rewrite the *Letter of Aristeas*, which had already been paraphrased by Philo of Alexandria and Josephus. On these two earlier works, which do not seem to exert any influence on Isaac’s own paraphrase, see A. PELLETIER, Flavius Josèphe adaptateur de la lettre d’Aristée: une réaction atticisante contre la Koinè (*Études et Commentaires*, XLV). Paris 1962; IDEM, Lettre (cited n. 5), 78-80 and, most recently, A. WASSERSTEIN – D.J. WASSERSTEIN, *The Legend of the Septuagint: From Classical Antiquity to Today*. Cambridge 2006, 35-50.

pretation of the text are considerably complicated by its bad state of preservation, as it clearly transpires from Uspenskij's edition, published more than a century ago.²⁰ While I intend to peruse the manuscript directly, for the time being I cannot but rely on Uspenskij's transcription, which is often fragmentary and difficult to interpret. However, despite these evident problems, this old edition provides enough material for a first reassessment of Isaac's working method and agenda.

1. Replacing *Aristeas*

Let us now turn to the paraphrase proper and to the reasons behind Isaac's decision to rewrite the *Letter of Aristeas*. The title introducing Isaac's composition is already quite telling.

τὸ τῆς παλαιᾶς προοίμι(ον) ὄπ(ερ) ὁ Ἀ[ριστέ|ας] πρὸς τὸν Φιλοκράτ(ην) ἐκτέθεικ(εν) μακ[ρη|γορία] καὶ ἀσαφεία ὁ δὲ πορφυρογ[ένν|ητος] καὶ υἱὸς τοῦ μεγάλ(ου) βασιλέως κ(ύρ) Ἀλε[ξίου] | τοῦ Κομνην(οῦ) εἰς συντομί(αν) μετερῦμ|σε καὶ σαφήνει(αν).

Finding the preface to the Old Testament, which Aristeas expounded to Philocrates, prolix and confused, the Porphyrogennetos, son of the Great King Lord Alexios Komnenos, refashioned it with conciseness and clarity.²¹

According to these few lines, the son of emperor Alexios found the original text by Aristeas to be excessively long and obscure. For this reason, he decided to propose a new version of it, with the aim of providing his readers with a shorter and clearer account of the events leading to the Septuagint translation. In the first lines of the paraphrase, Isaac further expands upon these same arguments. While admiring the good intentions of Aristeas, who had the commendable idea to compose an introduction (προοίμιον) to an instructive text like the Octateuch, the *sebastokratōr* deplores the verbosity and lack of clarity of his model, which needs to be shortened and polished with the 'axe of *logos*' (τοῦ λόγου πελέκει). Therefore, having carefully read the whole *Letter* and having selected only the elements that were conducive to the discovery of truth – just like a bee picking out the best flowers (δίκην μελίσης ἀπανθίζούσης τῶν ἀνθέων) – Isaac set down to write his own version of the story. In exchange for his labor, he asks for

20 See USPENSKIJ, L'Octateuque (cited n. 13), 2-14. In what follows, all quotations from Isaac's paraphrase will refer both to the page numbering of USPENSKIJ's edition and to the location of the relevant passage in the Seraglio Octateuch. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

21 Topkapı Sarayı, cod. gr. 8, fol. 3^r (transcription and translation by LOWDEN, Octateuch Manuscripts [cited n. 1], 111).

the gratitude of his readers, who are invited to pray to the Lord on his behalf.²²

Apart from a few passing comments scattered throughout the text, it is only in the final lines of the paraphrase that Isaac goes back once again to the reasons that inspired him to compose this work. While reiterating his former criticism of Aristeas’ style and resorting once more to the now familiar image of the ‘axe of conciseness’, this final passage provides further information both on Isaac’s agenda and on the identity of the readers that he had only cursorily mentioned in the introduction. Indeed, before concluding his paraphrase and finally leaving the stage to the *Letter of Aristeas*, Isaac directly addresses his prospective audience as follows:

ὁ γοῦν συντομίας τοῦ γράμματος ἐφιέμενος καὶ τῆς καλλίστης σαφηνείας ἐρῶν, τῷ παρόντι μου ἐντριβέτω πονήματι, ἑπτὰ φύλλοις τόμον συσφίγγοντι πᾶσαν τῶν γεγονότων τὴν δύναμιν, ἐν πολλοῖς ἠπλωμένῃν ἄχθει τῆς ἀσαφείας καὶ τῶν παρελκόντων ἐκείνων λόγων, ὡς διεξήειμεν πολλαχοῦ. ὅς δὲ ὑποφεύγειν ἐθέλει τούτου τὴν ἀρτιγένειαν φύσιν ἀρκοῦντος τοῦ βροτοφύραματος πρὸς τὰ τῶν συγγραμμάτων ἀναγινώσκειν νεώτερα, ὑποποδίζετω κατὰ τὴν τούτου ἀρέσκειαν πρὸς μείζονα πόνον καὶ ἀσαφῆ τοῦ προοιμίου τοῦ Ἀριστέου, ὃ καὶ σύνδρομον πάντως ἐξεικονίσειε τῷ ἐντυγχάνοντι τῆς ἐντυχίας πόνον ἔν τισι μείζονα καὶ παρέλκοντα. [τὴν] γὰρ κρίσιν τοῦ πράγματος τοῖς πεπαιδευμένοις τῶν ἀκροατῶν ἀνατίθημι.

He who aspires to a concise writing style and loves the most beautiful clarity should read this here fruit of my labor: the whole essence of the events – which, as I said many times, was often burdened by the weight of obscurity and those lengthy digressions – has been condensed in seven pages only. However, he who is by disposition opposed to reading innovative writings, and therefore eschews the novelty of my preface, may indulge his tastes and jump directly to Aristeas’ preface, which, being obscure and requiring a greater effort, is bound to provide a more verbose and tiresome reading, thus certainly mirroring the preferences of such a reader. As far as I am concerned, I entrust the judgement on this matter to the learned audience (*pepaideumenoi*).²³

By contrasting the merits of his work to the redundant *Letter of Aristeas*, Isaac is not merely expanding upon the reasons that pushed him to compose the para-

22 Isaac Komnenos, *Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 2-3 (Topkapı Sarayı cod. gr. 8, fol. 3^v).

23 Isaac Komnenos, *Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 14 (Topkapı Sarayı cod. gr. 8, fol. 9^v).

phrase. Rather, he is presenting his version of the story as a potential replacement for his model. The readers who are not afraid of leaving the traditional path and are willing to embrace the novelty of Isaac's paraphrase will avoid being caught in the convoluted structure of Aristeas' lengthy narrative and will thus be spared a tedious reading. Instead, those who are by principle opposed to any form of innovation are invited to skip ahead to the original text of the *Letter*, where they are bound to find something suitable to their tastes. The convolute phrasing of this passage, which seems to suggest that this conservative group of readers has in the burdensome Aristeas a sort of literary counterpart, does not leave much doubt as to Isaac's opinion of their literary refinement. If read with these considerations in mind, Isaac's subsequent declaration that he will entrust his work to the judgment of his learned audience (*pepaideumenoι*) cannot be interpreted as a mere topos of modesty. While apparently submitting to the opinion of the *pepaideumenoι*, the *sebastokratōr* is implying that those who do not appreciate his work are automatically excluded from this restricted and sophisticated group. After all, the readers who prefer the tedious Aristeas must ignore the fundamental principles of the rhetorical art and, consequently, cannot legitimately belong in the circle of the truly educated. But there is more: by suggesting that his work deserves appreciation on the part of his learned audience, Isaac is not merely defining the literary and aesthetic criteria that should guide the *pepaideumenoι*, but he is implicitly fashioning himself as one of them.

This impression is strengthened by a series of passages where, instead of summarizing the content of the *Letter of Aristeas*, Isaac either expands upon it or even goes as far as to add personal excursus that are nowhere to be found in the original text. Interestingly, most of these additions are clearly meant to embellish and enrich the model, thus further displaying the paraphrast's literary talent and erudition. While I intend to carry out a detailed analysis of these passages in a study devoted to Isaac's 'paraphrastic' style, there is at least one instance that deserves to be briefly discussed here.

When describing the gifts that Ptolemy would later send to the Jewish high priest, Isaac devotes much space to the richly ornate golden table that was to be placed in the temple of Jerusalem. Just as Aristeas, Isaac remarks that this luxurious object was characterized by a triangular structure. However, while the *Letter* only hints at this detail, Isaac goes on to include a rather lengthy discussion of the symbolic meaning of the table's triangular shape, enriching it with a learned reference to Euclid's *Elements*.²⁴

24 Isaac Komnenos, *Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 5 (Topkapı Sarayı cod. gr. 8, fol. 4^v): αὕτη γὰρ ἀδιαίρετος ὡς ἀπλουτέρα καὶ τινος συνθέσεως μὴ μετέ-

Interestingly, Euclid features prominently also in the oration that Theodore Prodromos composed after Isaac’s return to Constantinople in 1138.²⁵ The Greek mathematician is mentioned amongst the learned men of the past who belong to Isaac’s imaginary court of ‘philosophers.’²⁶ Along with Aristoteles and Plato, Euclid is there to confirm Isaac’s status as a learned ruler, a worthy successor to Alexander the Great, Cato and Marcus Aurelius. More interestingly still, Prodromos does not limit himself to mentioning Euclid, but he also includes a specific reference to his demonstration on “how to construct an equilateral triangle on a given straight line”.²⁷ Of course, the connection between Euclid and the triangle in both Prodromos and Isaac may simply be a coincidence, due to the fact that this geometric shape was the subject of the first proposition of Euclid’s *Elements*. Nevertheless, the repeated mentions of Euclid in Prodromos’ oration²⁸ clearly show not only that the rhetorician was well aware of Isaac’s interest in the Greek mathematician, but also that such interest was deemed a particularly telling manifestation of the *sebastokratōr*’s erudition. Thus, if we cannot prove that these similarities are the result of a deliberate interplay between oration and paraphrase, we can at least safely conclude that, in both texts, the specific references to Euclid were meant to emphasize Isaac’s extraordinary learnedness.

If Isaac’s changes to the *Letter* are meant to display his erudition to the benefit of his learned audience, they also have the additional effect of amplifying his authorial presence. Indeed, when inserting personal considerations that are not to be found in his model, Isaac often speaks in the first person,²⁹ further underlining the source of these refined insertions. In so doing, the *sebastokratōr*

χουσα, ἥς τὸν τύπον ὡς εἶρηται φέρειν οἶδε σχῆμα τὸ τρίγωνον τῶν ἄλλων τυγχάνον ἀπάντων σχημάτων ἀπλούστερον καὶ εἰς ἕτερον σχῆμα μὴ διαιρούμενον τοῦ Εὐκλείδου πάσαι διδάσκοντος ἤκουσα.

25 Theodore Prodromos, *Letters and Orations*, ed. M.D.J. OP DE COUL, Théodore Prodrome: Lettres et Discours. Édition, traduction, commentaire (PhD thesis). Paris 2007, 209-216 (French translation at pp. 217-223). The first edition of this text features in E. KURTZ, Unedierte Texte aus der Zeit des Kaisers Johannes Komnenos. *BZ* 16 (1907) 69-119: 112-117.

26 The presence of Euclid in both Isaac’s paraphrase and Prodromos’ oration was noted also by Nancy Patterson Ševčenko in the context of a lecture that she gave at Dumbarton Oaks on September 19, 2011 (‘A Prince and His Monastery: Isaac Komnenus and the Church of the Virgin Kosmosoteira in Thrace’), the text of which she kindly shared with me.

27 Theodore Prodromos, *Letters and Orations*, ed. OP DE COUL, 213, 113-115 (ὁ μὲντοι Εὐκλείδης, κἂν μόνον ἐπὶ τῆς δοθείσης εὐθείας τρίγωνον ἰσόπλευρον ἐπιχειρήσῃ συστήσασθαι, μετὰ τοῦ ἀμηγάνου τῆς ἀποδείξεως καὶ ἀπόρητον εὐφροσύνης γάνος ἐπισταλάττει ταῖς ἀκοαῖς).

28 Theodore Prodromos, *Letters and Orations*, ed. OP DE COUL, 213, 105 and 113; 215, 161.

29 See e.g. the ἤκουσα that introduces the aforementioned digression on Euclid.

subtly replaces the narrating voice of Aristeas, who, in the paraphrase, is mentioned almost exclusively when it comes to his deplorable prolixity and obscurity. However, at a closer look, Isaac's attempts to eclipse Aristeas are not limited to replacing him as a narrator – and, indeed, as an author. If we read carefully Isaac's version of the events, we will remark that Aristeas disappears also as a character. For instance, the latter's prestigious position at Ptolemy's court and his crucial role in the embassy to Jerusalem are not even hinted at. Interestingly, the disappearance of Aristeas happens to the advantage of other characters, who, in the paraphrase, end up taking center stage: I am referring to Demetrius of Phalerum, the 'director' of the royal library of Alexandria, and to Ptolemy himself, who, as I will show in what follows, becomes the true protagonist of Isaac's story.

2. *The Byzantine alter ego of an Egyptian king*

As mentioned, the appeal of illuminated Octateuchs for imperial and aristocratic commissioners lied, inter alia, in the traditional association between the first eight books of the Old Testament and the *Letter of Aristeas*. More specifically, wealthy and noble patrons were likely to be especially interested in the section of the *Letter* recounting the long conversations between Ptolemy and his wise guests, who, for seven nights in a row, instructed the king on the moral principles that every just and pious ruler should follow. The interpretation of this long sequence of questions and answers as a sort of *speculum principis* reverberates also onto the images that accompanied the text of the *Letter*: in all the relevant illuminations, Ptolemy is represented with the conventional attributes and attire of a Byzantine emperor.

Isaac was no doubt familiar with this reading of the *Letter of Aristeas*, which may well have been one of the reasons why he himself became interested in this text. After all, being an ambitious and influential member of the imperial family, the *sebastokratōr* had every reason to be fascinated with such a detailed and authoritative guide for the perfect ruler. However, an in-depth reading of his paraphrase shows that Isaac's perception of Ptolemy goes well beyond the traditional identification of the Egyptian king with an ideal – but abstract – paradigm of kingship. As I will try to show in what follows, Isaac's Ptolemy displays a striking affinity with a very specific member of the Komnenian family, that is Isaac himself.

To prove my point, I will begin with the first appearance of Ptolemy in the paraphrase. Differently from what happens in the *Letter of Aristeas*, the Egyptian king is the very first character to be mentioned in Isaac's retelling of the story. Ptolemy makes a rather impressive appearance immediately after the end of the paraphrase's programmatic introduction. More significantly still, the king is intro-

duced through a flattering presentation that has no parallel in Aristeas’ account:

Ἦν μὲν ὁ Πτολεμαῖος τῆς τῶν Αἰγυπτίων ἀρχῆς τὸν πατέρα διαδεξάμενος ἀποιχόμενον, φύσει καὶ προαιρέσει τῶν καλῶν ἐραστής καὶ τῇ μεγαλοπρεπείᾳ τῶν ἔργων ὑπὲρ τὸ διάδημα σεμνυνόμενος μάλιστα τὸ βασίλειον· ἐπεὶ δ’ οὕτως εἶχε τὰ κατ’ αὐτόν, δεξιῶς τῇ δεξιᾷ φασὶ τοῦ ὑψίστου περιφρουρούμενος καὶ τὴν βασίλειον ἀρχὴν κρατυνόμενος, εἰς ἔρωτα συλλογῆς παμπληθῶν βιβλίων ἐξ ἑλληνισμοῦ· καὶ μᾶλλον τοῦ μωσαϊκοῦ νόμου ... [lacuna in the manuscript].

Ptolemy, who had inherited the kingdom of Egypt after his father’s death, was by nature and by choice a lover of beauty. He took special pride in his magnificent enterprises, more than he did in the royal crown. They say that – being such a man and enjoying the dexterous protection of the right hand of the Lord – when he became king [he was taken by] a strong desire to gather all the existing books, both the works penned by Greek authors and especially the Mosaic Law ...³⁰

This lengthy addition to the original would be proof enough of Isaac’s interest in the figure of the Egyptian king. However, if we analyze the traits that make up his portrait of Ptolemy, we will be able to better appreciate the reasons for such a deep fascination. Isaac starts by presenting the Egyptian ruler through his lineage, carefully noting that Ptolemy had inherited his father’s crown after the latter’s death. Immediately afterwards, we are introduced to another central trait of Ptolemy’s personality, namely his ‘love for beauty’, which is presented as both a natural disposition and the result of a deliberate choice. The text goes on to introduce a comparison between these two central elements of the king’s portrait: while his glory stemmed from both his royal ancestry and his magnificent patronage activities, Ptolemy seemed to take more pride in the second than he did in the first. And indeed, as soon as he succeeded his father, he decided to embark on a majestic enterprise, the collection of all the books that were ever written, both in Greek and in other languages. Interestingly, this depiction of Ptolemy highlights the same elements that featured in the very title of Isaac’s paraphrase: imperial ancestry and passion for art and literature. Just as the Egyptian king, Isaac is an imperial scion with a special love for *paideia*, a trait that he is careful to display throughout his paraphrase. Just as Ptolemy entrusts his desire to create a library to the learned Demetrius, Isaac addresses his literary achievement – and the magnificent manuscript hosting it – to the *pepaideumenoι*, who are his

30 Isaac Komnenos, *Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 3 (Topkapı Sarayı cod. gr. 8, fol. 3^v).

main interlocutors. These observations might also help to explain why, in Isaac's paraphrase, Demetrius plays a more important role than he did in the *Letter of Aristeas*. Indeed, according to Isaac's version, it is Demetrius who handles all dealings with the high priest Eleazar and the Jewish elders, a task which, in the original text, was entrusted to Aristeas and his friend Andreas.

The passage just discussed is only one amongst many examples of Isaac's tendency to expand upon his model when it comes to emphasizing both Ptolemy's munificence and his love for art and *paideia*. To be sure, the *sebastokratōr* is just as keen on parading his own erudition as he is on celebrating the learnedness and generosity of his Egyptian counterpart. For instance, when it comes to describing the rich gifts that Ptolemy sent to Eleazar, Isaac goes far beyond a mere rephrasing of the original text. Having reiterated the *Letter's* emphasis on the king's direct involvement in the preparation of the precious objects,³¹ Isaac inserts a rather interesting comment, which is nowhere to be found in the *Letter of Aristeas*:

οὐκ οἶδε γὰρ ἡσυχάζειν ἀνδρὸς προαίρεσις εἰκῆ μεγαλοπρεπεῖα δουλεύουσα· ὅθεν σὺν τῇ τραπέζῃ καὶ τῷ κρατῆρι τάλαντα χρυσοῦ πολλὰ τοῖς κατεσκευασμένοι ταῦτα τεχνίταις ἀπέδωκεν (...)

The will of that man could not be satisfied with serving idle magnificence. For this reason, in addition to commissioning the golden table and bowl, he bestowed many golden talents upon the artists who had made them (...)³²

While praising once again Ptolemy's *megaloprepeia*, a trait that featured also in the initial portrait of the king, Isaac is careful to emphasize that such generosity is not a superficial display of wealth and power. Ptolemy does not forget that the exquisite objects that he will send to Eleazar are the result of the hard work of the many artists whom he had summoned to his court: their skill deserves not only to be acknowledged, but also to be generously recompensed. If we keep in mind that, apart from commissioning the very Octateuch preserving his paraphrase of the *Letter of Aristeas*, Isaac had sponsored many other architectural and artistic enterprises, we are tempted to conclude that, in this case too, he is recasting the figure of Ptolemy so as to both project and advertise his own munificence.³³

31 *Letter of Aristeas* 80-81, ed. PELLETIER, 140-143.

32 Isaac Komnenos, *Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 6 (Topkapı Sarayı cod. gr. 8, fol. 5^r).

33 This interpretation seems to be confirmed by another passage of the paraphrase where Isaac expands upon the original text to further underline Ptolemy's generosity – and piety. Having described the gifts prepared for Eleazar, Isaac declares that he has forgotten to mention the number of gems that the king deployed for this endeavor. Significantly, Isaac does not limit himself to reporting the supposedly forgotten information, but he is

Should this interpretation be correct, Isaac may not only be reminding his learned audience of his past patronage, but he may also be prospecting future rewards for his potential protégés, whatever their talent.

Another significant passage recounts Ptolemy’s first encounter with the Jewish elders who brought the books of the Law to Alexandria. In the *Letter of Aristeas*, the king welcomes his guests with great enthusiasm, showing deep reverence for the sacred rolls they carry. According to Aristeas, Ptolemy is so curious about their content that he immediately starts questioning the Jewish translators. Admittedly, this time Isaac’s paraphrase is quite close to the original account: we encounter the same generosity and curiosity on the part of the king, who is keen on learning about the Jewish Law. However, even when he seems to be just rephrasing his model, Isaac manages to add a couple of details that considerably affect the description of Ptolemy’s attitude, especially as concerns his interest in the precious books. For one, whereas in the *Letter of Aristeas* the king limits himself to observing the rolls of the Law, in Isaac’s version he goes as far as to open them, thus showing more agency as compared to his counterpart in Aristeas’ account.³⁴ Moreover, if in the *Letter* we are merely told that Ptolemy questions his guests on the content of the rolls, Isaac is far more specific: in his retelling of the story, the king spends a long time with the Jewish envoys, from whom he learns the very words of the Law (τοῦ νόμου τὰ ῥήματα).

careful to add another comment of his own, stating that Ptolemy considered the books of the Law to be more precious than all the gems he could ever send to the Jewish high priest (*Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 6-7 [Topkapi Sarayi cod. gr. 8, fol. 5^v]: εἰ γὰρ καὶ τῶν ἀπεσταλμένων παρ’ αὐτοῦ ἱερῶν ἦσαν οἱ λίθοι τὸν ἀριθμὸν πεντακισχίλιοι, ἀλλ’ οὐδὲν ἐλάχιστοι τούτῳ τῷ ἀποστείλαντι ἔδοξαν πρὸς τὸ χάρισμα τοῦ νόμου, ὃν αὐτὸς ὑπεδέξατο).

34 See especially *Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 9 (Topkapi Sarayi cod. gr. 8, fol. 6^v: ἀνέπτυξεν ἐντεῦθεν τὰς βίβλους, τοῦ νόμου τὰ ῥήματα ἐπὶ μήκει χρόνῳ παρὰ τῶν ἑβραίων μεμάθηκε) and compare it with *Letter of Aristeas*, 176-177 ed. PELLETIER, 184-185. Similar considerations apply to Isaac’s treatment of other major episodes. To be sure, in the paraphrase Ptolemy is responsible for almost all the initiatives that in the *Letter* were attributed to other characters. Consider for example the passage concerning the decision to translate the Jewish Law: in Isaac’s version it is Ptolemy who encourages Demetrius to do so and not the other way around. The same applies to the liberation of the Jewish slaves living in Egypt: in the paraphrase, Aristeas’ role in the matter is completely neglected and Isaac only stresses Ptolemy’s magnanimity (see especially his emphasis on the king’s humanity in *Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 6 [Topkapi Sarayi cod. gr. 8, fol. 5^v]: καὶ πάντας, φημί, τοὺς ἑβραίους δέκα μυριάδας ὄντας τὸν ἀριθμὸν, οὓς ὁ πατὴρ πρὸ τοῦ Πτολεμαίου τῆς βασιλείας δορυαλώτους εἰργάσατο καὶ κατεῖχε δεσμίους, ἀπηλευθέρωσεν).

Before concluding this overview, I would like to consider one of the last passages of Isaac's paraphrase, which comes immediately before his final address to his prospective readers. The *sebastokratōr* is now recounting the parting between the king and the Jewish elders, who are invited to come back to Alexandria as often as possible. Once again, Isaac does not significantly alter the content of the original account. Nevertheless, while he appears to be merely rephrasing his model, he ends up transforming a rather marginal section of the *Letter* into a lengthy passage, which takes up a considerable section of his paraphrase. This time, Isaac's decision to expand upon the original text may have stemmed from the themes featuring in this passage of the *Letter*, which are perfectly in tune with his broader authorial agenda. Indeed, in this section of Aristeas' account, Ptolemy does not simply express his desire to be surrounded by learned men, but he also declares that he would rather devote his considerable wealth to rewarding such men than waste it in superficial pursuits. These exact same themes feature also in Isaac's version, which, however, is considerably more elaborate than its model:

[ἐπεὶ δὲ] πολλοῦ πεποίητο ὁ τὴν δεξιὰν ὑφαπλώσας οὕτω τοῖς χρήμασι τὸ συνεῖναι τοῖς πεπαιδευμένοις ἀνδράσιν αἰεὶ, δι' ἐπιστολῆς ἡξίου τὸν Ἐλεάζαρον, ὡς εἴ τινες ἂν τῶν πεπαιδευμένων τῆς ἰουδαϊκῆς ὁμηγύρευος βούλοιντο πρὸς αὐτὸν παραγενέσθαι πάλιν τὸν ἐπιστεῖλαντα, μὴ κωλύεσθαι τοῦ σκοποῦ, ἵνα τὰ παρὰ τούτου τῆς χρηματικῆς οὐσίας ἀναλισκόμενα [εἶεν] πρὸς αὐτοὺς καὶ μὴ εἰς μάταιον τρόπον καταναλίσκοιντο.

The king, whose right hand was so generous in spreading his riches, considered that being constantly surrounded by learned men was of the utmost importance. For this reason, he wrote a letter to Eleazar, asking that the educated members of the Jewish delegation who may wish to visit him again not be diverted from their aim, so that the king could lavish his fortune onto them, instead of wasting it in futile expenses.³⁵

Reading these lines, one cannot but think back to the passage where Isaac complemented Aristeas' narrative by further emphasizing Ptolemy's generous treatment of the Alexandrian artists. If, by celebrating the king's munificence, Isaac was likely aiming at advertising his own, the passage we have just examined may very well be driven by a similar agenda. The fact that Isaac characterizes the Jewish translators as *pepaideumenoι* twice in a few lines seems to point in this direction. As noted, a few lines later, the *sebastokratōr* would address his target audience with the very same term: by implicitly associating his cultured addressees with the

35 Isaac Komnenos, *Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 14 (Topkapı Sarayı cod. gr. 8, fol. 9^v).

beneficiaries of Ptolemy’s generosity, Isaac may be implying that his munificence towards his learned interlocutors – and potential protégés – will not be inferior to that of the Egyptian king.

The fact that Isaac’s interest in Ptolemy was motivated first and foremost by the latter’s munificence and cultural pursuits seems to be confirmed by the way in which the paraphrase treats the long exchange between the king and the Jewish elders. Interestingly, Isaac does not hesitate to declare that he finds this section of the *Letter* to be long and tedious. Thus, he sets out to recount only the passages that he deems to be especially admirable (τὰ δὲ τῶν προτεθέντων θαυμασιώ[τερα]). Had his interest in the *Letter of Aristeeas* resided first and foremost in this sort of *speculum principis*, it would be quite hard to explain his decision to cut it down to size. This impression is strengthened by a closer observation of his rewriting of the episode.

To begin with, it is worth noting that Isaac completely ignores all questions and answers related to warfare and comparable subjects, which, however, represent a recurrent theme in the conversations between Ptolemy and his guests.³⁶ Secondly, he generally tries to group similar topics together, so as to summarize the (often redundant) questions and answers of the original text and replace them with fewer thematic unities.³⁷ While he tends to insist on traditional imperial virtues such as *philanthropia*, *eusebeia* and *dikaiosyne*, there are a few elements that stand out from this set of conventional motifs. For one, Isaac opens and closes this section of the paraphrase by focusing on the importance of truth³⁸ and on the definition of *philosophia*.³⁹ Interestingly, truth is one of his main con-

36 See e.g. *Letter of Aristeeas* 193-194 and 199, ed. PELLETIER, 192-193 and 194-195, respectively.

37 As mentioned, I am preparing a study of Isaac’s ‘paraphrastic’ style, which will include a systematic comparison – passage by passage – of the paraphrase with the *Letter of Aristeeas*. In what follows, I will limit myself to pointing out some of the most evident trends.

38 Isaac Komnenos, *Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 9 (Topkapı Sarayı cod. gr. 8, fol. 7^v): [lacuna in the manuscript] ἐνοπτρίζοιτο· τὸ γὰρ κράτος τῆς ἐξουσίας οὐ προσανά[γει] ψεύδεσθαι· οὕτως εἶχε τῶν ἑβραίων τὸ γένος συνέσεως, ὡς ἐκιδάσκειν πρῶτως τὰ λήφονα. Despite the lacuna in the manuscript, we can quite safely assume that Isaac’s paraphrase of the conversation between Ptolemy and the Jewish elders began with a rephrasing of *Letter of Aristeeas* 206, ed. PELLETIER, 196-197. The final remark on the wisdom of the Jewish elders, who deal with the more important topics first, is another of Isaac’s personal additions.

39 Isaac Komnenos, *Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 10 (Topkapı Sarayı cod. gr. 8, fol. 7^v): καὶ ὄρον ἔτι φιλοσοφίας διεφήμιζον τὸ μὴ συνιστορεῖν ἑαυτῷ κακὸν πεπραχότι, which clearly paraphrases *Letter of Aristeeas* 260, ed. PELLETIER, 216-217. Interestingly, in his rewriting, Isaac replaces the term σοφία featuring in his model with φιλοσοφία.

cerns also in the introduction to the paraphrase,⁴⁰ while Philosophy is presented as Isaac's intellectual 'mother' in the oration that Prodomos composed for the *sebastokratōr* after his return to Constantinople in 1138.⁴¹ Another relevant case in point is Isaac's interest in the principles that should guide the appropriate relationship between parents and children: this time, a rather marginal theme of the *Letter of Aristeas* acquires considerable prominence in Isaac's otherwise concise rewriting.⁴² Once again, the learned son of emperor Alexios seems to be especially concerned with the two elements that featured prominently also in the very title of his paraphrase: lineage and *paideia*. What is more, the latter aspect is not simply emphasized through the selection of particularly relevant passages from the *Letter of Aristeas*. As he did when discussing the triangular shape of the golden table, Isaac does not hesitate to display his literary refinement by inserting personal interventions into the rather dry sequence of questions and answers making up the structure of his model. In light of what we have observed so far, we will not be surprised to remark that all these additions focus on Ptolemy, whose reaction to the wise answers of his guests is described through a series of elaborate similes, aimed both at exalting the king's wisdom and at displaying the literary abilities of the paraphrast.⁴³

To sum up what we have observed so far, Isaac's interest in the *Letter of Aristeas* can only be partly justified by the traditional reading of this text as a *speculum principis* for the ideal Byzantine ruler. Certainly, the focus of the paraphrase is on Ptolemy. However, instead of conceiving him as an abstract paradigm of king-

40 See *Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 3 (Topkapı Sarayı cod. gr. 8, fol. 3^v), where Isaac declares that it was his natural disposition for the truth (οὐ γὰρ πεφύκαμεν <πρὸς> φίλον τὸ ἀληθὲς οἷς ποτε προσετύχομεν γράμμασιν ἀμελέστερον διατίθεσθαι) that inspired him to compose a new version of Aristeas' account (τὰ χρήσιμα ἐκλεξάμενοι τὰ πρὸς γνῶσιν τῆς ἀληθείας συντείνοντα, κατὰ τὸ παρὸν ἐκτιθέαμεν δόνακι).

41 See e.g. Theodore Prodomos, *Letters and Orations*, ed. OP DE COUL, 213, 126-127: Χαῖρέ μοι, ὦ τέκνον ὀψίτοκον μὲν, τῶν δὲ ἐμῶν ὠδίνων ὡς ἐπίπαν καλλώπισμα· χαῖρε μοι, ὦ τέκνον, καὶ ὄναιο τῆς εἰς τὴν μητέρα φιλοτιμίας (these words are spoken by Philosophy herself, represented as addressing Isaac).

42 See Isaac Komnenos, *Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 10 (Topkapı Sarayı cod. gr. 8, fol. 7^v): ὄρον δ' αὖ θεραπείας καὶ χάριτος ἀξίας . . . τῶν γεννητόρων φιλοσόφως τοῦτο διεμαρτύροντο, τὸ μὴ λυπεῖν τούτους τὰ ἔκγονα. In this section of the paraphrase, Isaac seems to conflate two different passages of his model (i.e. *Letter of Aristeas* 228 and 238, respectively).

43 See e.g. the long section of the paraphrase where Isaac compares the words of the Jewish elders to open doors leading to the knowledge of the divine Law – doors that the king, being endowed with extraordinary virtue (καλοκαγαθία κεκοσμημένος), is both eager and prepared to step through (*Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 11 = Topkapı Sarayı cod. gr. 8, fol. 8^r).

ship, Isaac seems to present him as a sort of alter ego, onto which he projects his own conception of rulership, based on the celebration of *paideia* and patronage. Such a message is further strengthened by Isaac’s subtle replacement of Aristetas’ authorial voice with his own, which allows him to adopt a double stance towards his target audience of *pepaideumenoι*: being both the counterpart of Ptolemy and a refined writer, Isaac has a privileged connection with his learned addressees, since, in addition to being a potential patron, he is a refined intellectual himself.

But why did Isaac go to such great lengths to compose a paraphrase that allowed him to fashion himself both as a competent *pepaideumenos* and as a prominent member of the imperial family? As demonstrated by countless studies on the Komnenian dynasty, posing as an intellectual ruler was far from a harmless game in 12th-century Byzantium. The failed coup of Isaac’s sister Anna and her husband Nikephoros Bryennios – both amply celebrated for their extraordinary *paideia* – had already shown the appeal that a learned emperor could have on some strata of the Constantinopolitan society, such as the members of the imperial administration and the capital’s intellectual circles. Indeed, it seems that, together with prominent imperial officials, the Constantinopolitan literati played an important part in backing Isaac’s botched attempts to dethrone his brother John. To quote an illustrious example, Theodore Prodromos himself may well have been one of the *sebastokratōr*’s supporters.⁴⁴ After all, in his aforementioned oration for Isaac, Prodromos does seem to represent his dedicatee as a more ‘accomplished’ ruler than his brother John. While the latter was mainly celebrated because of his military victories, Isaac is said to be the only one capable of combining military competence with an admirable education.⁴⁵ Thus, by posing as a sort of alter ego of king Ptolemy, Isaac would simply be building on his reputation as a learned and munificent ruler, while also hinting at his privileged relationship with the *pepaideumenoι* to whom he addresses his writing. If composed roughly at the same time as Prodromos’ oration, Isaac’s paraphrase would not only perfectly fit into the portrait painted by Prodromos himself, but would also represent an implicit answer to the poet’s requests for support.

The potential connections between Prodromos’ compositions and Isaac’s paraphrase are not limited to the representation of the *sebastokratōr* as a learned

44 On the role of the Constantinopolitan cultured elites – and of Prodromos in particular – in supporting Isaac’s imperial ambitions, see P. MAGDALINO, *The Triumph of 1133*, in: BUCOSSI – RODRIGUEZ SUAREZ (eds), *John II Komnenos* (cited n. 2), 53-70 (especially 62-66).

45 See e.g. Theodore Prodromos, *Letters and Orations*, ed. OP DE COUL, 215, 178-181 (τὸ δὲ τὸν αὐτὸν καὶ στρατηγεῖν ἅμα καὶ ἐπιστατεῖν ποιήμασι καὶ φιλοσοφεῖν καὶ θεολογεῖν καὶ ῥήτορσι διαιτᾶν καὶ ἐκάστῳ τούς περὶ ἕκαστον εὐδοκίμους – νικᾶν οὐδενὸς ἂν εἴη τῶν ἀπάντων, ἢ μόνης τῆς Ἰσαακίου ψυχῆς).

and generous ruler. The *Letter of Aristeas* featured another element that could prove particularly appealing to Isaac, especially if we date his paraphrase after 1138. This same element, in turn, is the focus of a poem that Prodromos composed for Isaac soon after the latter's return from his long exile in the East. Such a constant *fil rouge* is represented by the Holy Land, which, in addition to playing a crucial role in the *Letter of Aristeas*, was also a particularly relevant issue for the Komnenian dynasty in general and for Isaac and his brother in particular.

3. *The Holy Land in Isaac's paraphrase and in Komnenian political agenda*

Since the reign of Alexios, the desire to reconquer the Crusader States was an important aspect of imperial foreign policy and propaganda. To support his claims on the Holy Land, the founder of the Komnenian dynasty went as far as to spread a prophecy according to which he would not die before having laid down his crown in Jerusalem.⁴⁶ However, despite this propagandistic move, Alexios never managed to realize his ambitions, which were inherited by his son. As attested by our sources, John was equally invested in this project, which he pursued through diplomacy and shows of military force. After all, the reconquest of the Holy Land – and of Jerusalem in particular – was particularly meaningful to an emperor whose public image relied on military success and theatrical displays of piety. Moreover, as the legitimate ruler of all Christians of the East, John considered it both his right and his duty to restore Byzantine power on the so-called Crusader States.⁴⁷ However, after a first ephemeral success and a triumphal entrance in Antioch, the emperor soon lost control of both the city and its fickle Latin rulers. Things went even worse when it came to Jerusalem: having been astutely rejected by King Fulk, John never even managed to enter the city. The failure not only

46 P. MAGDALINO, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143-1180*. Cambridge 1993, 34.

47 According to our sources, John had already mentioned his desire to reconquer Jerusalem in his coronation speech: the relevant passages are quoted by A. PAPAGEORGIOU, *The political ideology of John II Komnenos*, in: BUCOSI – RODRIGUEZ SUAREZ (eds), *John II Komnenos* (cited n. 2), 37-52 (see especially p. 44 with n. 29). The political and ideological reasons behind the emperor's interest in the Holy Land are still subject of debate. According to PAPAGEORGIOU, John II's emphasis on the reconquest of Jerusalem stemmed from his desire to pose as a crusader, a propagandistic move that was aimed first and foremost at the Latins of the Crusader States. For a different interpretation, see M.C.G. LAU, *The Reign of Emperor John II Komnenos, 1087-1143: The Transformation of the Old Order* (PhD thesis). Oxford 2015, 364 and I. STOURAITIS, *Narratives of John Komnenos' wars: Comparing Byzantine and modern approaches*, in: BUCOSI – RODRIGUEZ SUAREZ (eds), *John II Komnenos* (cited n. 2), 22-36. The latter, in particular, stresses that John's policy towards the Crusader States was mostly inspired by his need to re-establish his "exclusive political authority over Eastern Christian populations".

to reconquer but also to visit the Holy Land was both a military and a symbolic setback for the pious John, who had always wished to see Jerusalem. Despite all his efforts, his desire to consecrate a magnificent golden lamp to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre died with him.⁴⁸

While he never succeeded in seizing the imperial throne, Isaac was at least able to surpass his brother in this symbolically charged endeavor. As we learn from a celebratory poem penned by Theodore Prodromos, during his exile in the East, Isaac managed to both visit Jerusalem and perform remarkable pious deeds while in the Holy Land. According to Prodromos’ account, the *sebastokratōr* personally restored the aqueduct of the monastery of Saint John the Baptist on the River Jordan.⁴⁹ The laudatory tones of this composition leave no doubt as to the propagandistic value of such a gesture. Not only was Isaac the first Komnenian ever to set foot on the Holy Land, but he also managed to leave his mark by lavishing his generosity onto its inhabitants.⁵⁰

If Isaac made sure to have this accomplishment celebrated by one of the most appreciated court poets of the time, it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that his interest in the *Letter of Aristeas* was equally driven by his desire to remind the audience of his pilgrimage and pious deeds. As a matter of fact, this further

48 On this golden lamp, which would be dedicated by Manuel I only after his father’s death, see F. SPINGOU, *Words and Artworks in the Twelfth Century and Beyond: The Thirteenth-Century Manuscript Marcianus gr. 524 and the Twelfth-Century Dedicatory Epigrams on Works of Art* (PhD thesis). Oxford 2012, 168-169.

49 Theodore Prodromos, *Carmina Historica* XL, ed. W. HÖRANDNER, Theodoros Prodromos. *Historische Gedichte (WBS, 11)*. Vienna 1974, 391-393. In this poem, the narrating voice is that of Isaac himself, who, addressing John the Baptist, recounts both his pilgrimage and patronage activities in the Holy Land. See especially ll. 1-15: Πολλοῖς παλαίσας κινδύνοις φόβοις φόνοις | ζάλαις ἀνάγκαις συμφοραῖς ληστηρίοις, | πάντων δὲ ῥυσθεῖς τῇ θεοῦ συμμαχίᾳ | καὶ προσκυνήσας τὸν σεβάσμιον τάφον | καὶ πάντας ἀπλῶς τοὺς ἐκεῖ θεῖου τόπους, | Ἰορδάνου δὲ ταῖς ῥοαῖς λελουμένος | καὶ τῆς ἐν αὐτῷ σῆς μονῆς τὸ χωρίον, (...) | διψηλὸν εὐρῶν ὡς τὸ Λιβύης πέδον (...) | πέπονθα κάγῳ δίψαν εὐλογωτάτην, | ἴαμα δίψης προσπορίσαι τῷ τόπῳ (Having wrestled with many dangers, with fears and slaughters, with storms, duress, misfortunes and robberies – from these I was always rescued by the Lord, my ally – having adored the venerable Sepulchre and the other holy places of that land, I washed in the currents of the River Jordan. There, I found that the land surrounding your monastery (...) was as thirsty as the Libyan lands (...). Then, I too felt a most praiseworthy kind of thirst, the thirst for a remedy to the land’s thirst).

50 On the political power of patronage and on the way the Komnenoi used it to project a carefully crafted public persona, see e.g. V. STANKOVIĆ, *Comnenian Monastic Foundations in Constantinople: Questions of Method and Historical Context*. *Belgrade Historical Review* 2 (2011) 47-73, and V. STANKOVIĆ – A. BERGER, *The Komnenoi and Constantinople before the Building of the Pantokrator Complex*, in: S. KOTZABASSI (ed.), *The Pantokrator Monastery in Constantinople (Byzantinisches Archiv, 27)*. Berlin 2013, 3-32.

thematic affinity connecting contemporary court rhetoric with Isaac's paraphrase may even be read as an additional argument in favor of a later dating of the latter text. Unfortunately, the folia preserving the section of the paraphrase dealing with the Holy Land are highly damaged and it is sometimes difficult to appreciate Isaac's personal additions to – or modifications of – the original text. However, Uspenskij's edition is enough to propose some preliminary observations, which I hope to corroborate through a direct perusal of the manuscript.

I would like to start with one of the best-preserved passages, which is concerned with the very beginning of the Alexandrian embassy in Jerusalem. Isaac is describing the momentous encounter between the Jewish high priest Eleazar and Ptolemy's emissaries. In addition to completely erasing Aristeas from the picture and to focusing exclusively on Demetrius' persuasive skills, Isaac includes another interesting detail, which has no parallel in the original text:

[lacuna in the manuscript] τὰ δωρήματα, τοῦτον εὐθέως τῇ διαχύσει πέπεικεν [ὥστε ἐγερ]θῆναι τοῦ σκίμποδος καὶ τὰς χεῖρας ἀνατείνειν πρὸς ὕψος οὐράνιον καὶ εὐχὰς ἀπονεῖμαι τῷ τοὺς αἰχμαλώτους καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ δωρήματα στείλαντι.

[having shown?] these gifts [to Eleazar], he [Demetrius] persuaded him immediately. Such was Eleazar's joy, that he roused from his couch and lifted his arms to the west of the sky and started praying on behalf of the man that had sent him the prisoners as well as the other gifts.⁵¹

If, according to Aristeas, Eleazar was slightly reluctant to abide by Ptolemy's requests, in Isaac's account the high priest is so stricken by the richness and beauty of the presents that he literally springs to his feet and immediately agrees to collaborate with the generous king. This alteration of the model has not escaped the attention of modern commentators, who dismiss it as one of the many 'phantasies' characterizing Isaac's peculiar rendition of the *Letter*.⁵² However, as I hope to have shown in the previous pages, Isaac's modifications of the original are all but abstruse extravagances – on the contrary, they are deliberate interventions meant to convey the author's ideas and self-fashioning agenda. In the present instance, for example, the paraphrase's focus on the role played by Ptolemy's gifts in persuading Eleazar may be read as a reminder of the generosity that Isaac himself displayed while in Palestine. Indeed, just as Ptolemy, Isaac was not only a lover of beauty, but he was also a generous patron of the arts, eager to lavish his

51 Isaac Komnenos, *Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 6 (Topkapı Sarayı cod. gr. 8, fol. 5^v).

52 PELLETIER, *Lettre* (cited n. 5), 12.

munificence both on his native city and on foreign lands – including the holiest land of all. What is more, by emphasizing the fruitful collaboration between the high priest and the Egyptian king, Isaac may also be hinting at the connections with the local rulers that he had managed to establish during his exile in the East. Admittedly, due to our lack of information on Isaac’s ‘diplomatic’ activities in Jerusalem, much of this remains in the realm of speculation. However, it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that, in his constant search for allies, Isaac might have tried to meet with King Fulk himself.⁵³ At any rate, we can at least surmise that the presence of the renegade brother of the Byzantine emperor must not have gone completely unnoticed by the local authorities.

Whatever the case, other details seem to support the idea that Isaac saw the *Letter of Aristeas* as a suitable opportunity to advertise his pious accomplishments in the Holy Land. For instance, it is worth considering which passages of Aristeas’ description of Palestine he decided to include in the relevant section of his paraphrase. Despite the bad state of preservation of the manuscript, if we take into account the length of the lacunae signaled by Uspenskij and we compare what is left of the paraphrase with the *Letter*, we can at least advance some preliminary observations. Before focusing on Isaac’s choices and their meaning, it may be useful to bear in mind that the section of the *Letter* devoted to Aristeas’ visit to the Holy Land can be roughly divided into four parts:

- the first one is devoted to a detailed description of the Temple of Jerusalem and its efficient piping system (*Letter of Aristeas* 84-87);
- the second focuses on the sacrifices and solemn ceremonies taking place at the Temple, all celebrated by Eleazar himself (*Letter of Aristeas* 88-99);
- the third recounts Aristeas’ visit to the citadel and briefly presents its defense system (*Letter of Aristeas* 100-111);
- the fourth consists in a lengthy description of the lands surrounding Jerusalem, with a special focus on their economic produce (*Letter of Aristeas* 112-120).

Of these four sections, the last one does not feature at all in the paraphrase. As for the first, Uspenskij’s transcription suggests that Isaac must have at least hinted at the Temple. However, considering the limited length of the lacuna affecting this section of the paraphrase, we can safely conclude that he did not linger much on the description of this sacred building. Instead, he seems to have been particularly interested in the passage of the *Letter* dealing with the impressive hydraulic system of the Temple itself. Despite the numerous lacunae, Uspenskij’s edition

⁵³ VARZOS, Γενεαλογία (cited n. 4), 243.

is enough to suggest that, in this case, Isaac must have followed his model quite closely, probably going as far as to expand upon it:

ἀλλὰ πολλά κατὰ δ[ύσιν ὕδατος ὑποδοχεῖα] καὶ τούτων πλείονα στόμια τῶν Ἱεροσωλύμων παραπέπη[κται ναῶ ἄγ]χιστα τοῦ περιβόλου καὶ μέχρι τεσσάρων σταδίων πόρ[ρω] ἐν οἷς εἰσρέουσιν ὕδατα πλήσματα καὶ ῥοῖ[ζος]

fol. 4^r (now 6^r) . . [πλήθος] ἐξάισιον τῶν συρίγγων τῶν δι . . . [ὥστε ἀποφύρε]σθαι τὴν τῶν σφαττομένων ζώων [ἀκαθαρσίαν,] αἵματα καὶ [μ]ιάσματα ἀδήλοισ τῇ ὄψει <εἰς> κοιλώματα καὶ τὴν ἐκτὸς τῆς χθονὸς ἐπιφάνειαν οὕτως καθαίρεσθαι τὸ [ἔδα]φος

There (are) many reservoirs for collecting water, whose many openings are fixed to the [walls of] the Temple of Jerusalem. They are located close to the Temple's enclosing walls, but some of them are situated in the surrounding area, as far as four stadia away from the Temple itself. Abundant water flows in [these reservoirs] and its rumble...

The astonishingly numerous pipes ... so as to wash away the filth resulting from the sacrificed animals, that is their blood and other impurities, and take them first into hidden (?) reservoirs located underground. Thus was the ground [of the Temple] purified.⁵⁴

Isaac's focus on the specificities of the Temple's hydraulic system cannot but remind us of the aforementioned poem by Theodore Prodromos, which devotes considerable space to the technical aspects of Isaac's restoration of the aqueduct for the monastery of John the Baptist.⁵⁵ In turn, both the poem and the paraphrase seem to echo some passages of the later *Kosmosoteira typikon*, where Isaac recounts his personal involvement in securing water supplies for his newly founded Thracian monastery.⁵⁶ Apparently, the *sebastokratōr* was particularly invested in this kind of philanthropic activity, in which he took a direct interest. In light of these considerations, we can remark once again that Isaac's alterations of the *Letter of Aristeas* cannot be simply considered as the result of his chaotic paraphrastic style. In this case too, Isaac seems to be deliberately expanding upon a passage that he considered to be particularly relevant for his personal interests and agenda. Specifically, this lengthy description of the Temple's pipes and

54 Isaac Komnenos, *Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 7 (Topkapı Sarayı cod. gr. 8, foll. 5^v-6^r).

55 See especially Theodore Prodromos, *Carmina Historica* XL, 24-34, ed. W. HÖRANDNER, 392.

56 Isaac Komnenos, *Kosmosoteira typikon* 73, 1146-1147; 1450-1451; 1456-1460 and 113, 2071-2073, ed. PAPAZOGLU, 102-103 and 119, respectively.

cisterns allowed him to pursue a double aim: not only was he able to showcase his evident competence in the matter, but he also had another chance to remind his readers of both his pilgrimage to the Holy Land and the generous building activities he sponsored while staying there.⁵⁷

There is one last passage of the paraphrase that might further contribute to a better appreciation of Isaac’s agenda. This time, the *sebastokratōr* is dealing with the description of Jerusalem’s citadel. Once again, all traces of Aristeas’ authorial voice and personal remarks are completely erased: gone are his admiration for the guards’ loyalty as well as all the details concerning the strict discipline required by their job.⁵⁸ The only element that Isaac deems worth preserving is the description of the citadel’s majestic walls and impressive defense system. However, while reformulating the same ideas featuring in his model, Isaac seems to adopt a different perspective to that of Aristeas. If the latter describes the citadel from the perspective of the Jewish guards, Isaac appears to adopt the point of view of an outsider. Moreover, while the *Letter* focuses on the threats that could come both from internal disorders (νεωτερισμοί) and from external enemy forces,⁵⁹ the paraphrase seems to contemplate only the second option, depicting the view and the obstacles that a potential attacker might face when trying to seize the city:

. . . πύργοις κατησφαλισμένοις (maybe κατησφαλισμένη ?) ἀπέκειτο δυναμέ[νοις] . . . πανσθενῆ καὶ τὴν τῶν ἐναντίων ἀοράτως † ἀπορρα[πί]ζουσιν † ἔφοδον· εἴποτ’ αὐτοὶ τῷ περιβόλῳ τοῦ ἄστεως προσβάλλειν ἐπεχείρησαν, φροῦδα λοιπὸν συναναφαίνοντο καὶ τὰ πολεμικὰ ὄργανα τῷ περιβόλῳ ποτὲ μάτ[την] προσαρρασσόμενα καὶ λίθους ἀφιέντα † τοῖς κρουμένα· † οὕτως εἶχεν ἰσχύος τὸ θέαμα ἀναντήτου τοῖς βάλλουσι.

The citadel lied at a distance and [was protected] by fortified towers . . . which could [repel] the unseen approach of the enemy. If the latter ever tried to attack the walls of the citadel, they would soon experience the futility of war machines, to no purpose crashed against the walls and throwing rocks . . . Such was the spectacle of impervious strength to which the attackers were confronted.⁶⁰

57 Interestingly, the paraphrase is interspersed with what we may define as ‘watery imagery’: see for example the passage where the words of the Jewish elders are compared to spring water trickling into Ptolemy’s ears (*Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 10 = Topkapı Sarayı cod. gr. 8 fol. 7^v). Could the recurrence of these images be a rhetorical stratagem aimed at reminding the reader of Isaac’s building activities in the Holy Land?

58 *Letter of Aristeas* 102-104, ed. PELLETIER, 154-155.

59 *Letter of Aristeas* 101, ed. PELLETIER, 154-155.

60 Isaac Komnenos, *Paraphrase of the Letter of Aristeas*, ed. USPENSKIJ, 8 (Topkapı Sarayı cod. gr. 8 fol. 6^v).

To be sure, this passage is too fragmentary to reach a definitive conclusion. However, should my interpretation of the text be corroborated by a direct perusal of the manuscript, it would be interesting to further delve into the reasons for Isaac's seeming change of perspective. For the moment, I cannot but suggest a few tentative hypotheses. While modern scholarship has recently provided a more nuanced and detailed account of John's military tactics,⁶¹ our sources place much emphasis on his skillful employment of siege machines, which allowed him to take many cities that were considered impregnable. Seen in this context, Isaac's remarks on the unconquerability of Jerusalem's walls, along with his pointed insistence on the uselessness of a siege, may have been intended as a veiled warning against the dangers that a military expedition would entail. Alternatively, just as his former considerations on the Temple's piping system, Isaac's additions may simply be read as a way of showcasing both his extensive knowledge and his direct experience of the area, something that no other member of the Komnenian family could boast of.⁶²

On the way to (re)discovering Isaac

This article has shown that, despite the lacunary nature of the only edition of Isaac's paraphrase of the *Letter of Aristeas*, it is nevertheless possible to single out some relevant trends that may guide future research on Isaac's working method, personality and political agenda.

In the first sections of the paper, I have argued that, along with the elimination of both the character and the authorial presence of Aristeas, one of the most evident innovations of Isaac's paraphrase is his treatment of the figure of Ptolemy. Such a deep interest in the Egyptian ruler does not seem to stem from the traditional interpretation of the *Letter* as a *speculum principis*. Indeed, Isaac's focus is not on the lengthy conversation between Ptolemy and his Jewish guests, a section of the original text that he considerably cuts down to size. Rather, the *sebastokratōr* seems to be interested in those features of Ptolemy's persona that best mirror the main components of his own strategy of self-propaganda. By posing as an intellectual ruler and hinting at his privileged relationship with the cultured social strata of the empire, Isaac proposes an alternative model of kingship to that of his warlike brother John (and young nephew Manuel). Significantly, this paradigm of enlightened rulership is the very same ideal that we

61 See, most recently, LAU, Emperor John II (cited n. 47), 67-71.

62 As shown by MAGDALINO, Empire of Manuel (cited n. 46), 41-76, the reconquest of the Holy Land was also one of Manuel I's main goals. However, his plans would initially be frustrated by far-reaching events such as the Second Crusade.

encounter in the poems and oration that Theodore Prodromos composed for Isaac around 1138. What is more, if Ptolemy is the literary alter ego of Isaac, it follows that the Alexandria featuring in the paraphrase is nothing but an ideal projection of Isaac’s Constantinople, which the *sebastokratōr* imagined as a rich and cosmopolitan city, a cultural and political capital attracting and rewarding artistic and literary talent.

Apart from Ptolemy’s (and Isaac’s) Alexandria, there is another city that plays a central role both in the *Letter of Aristeas* and in the paraphrase. Jerusalem, with its Temple’s hydraulic system and its impenetrable walls, seems to offer yet another occasion for Isaac to showcase his superior knowledge and, more importantly, to advertise his personal achievements. Once again, the themes featuring in the paraphrase are echoed by Prodromos’ laudatory poems, which celebrate Isaac’s building enterprises in the Holy Land as a pious feat of almost epic proportions. In light of these considerations, I have suggested that, when it comes to Jerusalem, Isaac seems determined to exploit a contemporary issue – the reconquest of the Holy Land – to celebrate his own accomplishments and to implicitly contrast them to those of his brother John.

As mentioned, most of the above are educated guesses and a more in-depth analysis of Isaac’s complex text is needed to better understand its implications for Byzantine political and cultural history. Nevertheless, I hope that the approach I have adopted in this paper will help to dispel former scholarly assumptions on the ‘poor quality’ of Isaac’s work, thus leading to a more informed reading of his literary production. This, in turn, will allow us to better appreciate not only the overall significance of the Seraglio Octateuch, but also the hitherto neglected figure of Isaac, who – to rephrase the title of a recent volume devoted to John II – has been living for too long in the shadow of father, brother, sister and son.⁶³

*University of Southern Denmark
Centre for Medieval Literature*

⁶³ BUCOSSI – RODRIGUEZ SUAREZ (eds), John II Komnenos (cited n. 2).

ABSTRACT

In a recent study on the illuminated Octateuchs, Lowden has defined this group of luxurious manuscripts as a typically 'Byzantine phenomenon'. The present paper focuses on Isaac Komnenos' paraphrase of the *Letter of Aristeas*, a unique feature of the Seraglio Octateuch.

The few modern scholars who have dealt with it have been rather ungenerous in their assessments of Isaac's literary enterprise. Through an analysis of the structure of the paraphrase and a systematic comparison with the *Letter of Aristeas*, I demonstrate that these appraisals do not do justice to Isaac's work, in that they fail to see both the reasons for his interest in this text and the rationale inspiring his rewriting. As I argue, far from being the fruit of Isaac's abstruse 'phantasies', the paraphrase opening the Seraglio Octateuch was carefully structured to fit his self-fashioning agenda, which, in turn, was deeply influenced by the sociopolitical and cultural climate of 12th-century Byzantium. In short, the Seraglio Octateuch will prove to be not just a 'Byzantine phenomenon' but a typically Komnenian one.