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Images of Trebizond and the Pontos in Contemporary Literature in English with a Gothic Conclusion

ABSTRACT

A Byzantinist specializing in the history of the Empire of Trebizond (1204–1461), the author presents four books of different genres written in English and devoted to the medieval state on the south coast of the Black Sea. The most spectacular of them is a novel by Rose Macaulay, *Towers of Trebizond*. Dąbrowska wonders whether it is adequate to the Trebizondian past or whether it is a projection of the writer. She compares Macaulay's novel with William Butler Yeats's poems on Byzantium which excited the imagination of readers but were not meant to draw their attention to the Byzantine past. This is, obviously, the privilege of literature. As a historian, Dąbrowska juxtaposes Macaulay's narration with the historical novel by Nicolas J. Holmes, the travelogue written by Michael Pereira and the reports of the last British Consul in Trabzon, Vorley Harris. The author of the article draws the reader's attention to the history of a rather unknown and exotic region. The Empire of Trebizond ceased to exist in 1461, conquered by Mehmed II. At the same time the Sultan's army attacked Wallachia and got a bitter lesson from its ruler Vlad Dracula. But this Romanian hero is remembered not because of his prowess on the battlefield but due to his cruelty which dominated literary fiction and separated historical facts from narrative reality. The contemporary reader is impressed by the image of a dreadful vampire, Dracula. The same goes for Byzantium perceived through the magic stanzas by Yeats, who never visited Istanbul. Rose Macaulay went to Trabzon but her vision of Trebizond is very close to Yeats's images of Byzantium. In her story imagination is stronger than historical reality and it is imagination that seduces the reader.

As a historian of the Empire of Trebizond, generally unknown and therefore a rather exotic state of the Byzantine imperial family of the Great Komnenoi, which operated in 1204–1461 on the southern shore of the Black Sea, I would like to use my perspective while referring to a famous novel by Rose Macaulay, *Towers of Trebizond*. The question whether the title image invoked a myth or whether Trebizond really existed with its mysterious towers might be of interest to academics dealing with contemporary English literature. The case is similar to that of Byzantium, whose fame in the milieu of literary scholars is due to the poems by William Butler Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium” (217–18) and “Byzantium” (280–81). While the poems have often been the subject of analysis, it is worth stressing that for the author, the name “Byzantium” did not mean the Eastern Roman Empire *per se* but its capital, Constantinople (whose ancient name was Byzantium), a famous city on the Bosphorus, captured by the Turks in 1453. Yeats was clearly fascinated by the glamour of the emperor in his golden reception hall—Chrysotriklinos, which guides the reader to the *Book of Ceremonies* written in the 10th century by Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (Constantinos Porphyrogennitos). This Byzantine source became popular due to the poet’s contemporary, John Bagnell Bury, an eminent Irish historian who gave lectures in Dublin and then in Cambridge in 1893–1927. Yeats was his student in Latin at High School in Dublin (Arkins 22). We can only speculate whether Bury’s analysis of the *Book of Ceremonies* published in 1907 inspired Yeats, who in the very same year appeared in Italy because of health reasons. The poet never reached Constantinople, that is Istanbul, but he visited Ravenna and the Byzantine monuments of the 6th century (Arkins 20). He was surely impressed by the golden, colourful mosaics in the basilica of San Vitale, representing the imperial couple: Justinian and Theodora and their court. He did not need to go any further. Whatever was left of the glory of the Byzantine court could be seen in these mosaics, as pointed out by Otto von Simson in *Sacred Fortress. Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna*.

But Byzantine studies have developed since Bury’s and Yeats’s time and one can find out much more about Byzantium, including the opportunity of an excursion to Turkey in search of the traces of the so-called Second Rome. However abundant are the scholarly studies on Byzantium, many visitors arrive at the Bosphorus with Yeats on their mind, as his poem from 1928 became an imaginative record of such a voyage. It is interesting to compare this phenomenon with the influence of contemporary Trabzon in north-eastern Turkey, previously called Trebizond. Are Rose Macaulay’s *Towers* from 1956 the same guiding star? To give an answer, it is necessary to introduce the Empire of the Great Komnenoi.

The state emerged in 1204, at the time of the Fourth Crusade, and was a rival to the “Byzantine government in exile” (cf. Angold)—the Nicaean Empire and then to the Byzantines after the reconstruction of the Eastern Roman Empire by Michael VIII Palaiologos in 1261. But the rivalry did not last for too long. Michael VIII subjected the Komnenoi to his authority in 1282 but they maintained their sovereignty as an independent state (Geanakoplos 119–37, 327). The Empire of Trebizond flourished due to its geographical position on the southern coast of the Black Sea. Surrounded by the so-called Pontic Alps, it was well protected and soon became the crucial point of commercial exchange between the Black Sea and the Levantine territories. The Italian Republics had much to do with this success. Both Venice and Genoa strengthened their position due to their involvement in this business.

The Empire of the Great Komnenoi collapsed after the spectacular invasion of Mehmed II, who had already conquered Constantinople in 1453. Thus the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries were the most significant time in the history of Trebizond. Then the state became a part of the Ottoman Empire, and afterwards—a significant part of modern Turkey created by Kemal Pasha, the Atatürk. He started his war for independence in 1919 in Samsun, the Black Sea port. In his policy of promoting the Turkish identity in Asia Minor, he eliminated in a cruel way the long lasting minorities of Armenians and Greeks. The capital of the former Empire of Trebizond, at that time Trabzon, became a purely Turkish town, in which the historical past of the Great Komnenoi was not emphasized. The Komnenian palace was already ruined; the main Byzantine churches were changed into mosques in the 15th century; the city walls were the visible remnants of the previous glory, but the town, as well as the whole region from Sinope to Hopa (Batumi was already in the Soviet Georgia) became completely Turkish.

It did not however discourage scholars from being interested in this easternmost province of Turkey where the glory of the Great Komnenoi was still visible. The research on it began to flourish in the 1970s; it was connected with the well-known names of Anthony Bryer, Sergei Karpov and Rustam Shukurov (Bryer, *The Empire of Trebizond and the Pontos, Peoples and Settlement in Anatolia and the Caucasus*; Karpov, *L'impero di Trebizonda, Istoriya Trapezundskoy Imperii*; Shukurov, *Velikiye Komnini i Vostok*). While examining particular aspects of the Komnenian Empire they concentrated on the economic connections with the Italian republics as well as with Turkish emirates, which, before the aggression of Ottomanis, enjoyed good relations with Trebizondian emperors whose beautiful daughters they married, thus becoming the allies of their fathers-in-law (Bryer, “Greeks and Turkmens”).

But the history of that region had also known earlier heroes, that is the family of Gabras, the dukes of Chaldia in the military structure of the Byzantine state. Their name became famous in the 11th century, when after the defeat of the Byzantine army in the battle with the Seljuks at Manzikert in 1071 (cf. Friendly), Theodore Gabras managed to win Trebizond over from the Turks. His ambitions, however, led him to a rebellion, and it was his son who succeeded him. The family of Gabras became significant in this part of the Empire (Bryer, “A Byzantine Family”).

The history of Trebizond has therefore two heroes: the Gabras and the Great Komnenoi, which enlarges the scope of scholarly interests from the 11th century till the end of the Middle Ages. Previous to that, from the 4th till the 11th century, the chroniclers did not take note of any spectacular events in this region. The very eastern part of Asia Minor was a typical border territory, a place of confrontation with Armenia which was of continual interest for Constantinople, especially in its time of imperial glory at the beginning of the 11th century (cf. Catherine Holmes).

In this context it is not surprising that the authors of contemporary studies on the Empire of Trebizond introduce the reader into the history of Gabras and then leave him/her with an outline description of this territory under the Turkish rule. The obligatory element which appears at the beginning of these studies is the expedition of mythological Argonauts to the Colchis¹ and Xenophon of Athens’ description of the expedition of the Persian prince Cyrus the Younger in Asia Minor, whose Greek contingents rebelled against their master and escaped up to Trebizond (cf. Waterfield).²

Which of these events attracted the attention of contemporary storytellers? Paradoxically, a history of the Empire of Trebizond is not reflected in the belles-lettres. It is a pity, as there are many questions which could be developed in works of fiction. The latest book entitled *Trebizond* was published in 2013 by Nicolas J. Holmes, who “applied to study the Byzantine M.A. course in Birmingham nearly thirty years ago but ended up getting a job in banking.”³ His book, having Trebizond in the title, concerns

¹ In the company of scholars dealing with the history of literature, I would stress Robert Graves’s still attractive book on this myth. Cf. Graves, *The Golden Fleece* (first edition in 1944).

² Cyrus the Younger’s army, the so-called Ten Thousand, consisted mainly of Greek mercenaries who after their master’s death during the battle of Cunaxa in 401 B.C. refused to serve the Persians and withdrew through northern Mesopotamia and Armenia to the Black Sea. Reaching the coast, they started to shout: *Thalatta!* which means “the sea.” The Belgian author of the survey of Trebizond refers to this story, also in the title. Cf. Janssens.

³ Nicolas J. Holmes was Professor Bryer’s student. The quotation comes from his letter to A. Bryer dated 24 Nov. 2013. The addressee kindly shared a copy with me.

the 11th century and cannot be any rival to Rose Macaulay's *Towers of Trebizond* which has dominated the readers' imagination since 1956. But anyone who wishes to find there traces of the Great Komnenoi will be disappointed, as the Empire of Trebizond is only an ornament in the story written by an eccentric author. However, there is a common element in the two books. It is the description of the landscape. Significantly, the terrain of the story concerns not only the Black Sea coast but Asia Minor in general, especially its eastern part. This is true for Holmes's story—due to Gabras's vicissitudes commented on in the sources; the same goes for Macaulay's book—due to the road chosen by the main characters who are on a journey.

I followed this geographical trace and I became interested in *The Reports of the Last British Consul in Trabzon, 1949–1956* written by Vorley Harris, and edited by his son Christopher in 2005. Christopher Harris doubted whether his father's book would be useful for me:

My father was reporting what he saw in contemporary Trabzon area. He himself never studied classical history, so (unlike many British diplomats) the ancient Greek history did not exercise an influence on him. The typical Trabzonlu of the 1950s and also today knows little about the Byzantine and Comnene past. My father describes what he saw. It is a pity that today's Trabzonlu deny their ancient glorious past.⁴

Being uncertain of the value of his father's reports for my purpose, Christopher Harris suggested the book by Michael Pereira, *East of Trebizond*, which I already had on my desk. Harris finished his e-mail with a crucial remark:

The Trabzon region is a fertile ground for English travel writers, being wild and unpredictable. However it is the wildness rather than the Byzantine history that inspires these writers.

My opinion was similar but even in Consul Harris's reports I saw the Byzantine traces which were not so visible for his son. Therefore I decided to concentrate on these four authors: Rose Macaulay, Michael Pereira,

⁴ Christopher Harris's e-mail to the author dated 16 Feb. 2014. Harris suggested introducing the novel *Greenmantle* by a Scottish writer, John Buchan (1916), however, it did not involve Trabzon but Constantinople, Sivas and Erzurum in the time of the First World War. The plot concerning the secret agents in this interesting political area resembles the atmosphere of Macaulay's book. Maybe it is even better than her story, but it does not have Trebizond in the content, not even in the title.

Vorley Harris and Nicolas J. Holmes. Comparing the four texts of completely different kinds I wondered whether it would be possible to notice what I would call the “Yeats’s effect,” which is visible in the case of Byzantium and its status in literary studies.

The main characters of Rose Macaulay’s book: Laurie (alter ego of the author), her aunt Dorothea Foullkes-Corbett, called Dot, and Father Chantry-Pigg launch an expedition to Turkey. The aunt’s idea is to liberate the Turkish women while the clergyman dreams about winning them over for the High Anglican Church. The aunt’s feminist approach and the priest’s conversion mission are at first glance unrealistic, therefore the reader expects something hidden behind the official image. It takes some time to learn that the aunt and the priest are lost on the Turkish-Soviet frontier. The possible scenarios of their vicissitudes in the country behind the Iron Curtain are vague and veiled. We can only speculate, as Turkey at that time was a playground for British and Russian spies (Macaulay 48).

The voyage of these eccentric travellers begins in Istanbul, where they board the ship called *Trabzon* sailing along the Black Sea coast to Hopa near the Russian frontier. The whole group disembarks in Trabzon (Macaulay 54). The reader receives very short information that

Trebizond was a free Roman city, and the gate to Armenia. Later it was a Greek empire after a Latin conquest of Constantinople, and the Queen of Euxine and the apple of the eye of all Asia. . . . It quickly turns out that it did not look like the capital of the last Byzantine empire but a picturesque Turkish port and town. . . . Expecting the majestic brooding ghost of a fallen empire we saw in a magnificent stagey setting, an untidy Turkish port. (56–57)

Unlike Yeats’s poems, Macaulay’s book is a recollection of her real voyage to Asia Minor, therefore it is not surprising that the British consul in Trabzon appears in her story. He warns her not to wear a swimming suit which was against the Muslim tradition. Vorley Harris’s name is not mentioned, which is obvious as the story was meant to be fiction. The consul, however, mentions the British lady in his reports. It would have been impossible to ignore her arrival and behaviour (Macaulay 108; Harris 15). Laurie prepared for the journey by reading George Finlay’s *History of Greece*, Lord Kinross’s book *Within the Taurus. A Journey in Asiatic Turkey* and David Talbot-Rice’s *Byzantine Painting at Trebizond*. Due to the last book Laurie tried to imagine what the Great Komnenos’ capital looked like in the time of glory. She was evidently moved by the city walls and the ruins of the palace:

I was in a banqueting hall where I spent most time, painting and looking out through the windows at the mountains behind and down the steep ravine to the sea in front, and imagining the painted walls and the marble floors and the gold starred roof, and the Comnenus emperors sitting on their golden thrones, and the Byzantine courtiers and clergymen talking to one another, intriguing, arranging murders, discussing 'Trinity, in which they took such immense interest, talking about the barbarians threatening the empire. . . . All the centuries of lively Byzantine chatter, they have left whispering echoes in the place where the hot sun beat down on the fig trees. (118)

The author visited the famous churches of Our Lady Chrysokephalos and of St. Eugenios but she was mostly impressed by Hagia Sophia,⁵ drawing her sketches there (Macaulay 124). She enjoyed the taste of life, eating famous Trebizondian cherries and honey (138). Her story concerns a vast space from the Aegean Sea up to Palestine. She was greatly impressed by Jerusalem, but even there,

between sleeping and waking there rose for me a vision of Trebizond; not Trebizond as I had seen it, but the Trebizond of the world's dreams, of my own dreams, shining towers and domes shimmering on a far horizon . . . and at its heart, at the secret heart of the city and the legend and the glory in which I was caught and held, there was some pattern that I could not unravel, some hard core that I could not make my own, and seeing the pattern and the hard core enshrined within the walls, I turned back from the city and stood outside it, expelled in mortal grief. (162)

At the end of the story the aunt reappears as well as the priest, and the motif of a religious mission, which might have been a cover for spying, becomes intriguing again. There is also a question of the author's religious attitude and her existential wonderings. There is no room to analyze the issue; let me only quote from the interesting conversation she had with her aunt: "I think my dear [the aunt said], the Church used once to be an opiate to you, like that Trebizond enchanter's potion; a kind of euphoric drug" (220). A metaphor of the towers of Trebizond seems to mean something

⁵ The cathedral of the Golden-Headed Virgin, built inside the city walls, near the imperial palace and citadel, was an asylum for the inhabitants in many cases. St. Eugenios, a martyr from the 4th century, was a patron of the Great Komnenoi. The church devoted to him is outside the walls but very close to the palace. The basilica of the Holy Wisdom was built at the seashore, much further from the imperial buildings connected with the two mentioned churches.

safe but unapproachable, shining in comparison with unpredictable dark void of death (Macaulay 222; Ciracli).⁶

Michael Pereira's book is also a testimony of the journey; however, it is not a novel but a travelogue containing the itinerary of his voyage with his friend Tim Smart. Pereira is also a writer of fiction but he was surely charmed by Turkey. He wrote two books: *Istanbul: Aspects of a City* (1968) and *Mountains and a Shore: A Journey Through Southern Turkey* (1966). *East of Trebizond* (1971) is his third text on this subject. The coastal area

is very fruitful. Its climate is moist and mild, and the lower slopes of the foothills which ring it produce tea and hazel nuts and timber. Only thirty miles inland, however, all this changes: in winter the climate is bitterly cold and the summers are fierce and dry. (*East of Trebizond* 20)

This geographical observation is an occasion to mention leaders interested in ruling there, not only Jason or Xenophon, but also others "who came with different motives: Pompey to add Armenia and Iberia to the Empire; the Sassanids, to claim the same regions for Iran, Byzantine Emperors and Seljuk chieftains, Ottoman Sultans and Russian Tsars" (21). This sentence proves that Pereira's book is a general survey concerning a very wide period of time.⁷ The Trebizondian Empire is only a part of it. How important is it in the story? Writing about the Kingdom of Georgia, the author mentions that Byzantines, Georgians and Armenians did not recognize the menace from the east in the 11th century. The victory of Alp Arslan over Emperor Romanos Diogenes at Manzikert in 1071 opened the Anatolian territory to the Seljuks (Pereira 71). Without mentioning details, Pereira depicts a historical background of the visited territories but this panorama lacks depth. He does more justice to the history of the Great Komnenoi, the rulers of the Trebizondian Empire. Basing this chapter on William Miller's book published in 1925,⁸ the author concentrates

⁶ The metaphorical meaning of the novel was analyzed lately by Mustafa Zeki Ciracli. I am grateful to Mr Christopher Harris for sending me a copy of this article.

⁷ Pereira's bibliography on the subject of Georgia and Russian conquest of Caucasus includes: W. E. D. Allen, *A History of Georgian People*, London: Kegan Paul, 1932; W. E. D. Allen and P. Muratoff, *Caucasian Battlefields. History of the Wars on the Turco-Caucasian Border 1828–1921*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1953; J. F. Baddeley, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*, London: Longmans, 1908; D. M. Lang, *A Modern History of Georgia*, London: Weidenfeld, 1962; H. Setton-Watson, *The Russian Empire 1801–1917*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1967.

⁸ It is interesting to note that William Miller, the author of the first synthesis of Trebizond, a medievalist contemporary to Bury and Yeats, rejected an academic career as

on the founders of the state and then draws attention to the relations with the Byzantine Empire on the Bosphorus, reconstructed by Michael VIII Palaiologos (Pereira, *East* 229–30):

Both sides seem to have taken a commonsense view of the situation: there was, after all, little that Constantinople could do about her eastern off-shoot whether she wanted to or not. The days when the imperial city could dispatch mighty fleets and armies to bring recalcitrant vassals to heel were long past. She had troubles enough nearer home. Similarly, Trebizond minded her own business. She did not (and could not) attempt to encroach upon Byzantine prerogatives or possessions. Thus an amicable *modus vivendi* was established, and the relationship between the two dynasties [i.e. Palaiologoi and Komnenoi] was strengthened by inter-marriage. (230)⁹

Pereira mentions the legendary beauty of the Trebizondian princesses, married to Georgian and local Muslim rulers, especially the White and Black Sheep Turkmen clans. Due to this matrimonial policy, the Empire managed to survive for a long time. In his short story of Trebizond, Pereira focuses on the last ruler, David and his niece, Theodora, the wife of Uzun Hasan, the ruler of the White Sheep. The author is moved by the description of the fall of Trebizond by Kritovulos of Imbros (Pereira, *East* 234; Kritovoulos 169–71) and he recalls the idea of the alliance of Uzun Hasan with the Western forces against the Osmanlis (Pereira, *East* 235–36; Dąbrowska, “Uzun Hasan’s Project”). It is a pity that the author does not revert to the only Trebizondian chronicler, Michael Panaretos, who described the reign of Emperor Alexios III Komnenos (1349–90). Due to this account the historians learnt a great deal about the local aristocratic elite who were not always friendly to the ruler (Bryer, “The Faithless”; Dąbrowska, “The Trebizondian Lady”). But, when Pereira was writing his book, Panaretos’ chronicle was published only in Greek, and it still remains accessible only in this language:

Trebizond has been called one of the curiosities of history. It has also been called strange and romantic, fabled and exotic. But beneath the myth the core of hard fact remains: for two hundred and a half centuries this small state flourished, fulfilling a thoroughly useful function

Head of Modern Greek and Byzantine History at King’s College, London. The successor of a rich family, he spent his life abroad in the company of his wife.

⁹ Cf. Dąbrowska, “Was There Any Room on Bosphorus for a Latin Lady?” *Byzantinoslavica* LXVI 1–2 (2008): 229–39.

as a port and staging-post on one of the great trade routes of history.
(Pereira, *East* 237)

This last passage by Pereira brings to mind Rose Macaulay's fascination, now expressed without her emphasis. The historical outline is an introduction to a chapter devoted to the author's and his friend's travel from Istanbul to Hopa which covered 800 miles. The distance from Samsun to Hopa took a half of it, while the road from Trabzon to the Russian frontier—150 miles (238). It gives the reader the image of space as an important factor of political advantage and agricultural profits. While writing about the geographical landscape, Pereira underlines the plantations of tea, which became an important economic asset in the contemporary times. Entering Trabzon, the author is disappointed by its ugliness. It is visible that the Turks do not care about the Byzantine past. He is disgusted with the fact that a new cement factory was built at the seashore and spoils the view. "Damn the Comneni," it seems to say, "and the Ottomans too. This is the twentieth century" (240). This remark shows that, according to the author, contemporary Turks do not appreciate their Ottoman past either. The Byzantine glory of Trebizond remains in such buildings as Hagia Sophia, the Golden-Headed Virgin and St. Eugenios, all of them mosques now. Pereira's description of citadel and palace is very short and far from the exaggerated impressions of Rose Macaulay:

The visitor arriving in Trebizond for the first time, his head filled with visions, perhaps, of imperial splendors, of beautiful princesses, of misty battlements, of decadent yet somehow noble Emperors . . . will certainly be disappointed. . . . The present-day town—by which I mean the main streets and squares and so on—is, like most Turkish provincial towns, functional rather than beautiful. (Pereira, *East* 242)

The disappointment and complaint were also connected with the Soumela monastery. The landscape was wild; there was nobody on the way, and the frescoes were damaged. The great consolation was the "marvel of its setting, that at least will always remain inviolable" (248). Pereira ends his chapter on contemporary Trebizond with a general remark concerning the border countries, enjoying freedom in the time of strength and mourning their glory after being conquered by the neighbours. The north-eastern part of Turkey was a periphery to Constantinople in Byzantine times. A forgotten country, almost a no man's land. In the 13th century these political conditions enabled the Komnenoi to create a state which became crucial in this part of Asia Minor and flourished for a long time.

Pereira's comments on economy and geography make one think about Vorley Harris's reports on this region in the 1950s. The materials are precious as the "Trabzon consulate area was the largest in Turkey" (Harris 23). The author's observations allow the reader to understand the temper of the inhabitants "who are unstable due to the damp and humid climate" (24). In a very small note called "Local antiquities" the consul writes as follows:

There are many interesting antiquities here in Trabzon. Apart from the old walls of the town, the old harbor built and early Greek churches, there is much of interest for the amateur archeologist. A book called *Byzantine Paintings in Trabzon* by Millet and Talbot-Rice is well worth studying in this context. (28)

Tout court in this case the consul's son is right. His father did not describe the region from the perspective which might be interesting for a Byzantinist. The reading, however, denies this objection. Vorley Harris left materials devoted to fourteen Turkish administrative units called vilayets.¹⁰ Describing the region of Rize, the author states that the high humidity is favourable for plantations of tea, oranges, lemons, apples and hazelnuts. Almost all the population are Lazes and speak their own peculiar tongue (37, 51). This kind of information leads us towards Anthony Bryer's and David Winfield's study on the topography of the Pontos. The other interesting details concern the city of Van, that is, the borderland of Byzantium in the 11th century. The author notices that "life in winter is hard on this bleak inhospitable Armenian plateau and it was with a feeling of relief that I headed north, towards the Black Sea coast and Trabzon with its mild winter" (Harris 56).

This feeling might have been shared by the Byzantines watching over the eastern frontier of the Empire. In the consul's reports the advantages of living in Trebizond are visible at first glance. The Black Sea zone surrounded by the Pontic Alps is definitely more pleasant in comparison with the Anatolian plateau (81–82): "The ancient city of Trabzon with its Roman, Greek, Genoese and Venetian remains, its coastline and the majestic scenery of the forest clad mountains of the interior is eminently suitable as

¹⁰ Announced by the British Embassy, he visited them systematically, spoke to the officials and gathered important information concerning the living conditions, climate, health, trade, commerce, agriculture, education and military forces. During his visits the consul presented a film concerning the coronation of HM Elizabeth II. There is a nice coincidence worth mentioning. Later on, during the International Congress of Byzantine Studies in Oxford in 1966, Sir Dimitri Obolensky used this material to speak about the Byzantine court ceremonial. At that time Anthony Bryer was working on his thesis devoted to the court of the Great Komnenoi at Trebizond. Prince Obolensky was his supervisor.

a tourist centre,” the consul writes, and he complains that the only good hotel is Yesil Yourt, by the way, the one in which Aunt Dot and her company stayed during their journey (99). While reading the descriptions concerning agriculture, one can easily understand that the city as well as the whole region owed its prosperity to the Venetian and Genoese commercial exchange (Karpov, *L'impero*). Sweet cherries, apples, oranges and hazelnuts were not enough to build the high economic position of Trebizond. The author's geographical observations on the port of Samsun connected by a valley with the Anatolian interior allow the reader to think of trade facilities, which built the economic power of the region in the Komnenian times (Harris 161–62). “During the preceding twenty centuries, what is now north-eastern Turkey was generally the eastern frontier of the western world,” he says, and this remark is very important for my text (208).

The borderlands of civilization are fascinating but not well known. They emerge from the darkness of history in the time of a military confrontation as it happened in the 11th century. In 1071 at Manzikert, the Emperor Romanos Diogenes tried to stop the Seljuk invasion on the Byzantine territories. The political circumstances and the battle itself are described in the sources and could be the background of a good historical novel. Nicolas J. Holmes faced this task in his book *Trebizond*.¹¹ The main plot of his text is a romantic story of Theodore Gabras from Trebizond and his wife, Irene, separated by the Seljuks, and facing many adventures. “They took his family. Now he will take his revenge.” These words on the cover invite the reader to dive into the story. The political context is well shown, especially the controversial figure of Andronikos Doukas whose betrayal at the battle of Manzikert was crucial and changed the history of Asia Minor: “One of the most intriguing questions facing Byzantine

¹¹ Among the primary sources of the period Holmes appreciates mostly Michael Attaleiates' *Historia* (Ed. I. Bekker, Bonn: 1853). The author complains about the lack of English translation, which actually appeared in the same year. Cf. Michael Attaleiates, *The History*, trans. A. Kaldellis and D. Krallis, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C.: Harvard UP, 2013. Others are: Michael Psellos, *Chronographia*, ed. E. R. A. Sewter, New Haven: Yale UP, 1953; Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter, ed. P. Frankopan, New York: Penguin, 2009; Bar Hebraeus, *Chronography*, trans. E. A. Wallis Budge, London: Oxford UP, 1932. As to secondary sources concerning Romanos Diogenes and battle of Manzikert, Holmes draws special attention to: Claude Cahen, *Pre-Ottoman Turkey. A General Survey of the Material and Spiritual Culture and History, ca. 1071–1330*, trans. J. Jones-Williams, New York: Taplinger, 1968; Spiros Vryonis, *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh to the Fifteenth Century*, Berkeley: U of California P, 1971; John Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World 565–1204*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999; Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999. Anthony Bryer's studies are already mentioned in the text.

historians, in my view is why Romanus [Diogenes] allowed Andronicus to command troops at the battle” (Holmes 315).

But before it happened, the Sultan Alp Arslan preferred not to enter the territory at the Lake Van and offered peace in 1069. Nicolas J. Holmes invites the reader to consider the possibility of that peace between the Emperor and the Sultan who wanted to wage a war against Fatimids, in accordance with the will of the Caliph of Baghdad. “The Caliph has asked that the Qur’an be read by him in Cairo not Constantinople” (135)—Alp Arslan says in the novel. But the war broke out and the Byzantine army was defeated at Manzikert. The Turks took over Trebizond and kept it till 1075 when Theodore Gabras regained the town for the Empire. Nicolas J. Holmes is fascinated by Gabras. He owes his interest in Theodore and Trebizond to Anthony Bryer, whose work enabled him to form

an impression of Trebizond as a vibrant Greek city that was remarkable in its ability to eject the Turks after the defeat of Manzikert, and which was subsequently able to resist Turkish encroachment for many centuries. (320)

Et voilà! The exotic Trebizond and the Pontos! An outstanding example of the role of the borderlands, being a stronghold of the independence of a state. Because of their peripheral status they could have become independent from the sovereign, as did Theodore Gabras and the Great Komnenoi. This created a special atmosphere which fascinates both the Byzantinists and fans of Byzantium. In the centuries that followed, Mehmed II’s conquests made the history of this region so Turkish that Christopher Harris doubted whether his father’s diplomatic reports would be useful for me. They are, as the geographical details are very well described and help the imagination when it is necessary to reconstruct the historical events. Christopher Harris, who was brought up in Trabzon, does not like Nicolas J. Holmes’s description of brutal and marauding Turks. Indeed, they are cruel in Holmes’s narration, but the image of the Byzantines is far from idealistic. Paradoxically, these two books complement each other. Michael Pereira in his travel story is not far from them, but he neglected Gabras and concentrated on the Great Komnenoi, described without any special emotion.

The Great Komnenoi appear in Rose Macaulay’s novel where Trebizond is only a pretext to consider existential questions. However, as the author describes the town, its image becomes unrealistic. The emperor clad in gold stands for the Trebizondian state as he does for the splendour of Byzantium in Yeats’s poems. It is like a dream, and even a reasonable Byzantinist cannot change it, especially now that the concept has

long been hijacked by popular literary imagination. And yet one thing that Yeats and Macaulay certainly share is their fascination with the beauty of the world that was totally obliterated as a result of the Turkish invasion.

As the Empire of Trebizond was on the eastern frontier of the so-called “Byzantine Commonwealth” (Obolensky), the river Danube was its western boundary. On the other side there were the territories of Wallachia, and I am going to briefly focus on them as a contrast that offsets the transience of the world whose distant echoes inspired Yeats and Macaulay.

After conquering Trebizond in August 1461, Mehmed II dispatched at the end of that year an envoy to Vlad III Dracul,¹² the Voivode of Wallachia, inviting him to Constantinople to pay the delayed *jizya* (the high ransom exacted from the infidels) and to provide five hundred Wallachian boys for the Janissary corps. Suspecting a trap, Vlad Dracul played the dangerous game and moved in with his troops. They were surrounded by the Turkish forces of Hamza Bey but then the Voivod’s rearguard arrived, defeated the Sultan’s soldiers and impaled them. The main confrontation happened in 1462 when the great Ottoman army crossed the Danube and entered Wallachia. Vlad did not risk the open battle but he harassed the Turks in many skirmishes and finally stopped them on the 17th June before entering his capital Targoviste. The so-called “Night Attack” became a symbol of his invincible power and successful cruelty. He is called Vlad the Impaler for a reason.

But also in this case literature hijacked the historical message. Cruelty was not enough. The scent of blood became more attractive. Another Irishman, Bram Stoker, introduced into his novel, published in 1897, a descendant of the House of Dracoulesti, the vampire Dracula, who won the imagination not only of high society, but also became a hero of popular culture due to the film adaptations where he behaved in accordance with his surname: like a devil (cf. Florescu and McNally). Vlad Dracul, the man who beat the

¹² Vlad’s father, Vlad II, received his surname “Dracul” after entering in 1431 the “Order of the Dragon,” founded by Sigismund of Luxemburg, King of Hungary, to protect Christianity. Dragon—“draco” in Roumanian, was changed into Dracul which means a devil. For a Polish historian it is an opportunity to mention Vlad II’s visit to Ladislas III, king of Poland and Hungary before the battle of Varna in 1444. According to Joannes Dlugossius, the eminent Polish chronicler (1415–80), Vlad II appeared in front of the monarch and warned him against the expedition against the Turks. Seeing the King’s determination, he offered him two strong horses and two faithful Wallachians knowing the country, who would save the monarch from any disaster. Ladislas III was about to accept these bodyguards but pursuing his mission to fight Murad II, he was killed in the battle of Varna. Cf. Joannes Dlugossius, *Annales seu Chronicae incliti Regni Poloniae*, XI–XII (1431–1444), ed. Jerzy Wyrozumski, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2004, 347–48. The very expressive description of the battle by Dlugossius was taken by the chronicler from the account of Andrea de Pallatio, the papal collector general in Poland in 1442–45.

sultan at his own game, was transformed exclusively into a damned blood-sucking monster. Likewise, the Byzantine Empire was reduced to “the golden dome” in Yeats’s poems. Macaulay replicated the construction. So much for the power of history challenged by the literary imagination.

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