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## A Neglected Storyworld Brought to the Fore: The Land of Rome in Byzantine *and* Turkish narratives\*

Review essay of Buket Kitapçı Bayrı, *Warriors, Martyrs, and Dervishes: Moving Frontiers, Shifting Identities in the Land of Rome (13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries)* (Leiden 2020)

*Ingela Nilsson*

**B**uket Kitapçı Bayrı's new study of the Land of Rome (*Rum İli* or *Rum*) is based on a combination of sources that I think remain largely unknown to many Byzantinists: Turkish warrior epics, Late Byzantine *martyria*, and Turkish dervish *vitae*. These groups of texts are investigated in three successive chapters entitled "Warriors", "Martyrs" and "Dervishes", each investigating four different themes appearing in these texts: the Land of Rome, Frontiers, Us, and Them. The aim of the author is "not to reconstruct the real-historical world of medieval Asia Minor and the Balkans but to understand perceptions of the land of Rome, its changing political and cultural frontiers, and in relation to these changes, the shifts in identity of the people inhabiting this space" (p. 3). The focus is accordingly on perceptions and identity, seen not as stable, but as shifting and changing. Accordingly, this book not only fills an important gap as regards understudied material highly relevant to Byzantine Studies, but also makes a welcome methodological contribution to the study of historical sources at large.

Byzantium is often described as the culture that somehow falls between East and West, absent in discussions of both European and Asian history. Recent years have seen a growing interest not only in bringing Byzantium (back) into the discussion, but also in looking at long-dis-

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tance chains of contact in which the Byzantine empire played an important role. A landmark was Peter Frankopan's bestseller *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, first published in 2015. The plural of the title is significant, because it means breaking away from the idea of a single Silk Road traversing Central Asia, and instead conceptualizing multiple roads and connections between places and peoples. In an interview published in 2019, Frankopan described the history of Central Asia as "a crucible for exchange – of languages, ideas and beliefs, as well as goods and products".<sup>1</sup> His interest in Constantinople and Byzantium is very much related to its being part of such a process, which lends it a place not only in the history of the Middle Ages, but in global history at large.

While attention has long been directed at the connections between, for instance, Byzantium and the Arab world,<sup>2</sup> or Byzantium and China,<sup>3</sup> and we have – over the last decade or so – seen an intensified interest in the identity of the Byzantines themselves (whatever that means),<sup>4</sup> one aspect of the Byzantine empire is most often left out of the discussion: the encounters and interactions between the Greek-speaking inhabitants of the borderlands and the Turkish-speaking groups that were not only invaders and enemies, but also neighbours for centuries. One of the reasons for this omission is, as often, linguistic – many scholars focus on either the Greek or the Turkish sources, and Ottoman Turkish is demanding even for Turkish-speaking scholars. With an increasing availability of translations into and studies in English, French and German, there is good reason for Byzantinists to be more inclusive when it comes to the Turkish point of view; otherwise it may seem as if there is a lack of interest in this specific aspect of Byzantine history and culture. That

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<sup>1</sup> Frankopan 2019, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Of particular interest to readers of the book reviewed here are perhaps el Cheikh 2007 and Eger 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Right now, note especially the PAIXUE project at the University of Edinburgh, <http://paixue.shca.ed.ac.uk/>. For a couple of fairly recent publications, see e.g. Zhi-Qiang 2006 and Kordosis 2008.

<sup>4</sup> I am thinking in particular of the well-known work of Yiannis Stouraitis and Anthony Kaldellis; for a full discussion with references, see the review essay by Milan Vukašinić in this journal issue. More recently, see also Theodoropoulos 2021.

is certainly not the case, with studies by – among others – Alexander Beihammer and Nevra Necipoğlu firmly offering fruitful directions for future studies. And the new book by Kitapçı Bayrı now offers an excellent example of how to look at the Byzantine empire from a new angle.

Her combination of sources represents in itself the basic methodological choices: “In this study, the Turkish Muslim epics and the Byzantine martyria are brought together not in regard to a religious space, as has often been the tendency, but on a broader geopolitical and cultural space, the land of Rome, the story-world of these texts.” (p. 17) By looking at the texts’ spatial expressions from the cultural-political rather than the religious perspective, Kitapçı Bayrı allows for a different kind of analysis: one that sees medieval identity not primarily in terms of ethnicity, language and religion, but also from the perspective of haircuts, food and sex. On the frontier, these issues become particularly relevant, since encounters with ‘the Other’ lead to “a merging of different cultural, religious, and ethic elements rather than the replacement of one entity by another” (p. 9). This is a refreshing contrast to some recent attempts to tie down Byzantine identity to one or two defining features.<sup>5</sup> A similar attitude is clear also in the recent volume *Identity and the Other in Byzantium*, edited by Koray Durak and Ivana Jevtić, in which Kitapçı Bayrı describes identity in terms of the “complexities of being, remaining, becoming, and re-becoming Byzantine”.<sup>6</sup>

Such complex processes of identity formation are exemplified in the study of both Turkish and Byzantine sources under investigation in Kitapçı Bayrı’s book on the Land of Rome. In the warrior epics *Battalname*, *Danişmendname* and *Saltukname*, the conquest of Byzantine territory is narrated in three different yet overlapping ways. Their story-world is obviously marked by the narrative setting on the frontier: there are mountain passes, rivers and defence towers, and the desire to conquer the land of Rome and capture Byzantine women dominate much of the storylines. It is a militarized environment where supernatural powers may appear and where chivalrous actors (*pehlivan*) may be respected across ethnic and religious boundaries. In this world of transgressive

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<sup>5</sup> Kaldellis 2019, 272–3; cited by Vukašinović in this journal issue.

<sup>6</sup> Kitapçı Bayrı 2019, 114.

identities, even Christian infidels can be respected friends while Muslim Arabs can be *küffar*. Ethnicities are not necessarily important, since the heroes of these narratives not always identify themselves as Turks or the hero of *Saltukname* sees himself both as a Turk and a Rumi, drawing on the cultural space in which he had intruded.

Byzantinists are obviously reminded of the storyworld of *Digenes Akrites*, another hero on the frontier whose identity is transgressive and whose story is a kind of biography based on actions and events rather than on character. While Digenes is an *akrites* concerned with defending what is ‘his’, the heroes of the Turkish stories burn with the desire to conquer – like the Emir, father of Digenes, who abducted a Christian woman and married her. But Digenes, too, is a conqueror, not the least of women, and violent sex and warfare mark his short life. Another similarity concerns the traces of historical layers in the texts that have come down to us. As noted by Kitapçı Bayrı, the Turkish warrior epics function as a kind of repository of collective memory, offering eleventh- and twelfth-century events as ‘backward projections’ from the perspective of the thirteenth and fourteenth-century Anatolians who compiled them (p. 25). The same can be said for *Digenes Akrites*, often said to reflect historical events of the eighth or ninth centuries, with part of the tradition cast in a twelfth-century form, but only preserved in later manuscripts.<sup>7</sup>

In that sense, this kind of heroic storytelling on the frontiers balances on the border between historicity and fictionality. They belong to the category of medieval narratives discussed under the heading “Between history and fiction” by Panagiotis Agapitos in his major investigation of fiction and fictionality in “Rhomanian, Frankish and Persian Lands”, even if the Turkish texts were not included in his survey.<sup>8</sup> More comparative studies of these kinds of narratives, like the Arabic *Sirat Delhemma* or the Persian *Shahname* – the “The Book of Kings” in which the emperor of China decides to invade Persia with the help of its vassal (Turkic?) state of Turan –, will offer new ways of understanding the shared storyworld of hunting, drinking and lovemaking in medieval narratives. By looking at the function of space and identity, we might be

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<sup>7</sup> For a recent discussion with references, see Goldwyn and Nilsson 2019, 191-192.

<sup>8</sup> Agapitos 2012.

able to move away from the simplistic and prejudiced genre designation of ‘epic’ for such texts, abandoning the classicizing and above all nationalistic connotations it inevitably carries.

Kitapçı Bayrı understands storyworlds as imagined spaces, based on the idea of “imagined communities” and of space as being closely connected to politics and identity (e.g. p. 18). From there, it is not a very big step to the narratological understanding of the concept as “mental models”: a “worldmaking practice” according to which the reader maps and works to comprehend a narrative.<sup>9</sup> That concept has already found its way into Byzantine Studies, together with a rather intense interest in space and spatial practices. Accordingly, the new book by Kitapçı Bayrı could hardly be more timely, offering an alternative model for how to understand both space and identity in a non-binary way that can only benefit our field of study. The final words of the book say it all: “A dialectic identity formation takes place whereby the newcomers transform the physical, social, and cultural space in an inclusive manner as they themselves are transformed, and the ‘natives’ reformulate their identity in a vast and vaguely defined space in a highly exclusive fashion.” (p. 194)

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<sup>9</sup> Herman 2009, 106.

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