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The Literary Voice of a Chronicler: The *Synopsis Chronike* of Constantine Manasses*

Ingela Nilsson

While the chronicle has long been seen as an inferior form of historiography, void of literary ambition and individual expression, the Byzantine chronicle tradition – repetitive and ‘traditional’ as it may be – in fact offers a wide range of means to rewrite and understand the historical past. The chronicles may seem similar at first glance and they may be recycling the same material, adding little new to our knowledge of historical detail, but the Byzantine chronicle was produced in a cultural environment in which repetition of previous information was a way to strengthen and verify your own account all the while offering a new form of already known historical events. Recent scholarship has shown how even small narrative changes may offer us

* This article was written in 2014, during a research visit in Vienna sponsored by a grant from Hilda Kumlins stiftelse, and intended for *The Brill Companion to Byzantine Chronicles*, ed. R. Tocci. Due to the delay of that volume and the publication of my monograph on Manasses (Nilsson 2021), I have withdrawn the present article to publish it here for the benefit of readers who come across references to it in the monograph. It retains the form of a handbook article written quite a few years ago, but I hope it can still be of use to some readers interested in chronicles in general and Manasses in particular. I have updated the references to secondary literature for this version, revisions made within the frame of the research programme Retracing Connections (<https://retracingconnections.org/>), financed by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (M19-0430:1). Finally, I would like to express my warmest thanks to Adam Goldwyn, Andreas Rhoby, Roger Scott and Nikos Zagklas for their careful reading of and useful remarks on successive drafts of this article along with many fruitful discussions, throughout the years, on Manasses and twelfth-century literature.

important insight into contemporary political, social or religious concerns.¹ With time, the Byzantine chronicle also changes and brings in more and more features from the neighbouring historiographical texts, becoming increasingly coloured by literary and rhetorical strategies. Thus the twelfth-century *Epitome Historion* by John Zonaras is very different from the chronicle of, for instance, Theophanes Confessor, taking a form that ties in with the Komnenian interest in ancient literature and narrative structure. The same century sees the composition of a work that takes us even further from what we may expect from a Byzantine chronicle: the *Synopsis Chronike* by Constantine Manasses.²

Manasses' work departs from the traditional chronicle form in a number of respects, the most significant of which is the metrical form: written in the fifteen-syllable political verse, the *Synopsis Chronike* takes a step towards the 'popular' literature of, for instance, *Digenis Akritas* and *Ptochoprodromos*, yet staying within the boundaries of learned language and historical content from the Creation of the world up to 1081. Manasses thus avoids narrating the history of the Komnenian dynasty – an enterprise he would never dare to undertake, as he explains in the very last verses of his work (6609-20). Perhaps this was a strategy wisely chosen by a writer on commission, depending – as we shall see – on the benevolence of imperial and aristocratic patrons. In addition to the verse form, the author employs an episodal narrative technique

¹ Roger Scott has been a pioneer in this regard; see e.g. the contributions in Scott 2012 and, more recently, Scott, Burke & Tuffin 2021. For a younger generation of scholars working on chronography from a literary perspective, see e.g. Goldwyn 2015; Kampianaki 2017, 2018 and 2020; Vilimonović 2021 – the latter probably the first study of Byzantine chronicles from a gender perspective and thus groundbreaking. For some other recent studies of the chronicle form, see Odorico 2021 and Wahlgren 2021.

² Ed. and modern Greek tr. Lampsidis 1996. Two translations into other languages have recently appeared, indicating the increasing interest in this text: Yuretich 2018 (English tr.); Paul & Rhoby 2019 (German tr.). Translations in this article are my own. For a general introduction to Manasses' chronicle, see Karpozilos 2009, 535-557, and Neville 2018, 200-204. The biography of Manasses will not be discussed here; for an updated survey of his life and authorship, see Paul & Rhoby 2019, 4-7; for a presentation of his life and functions at the court, Magdalino 1997, 161-165. On the place of the chronicle in the literary production of Manasses, see Nilsson 2021, esp. 145-153.

and a poetic language, both reminiscent of the contemporary novel, which has led scholars to describing the *Synopsis Chronike* as a literary or even novelistic chronicle.³ While such a description does not say much about the actual character or function of the chronicle, there are indeed narrative and stylistic affinities between the novelistic writing of the Komnenian century and the chronicle by Manasses, who in fact was a novelist himself.⁴ More important, the *Synopsis Chronike* clearly adheres to literary trends of the environment in which Manasses was active as a writer on commission for imperial and aristocratic circles, which explains the literary and poetic form of the chronicle, as well as the unusually frequent authorial comments inserted into the narrative. The present article is an attempt to show how these characteristics come to the fore in Manasses' literary recasting of history.

The authorial 'I' and his audience

Manasses wrote his chronicle for *sebastokratorissa* Eirene, married to *sebastokrator* Andronikos and thus sister-in-law of Emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1143-1180).⁵ Since the *Synopsis Chronike* includes praise also of the young Manuel (v. 2507-12), his accession to the throne offers us a *terminus post quem*, whereas Irene's death ca. 1153 provides us with the latest possible date for the chronicle's composition.⁶ Eirene was known to be a generous patroness of letters and she was involved with numerous writers of the period, including Theodore Prodromos and John Tzetzes. It is no surprise, then, that the *Synopsis Chronike* opens with a praise of Eirene's love of learning, as compared to the material desires of a greedy soul – her soul, by contrast, is imperial and most learned

³ On the innovative and literary/novelistic aspects of the *Synopsis Chronike*, see Lampsidis 1996, xl-xlv; Reinsch 2002; Nilsson 2006 and 2019; Rhoby 2014.

⁴ The novel, *Aristandros and Kallithea*, has been fragmentarily preserved in the form of excerpts from a later period; see Tzolakes 1967 and Mazal 1967 (with a reconstruction of the story), discussed in Nilsson 2021, 160-161.

⁵ See Jeffreys 2014.

⁶ A plausible scenario is that the work was written in portions, so that the references to Manuel were inserted after his ascension to the throne; see Lampsidis 1988; Paul & Rhoby, 7-9. Cf. Reinsch 2007, 266-267, dating the chronicle to 1150-1153.

(βασιλίτσα καὶ φιλολογωτάτη), “always thirsting for knowledge, culture and education, / always clinging to books, delighting in literature”.⁷ Her wishes for this particular project are then stated as follows:

Since you, as a foster child of learning, have desired / that a comprehensible and clear narrative should be composed for you, / teaching ancient history in a plain manner / – who reigned from the beginning and how far they reached, / over whom they ruled and for how many years – / I will take on the burden of this toil, / even though it is a difficult and burdensome task, involving much work; / for I am compensated for my efforts in this writing / by the size of your gifts and your generosity, / and the burning heat of my toil and travail / is cooled by your gifts, frequently bestowed.⁸

It seems, then, that both the form and content of the *Synopsis Chronike* depended on the wishes of the patron, and it appears that the dedication to the *sebastokratorissa* was not only a means to please her, but also part of a financial transaction between poet and patron.⁹ After this statement, which seems to be reminding the patron of their agreement, the writer interrupts himself:

But let me stop right here and now, / so that my discourse does not seem too flattering to some / and follows another voice, thus losing its goal. / Many have written histories and chronicles, / eager to

⁷ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike* 4-5 (Lampsidis): ἀεὶ διψῶσα γνώσεως καὶ λόγου καὶ παιδείας, / βιβλίοις ἀεὶ προστέτηκας, ἐπεντυφᾶς τοῖς λόγοις. A dedicatory poem in hexameters, likewise praising Irene, follows the chronicle in a number of manuscripts (but is printed before the chronicle in Lampsidis’ edition); see Rhoby 2009, 323-325.

⁸ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike* 7-17 (Lampsidis): ἐπεὶ γοῦν ἐπεπόθησας οἷα τροφίμη λόγου / εὐσύνοπτόν σοι καὶ σαφῆ γραφὴν ἐκπονηθῆναι, / τρανώς ἀναδιδάσκουσας τὰς ἀρχαιολογίας / καὶ τίνες ἦρξαν ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς καὶ μέχρι τοῦ προῆλθον / καὶ τίνων ἐβασίλευσαν καὶ μέχρις ἐτῶν πόσων, / ἡμεῖς ἀναδεξόμεθα τὸ βᾶρος τοῦ καμάτου, / κᾶν δυσχερές, κᾶν ἐπαχθὲς τὸ πρᾶγμα, κᾶν ἐργῶδες / παραμιθοῦνται γὰρ ἡμῶν τοὺς ἐν τοῖς λόγοις μόχθους / αἱ μεγαλοδωρία σου καὶ τὸ φιλότιμόν σου, / καὶ τὸν τοῦ κόπου καύσωνα καὶ τῆς ταλαιπωρίας / αἱ δωρεαὶ δροσίζουσι κενούμεναι συχνάκις. Cf. translation by Jeffreys 1974, 158.

⁹ On patronage in the twelfth century, note the foundational article by Mullett 1984; more recently and with updated references, Nilsson 2021, esp. 86-91.

recount correctly and truthfully, / and yet they have composed them differently; / I, having selected those which seem / to be most accurate and more truthful, / shall fulfil your wish as best I can.¹⁰

We do not know who might have found the writer's comments on the *sebastokratorissa's* generosity "too flattering", but in view of her involvement in various forms of patronage we may assume that her favours were in great demand; the situation for writers and intellectuals of the period was indeed competitive.¹¹ More interesting from a narrative perspective are the remarks on the individual choices made by the writer, indeed a sort of *topos* among historians – "accurate" and "truthful" are key concepts here – but nevertheless significant in view of what turns out to be the very personal inclusions and exclusions of Manasses, not always so truthful, according to our modern standards.¹²

The introductory part of the chronicle as a whole offers important information on the aim and function of Manasses' work: it is an historical account written according to the specific wishes of a patron, but based on the narrative choices and literary skills of the writer. The latter is indeed confirmed by the ensuing opening of the chronicle itself, consisting of an elaborate and poetic rewriting of the Creation, presented in the form of a long and dazzling garden ekphrasis, ending with the creation of Eve from Adam's rib (27-285). In accordance with the overall emphasis on art and nature in the episode, God is described not only as creator, but also as an artist and a gardener. As is often the case with Manasses – and indeed numerous other authors of the Komnenian period – he takes

¹⁰ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike* 18-26 (Lampsidis): Καὶ ταῦτα μὲν ἐνταῦθά μοι καὶ μέχρι τούτου στήτω, / μή πως κολακικώτερος δόξη τισὶν ὁ λόγος / καὶ τὸν σκοπὸν καταλιπὼν ἄλλην ἀκούσῃ τρέχειν. / πολλῶν ἱστορησάντων δὲ καὶ χρονογραφησάντων / καὶ σπουδασάντων μὲν εἰπεῖν ὀρθῶς καὶ φιλαλήθως, / ἀλλήλοισ ἀνομοίως δὲ ταῦτα συγγραμμένων, / ἡμεῖς, προχειρισάμενοι τοὺς μάλιστα δοκοῦντας / τῆς ἀκριβείας ἔχεσθαι καὶ μᾶλλον ἀληθεύειν, / τὸ κατὰ δύναμιν ἡμῖν ἀποπληρώσομέν σοι.

¹¹ Cf. the recurring motif of *phthonos* (envy) in the chronicle and the 'autobiographical' note by narrator (3204-12), on which see Reinsch 2007 and Hinterberger 2011, esp. pp. 91-100; now also Nilsson 2021, esp. 148-169. On the role of envy in the context of poet and patron, see also Hinterberger 2013, 169.

¹² See Maisano 1985, esp. 338-39, and Rhoby 2014.

a well-established image and adapts it to suit his purposes; here, the image of God as a gardener is underlined within the frame of the garden ekphrasis and intertwined with the surrounding vegetal imagery. At the beginning of the episode, he is an artist, a creator, a wise and skilful worker (41: θεὸς ὁ καλλιτέχνης; 49-50: ὁ τεχνίτης ὁ παντοτέκτων, ὁ σοφός; 63: ὁ τεχνίτης ... θεὸς ὁ παντεργάτης) and even a gardener of the heavenly garden of stars (133: φυτοσκάφος ὁ θεός). As more things are created and the artistic imagery on the whole increases, God's artistry is stressed in elaborate passages (e.g. 174–180) and then finally explained: he is indeed a gardener, but “He did not dig with his hands, He did not struggle with earth, / He did not work by touching the plants, but only with the Word”.¹³ The episode thus contains an intriguing parallel between the artistry of God and the artistry of the poet, both creating/composing by means of *logos* (word/narrative/culture).

By representing the Creation in the form of an ekphrasis, Manasses highlights the poetic character of the chronicle, while at the same time drawing attention to himself as the composer of a new kind of history. The emphasis on the creative skills of the writer also seems to imply an audience beyond the commissioner herself, consisting rather of learned peers of Manasses, appreciating this kind of intellectual pun. The *sebastokratorissa*'s involvement in literary circles indeed opens up the idea of an intended or primary reader/listener (the patron) being accompanied by a circle of learned aristocrats and/or intellectuals associated with the court. Works composed and performed in such environment would have had to meet the expectations of both commissioner and other listeners.¹⁴

¹³ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike* 183-84 (Lampsidis): οὐ σκαφευτρίαις ἐν χερσίν, οὐδὲ γαιομαχοῦσαις, / οὐδὲ παλάμαις φυτουργοῖς, ἀλλὰ τῷ λόγῳ μόνῳ. For the Creation episode, see Nilsson 2005, esp. pp. 129-137 and 140-46, and Karpozilos 2009, 542-543.

¹⁴ Cf. Croke 2010, esp. p. 43. On performative aspects of Byzantine literature, causing us to speak of ‘listeners’ rather than ‘readers’, see also Marciniak 2007; Bourbouhakis 2010 and 2017, 125*-158*.

The question is whether we should understand also the metrical form of the *Synopsis Chronike* as part of that expectation. As already mentioned, the political verse has certain popular connotations, which seems to stand in stark contrast to the courtly environment in which we find the chronicle by Manasses, and indeed many other works of the twelfth century written in the same metre. The combination of political verse with a linguistic register that sometimes displays vernacular tendencies, led Odysseas Lampsidis – editor of the *Synopsis Chronike* and author of numerous studies on Manasses – to an interpretation of Manasses’ chronicle as a popular work intended for a wider audience.¹⁵ However, the language of Manasses clearly stays within the boundaries of learned Greek, even if the author makes use of some nonclassical forms,¹⁶ and the work seems to contain too many learned allusions and references for a lowbrow audience. It is likely that the ‘simple’ form should be seen rather in light of the patroness and her wish for a “comprehensible and clear treatise ... teaching ancient history in a plain manner”. Popular connotations or not, the political verse was a common and appropriate medium for court poetry addressed to members of the imperial family, and *sebastokratorissa* Eirene had other works written for her in the same form.¹⁷ Moreover, it is likely that Eirene was of Norman origin,¹⁸ which would have created a need of comprehensive introductions to history and Greek learning.¹⁹ It has also been suggested that the *sebastokratorissa* was particularly fond of garden imagery, which could explain the casting of the Creation in the form of a garden

¹⁵ Lampsidis 1996, xliii.

¹⁶ See Trapp 1993, 119.

¹⁷ Jeffreys 1974, esp. 151-153 and 158; cf. Rhoby 2014, 393-394.

¹⁸ Jeffreys & Jeffreys 1994; Rhoby 2009, 306-321.

¹⁹ On the chronicle as a *Lehrgedicht*, see Rhoby 2014, 393; cf. Reinsch 2002, 84-85. For a recent study of didactic poetry, including Manasses, see Hörandner 2019; now also Nilsson 2021, esp. 116-117. Whereas Manasses presented Irene with a chronicle, John Tzetzes wrote a *Theogony* for her and Theodore Prodromos a grammar – together forming the very basis of Greek learning. On the grammar by Prodromos, see Zagklas 2011; on the relation between Manasses and Tzetzes, see Rhoby 2010, 167-168.

ekphrasis at the beginning of the chronicle.²⁰ Be that as it may, taken together with the introductory verses, the Creation passage can be read as a programmatic declaration for the entire chronicle, presenting both what kind of text and what kind of author the reader/listener may expect: a self-conscious creator of sophisticated *logos*, underlining the authorial act while staying within the contemporary horizon of expectation.

The ancient and the Byzantine tradition

In Byzantinists' scholarly quest for new historical details, the *Synopsis Chronike* does not seem to have much to offer; it is, as already mentioned, a 'novelistic' chronicle, an entertaining rewriting of already known historical events. It is, however, exactly in its capacity as a literary chronicle, written fairly late in the tradition, that Manasses' work can make a significant contribution to our understanding of the function of historical narrative and the adaptability of genre in Byzantium in general, and in twelfth-century Byzantium in particular. It is probably true, as Paul Magdalino has stated, that Manasses "writes only to entertain or to instruct on a very basic level",²¹ but even if his chronicle offers pleasant reading (or indeed listening), the historical content has not always been simplified, but rather recast through narrative and rhetorical structures.²² The techniques involved in this recasting are clearly related to the rewriting of ancient fiction that took place in the Komnenian period, but there is a crucial difference: as we have seen, Manasses never relinquishes the claim to historical truth.²³ His chronicle thus remains history, however 'novelistic', aesthetic, or entertaining the form.

Let us look at an historical episode of the *Synopsis Chronike* in order to see how all this works in practice. The eclectic approach of

²⁰ Magdalino 1997, 164. It should, however, be noted that garden imagery is very frequent in many authors throughout the Komnenian century; see e.g. Nilsson 2013.

²¹ Magdalino 1997, 162.

²² Cf. also Papaioannou 2010, 19, on Manasses as "blatantly indulgent in Psellian aesthetic pleasures", but no less part of the historiographical tradition.

²³ See Nilsson 2006. On the Komnenian novels as a key to understanding the literary trends of the period as a whole, see Nilsson 2014

Manasses and his predilection for entertaining and juicy stories as well as moralizing and didactic ones has left him with a number of narrative highlights, linked together in an episodic structure with less thrilling fillers.²⁴ Accordingly, important emperors with close links to Constantinople, such as Justinian I (527-565), receive more space and praise,²⁵ while minor emperors may be mentioned only briefly; we should note, though, that they are still usually inserted into the narrative and not simply annalistically enumerated as in more traditional chronicles.²⁶ In line with Manasses' interest in 'good stories', emperors associated with immoral or otherwise indecent behaviour, as well as truly bad or wicked emperors, receive more attention, supposedly triggering the imagination of both writer and audience.²⁷ We shall take an episode of the latter kind as our example: an incident set during the reign of Emperor Leo the Isaurian, also known as Leo the Iconoclast (717-741).²⁸

Leo's reign covers 120 verses in the *Synopsis Chronike* (4116-4236), anticipated by the characterization that is offered at the beginning of the power struggle between Emperor Theodosios III and the usurper Leo – “a beastly person as regards both soul and name and manners”,²⁹ signalling the gist of what will follow. The introductory verses of Leo's regin describe the violent storm that afflicted the Romans and the Church (4116-30), Leo's origins and his involvement with Jews (4131-60),³⁰ leading up to his heretical destruction of holy images and the resignation of Patriarch Germanos, forced away by the “raving mad Kerberos” (ὁ Κέρβερος ὁ λυσσητήρ) (4161-75). With the help of his

²⁴ See Reinsch 2002; Nilsson 2006.

²⁵ See Scott, 2006; cf. Reinsch 2007, 266-267.

²⁶ A fourteenth-century scribe felt the need to 'correct' this, inserting verses with chronological information (102 in all) where he felt it was needed. See Lampsidis 1996, lxxi-lxxvi, and Reinsch 2002, 85.

²⁷ See now the excellent study of characterization as a stylistic device by Taxidis 2017.

²⁸ Historical aspects of Leo's reign or the iconoclastic controversy will not be addressed here; for a detailed study, see Brubaker & Haldon 2011, 69-105.

²⁹ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike* 4099 (Lampsidis): ὁ καὶ ψυχὴν καὶ τοῦνομα καὶ τρόπους θηριώδης.

³⁰ On Leo's alleged Jewish and/or Muslim influence, see Brubaker & Haldon 2011, 105-17.

wolpack Leo scatters the disciples and ravages the churches, causing darkness to descend upon the empire (4176-81); books and discourses of old have recounted these horrible things, says Manasses, but he will chose one single event to describe this evil emperor – “I shall reveal the Persian [Leo] by his robe and necklace, / the croaking crow by his black colour”.³¹ The gloomy and dramatic tone then swiftly changes and we find ourselves in a pleasant and light setting:

Near the precincts of the Divine Wisdom / was a beautiful house built by emperors of old, / a splendid garden, one might say, of book-bearing trees, / a beautifully planted grove of manifold wisdom; / books were stored within, / about thirty-three thousand; / this great garden, this extensive grove, / was entrusted to a divine man, distinguished by his wisdom / and shining forth with rays of knowledge, more than any other / – another Adam, one could say, a godly caretaker of trees / taking pleasure in the beautifully growing trees of Eden / and gardener of plants that never wither.³²

The contrast to the city just described could hardly be any sharper, as the reader/listener finds themself at the Patriarchal School, located in the vicinity of Hagia Sophia.³³ On a poetic level, we should note the garden metaphor, representing the library as a grove filled with trees, tended by a diligent gardener. The ekphrastic mode here is clearly reminiscent of the chronicle’s opening description of Creation, an allusion further

³¹ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike* 4188-90 (Lampsidis): ἐγὼ δ’ ἀπολεξάμενος ἐν ἀπὸ πάντων τούτων / τὸν Πέρσην ἐκ τοῦ κἀνδύου καὶ τοῦ στρεπτοῦ γνωρίσω / καὶ κόρακα τὸν κρωκτικὸν ἐκ τῆς μελαντηρίας.

³² Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike* 4191-4202 (Lampsidis): Τοῦ τεμενίσματος ἐγγὺς τῆς τοῦ Θεοῦ Σοφίας / οἶκος λαμπρὸς δεδόμετο τοῖς πάλαι βασιλεῦσι, / κῆπος, ἂν εἴποι τις, ἄβρὸς βιβλιοφόρων δένδρων, / ἄλσος ἀγλαοφύετον παντοδαπῆς σοφίας· / βιβλίοι γὰρ ἦσαν ἐν αὐτῷ προτεθησαρισμέναι / εἰς τρισμυρίας φθάνουσαι πρὸς ἄλλαις τρισχιλίας· / τὸν τηλικούτον κῆπον δὲ καὶ τὸ τοσοῦτον ἄλσος / θεῖος ἀνὴρ πεπίστευτο, προέχων ἐν σοφίᾳ / καὶ πλέον πάντων ταῖς ἀνγαῖς τῆς γνώσεως ἐκλάμπων, / ἄλλος, ἂν εἴποι τις, Ἀδάμ ἐνθεὸς δενδροκόμος / τοῖς τῆς Ἐδέμ ἐπεντροφῶν καλλιβλαστήτοις δένδροις / καὶ φυτευμάτων γεωργὸς τῶν μὴ μαραιομένων.

³³ On the location and function of the Patriarchal School, dating from the fifth century or earlier, see Browning 1962.

strengthened by the explicit reference to Adam, the “goodly caretaker” of Eden. The garden imagery is intermingled with that of learning, just as in the Creation episode discussed above, but the keyword here is *sophia* (wisdom) rather than *logos*, tying in with the setting close to Hagia Sophia, and probably also with the close relation between the school and the Church. The ekphrastic mode, depicting a harmonious and ideal environment, continues for a few more lines, depicting the twelve teachers working under the head librarian/gardener “like lieutenant generals under a noble general” as “shining stars and torches of the night / completing the number of the zodiac circle”.³⁴ They worked unpaid, “these teachers of those who desire learning (*logos*)”, removing the veil of obscurity (*skoteinologias*) from pagan as well as Christian writings,³⁵ and their leader was like a bright sun in their middle, surpassing them in virtue and offering counsel and knowledge to emperors.

This harmonious order is then brutally overthrown by the emperor, obviously provoked by the high status of this educational institution and its members. He first tries to snare them and have them as partners in his ungodly madness, but when neither threats nor gold can convince them he finally despairs. “How can I even narrate?”, says the author, and then he goes on to do so:

He plotted a malicious scheme, absurd, impious, / as would neither a
savage Scythian, nor a Massagetan; / he piles up wood all around the
house, / dry firewood, combustible, flammable fuel, / and he lights
a bright fire and incinerates all / these holy men – alas! – and with
them all the books. Woe, soul that hates goodness! Alas, savage mind!
The terrible Leo was revealed by his claws. The most beautiful of all
teachings were in there, / also one extraordinary scroll made from the

³⁴ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike* 4204-06 (Lampsidis): καθάπερ ὑποστράτιγγοι γενναίω στρατηγέτη, / ἀστέρες ἄντικρυς φαιδροὶ καὶ τῆς νυκτὸς ἀδοῦχοι, ἐπλήρουν δὲ τὸν ἀριθμὸν τοῦ ζωοφόρου κύκλου.

³⁵ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike* 4207-4211 (Lampsidis): ἄμισθοι δ’ ἦσαν παιδευταὶ τοῖς ἔρασταῖς τοῦ λόγου· / ἀφήρουν γὰρ τὸ κάλυμμα τῆς σκοτεινολογίας, / ὁπόση τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς τερθρείας καὶ σαπρίας / ὁπόση τε τῆς καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἱεροπρεπεστάτης, / αὐτὸς δ’ ἐν πᾶσιν ἔστλβεν ἥλιος ὥσπερ γίγας.

intestine of a snake / carrying the Homeric poems in writing, / I mean the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.³⁶

The wickedness of Leo – beyond that even of the inhuman Skythians and Massagetans³⁷ – is thus revealed to lie not primarily in his disdain for holy images, but above all in his hatred for wisdom and learning – he even goes so far as to sacrifice a precious manuscript of Homer! This is indeed a crime that is sure to cause indignation among Byzantines in general, but even more so in the learned circles of *sebastokratorissa* Eirene and Manasses, considering the great respect for ancient literature, not least Homer, in the Komnenian century. We may remind ourselves of the author’s praise of Eirene in the opening verses, describing her as “most learned” (φιλολογωτάτη) with a soul “ever applying itself to books, delighting in literature”, and note the contrast to Leo’s behaviour and his “soul which hates beauty” (μισόκαλος ψυχή), his “savage mind”. We should also note that this is the one event from Leo’s reign that Manasses explicitly chooses to narrate, selecting suitable episodes in accordance with the intentions stated in the introductory verses.³⁸ The narrative structure of the episode depicting Leo’s reign, culminating in this brutal burning of learned men and books (covering 45 of the 120 verses of the reign as a whole), thus appears to make a statement – one that goes beyond the traditional post-iconoclastic representation of Leo

³⁶ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike* 4224-4236 (Lampsidis): ... ἀλλὰ γὰρ πῶς ἐξείπω; / βουλὴν βουλευέται σκαιάν, ἔκτοπον, ἀνοσίαν, / ἦν οὐδὲ Σκύθης ἄγριος, ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ Μασσαγέτης· / ὕλης σωρεύει φορυτὸν κύκλω περὶ τὸν οἶκον, / ὕλην ξηράν, εὐέξαπτον, δαδῖτιν, φρυγανῖτιν, / καὶ πῦρ ὑφάπτει λιπαρὸν καὶ καταφλέγει πάντας / τοὺς ἄνδρας, φεῦ, τοὺς ἱεροὺς καὶ σὺν αὐτοῖς τὰς βίβλους. / αἱ αἱ μισόκαλος ψυχή! φεῦ γνώμη θηριώδης! / ἐκ τῶν ὀνύχων ὁ δεινὸς πάντως ἐγνώσθη Λέων. / ἦσαν ἐκεῖ τὰ κάλλιστα πάντων τῶν παιδευμάτων, / καὶ τόμος εἷς ἐξαισίος ἐκ δράκοντος ἐντέρου, / τὰς δέλτους τὰς Ὀμηρικὰς φέρων ἐγγεγραμμένας, / τὴν Ἰλιάδα τέ φημι καὶ τὰ τῆς Ὀδυσσεΐας.

³⁷ Cf. Her. 1.215-16. For Manasses and his use of Herodotos, see Jeffreys 1979, 213-214; Rhoby 2014, 402-403; Paul & Rhoby 2019, 22 and 51.

³⁸ Cf. v. 4188 (ἀπολεξάμενος) with v. 24 (προχειρισάμενοι).

as an enemy of ancient literature and enters, rather, the contemporary socio-cultural meaning of learning.³⁹

In order to better understand to what extent Manasses' narrative choices are literary and innovative, let us compare this poetic and lively tableau with the same event in some other chronicles of the same period. Manasses draws from a number of chronographical sources that are used successively or in combination, and due to his poetic recasting it is sometimes rather difficult to determine exactly which source he has used.⁴⁰ For the Leo episode, two almost contemporary chronicles are of particular interest: the *Synopsis Historion*, written by George Kedrenos by the end of the eleventh century or the beginning of the twelfth century,⁴¹ and the *Epitome Historion* by John Zonaras, written in the first part of the twelfth century.⁴² Let us begin by looking at Kedrenos, who relates the burning of the school in relation to the riots by the Chalke gate, caused by Emperor Leo's famous removal of the icon of Christ.⁴³ It is not entirely clear whether it is the event as such, or just the location of the Chalke in relation to the Basilika, that guides the narrative structure of Kedrenos,⁴⁴ but the passage relevant to us runs as follows:

By the Basilika cistern (as it is called) was a revered palace, in which, according to an ancient decree, an ecumenical teacher was installed with twelve disciples who were noble in word and deed. Partaking of all philosophical knowledge with the quickness and strength of their

³⁹ We may also note Manasses' possible position as a teacher at the Patriarchal School, though we do not know if he was already teaching there at the time when he wrote the *Synopsis Chronike*; see Polemis 1996", esp. 280, and cf. Nilsson 2021, 114-115 and 140-141. In either case, Manasses certainly moved in circles in which the school was held in high esteem, and he might have been a student there himself when he was young.

⁴⁰ On Manasses' use of sources, see Jeffreys 1979, 207-215; Lampsidis 1996, xlvi-xlix and lii-liv; Karpozilos 2009, 541; Kiapidou 2009; Rhoby 2014.

⁴¹ On Kedrenos's chronicle, see Karpozilos 2009, 331-41; Scott, Burke & Tuffin 2021.

⁴² On Zonaras' chronicle, see Grigoriadis 1998, 465-489; Mallan 2018; Vilimonović 2021

⁴³ On the Chalke icon and its role in the iconoclastic events, see Brubaker & Haldon 2011, 128-135.

⁴⁴ Cf. Theoph. 405, 4-14.

nature, they pursued above all the divine wisdom of the Church. It was not considered righteous to do anything contrary to their view, even by emperors themselves. Konon [Leo] often called on them and tried to win them over to his own heresy. As they did not accept it but resisted him, he ordered that they be imprisoned there in dishonour, and after setting fire all around them during the night, the accursed man completely burned [them] along with their home, their many beautiful books and their sacred vessels.⁴⁵

We recognize the basic details of the situation from the version of Manasses: a learned teacher (here with the title *oikoumenikos didaskalos*) is in charge of the school, assisted by twelve disciples; their wisdom – with an emphasis on their divine wisdom of the Church (ἐκκλησιαστικὴν θεοσοφίαν) – is so great that even emperors have to ask for their advice.⁴⁶ When Leo cannot convince them to take his heretic side, he locks them up and burns down the house, together with books and other valuable items. Whereas Manasses pays relatively little attention to the iconoclastic conflict per se, Kedrenos clearly saw fit to devote rather much space to this aspect of Leo’s reign; by contrast, Manasses’ version lacks almost entirely the theological emphasis.⁴⁷ If we compare this version with that of Zonaras, it seems that he follows Kedrenos rather closely:

⁴⁵ George Kedrenos, *Synopsis Historion* 476.3 (Tarataglia): πρὸς γὰρ τῇ Βασιλικῇ τῇ λεγομένη κινστέρνῃ παλάτιον ἦν σεμνόν, ἐν ᾧ κατὰ τύπον ἀρχαῖον οἰκουμενικὸς ἐκάθητο διδάσκαλος, ἔχων μαθητὰς λόγῳ καὶ βίῳ σεμνοῦς τὸν ἀριθμὸν ἰβ´. οὗτοι πᾶσαν λογικὴν ἐπιστήμην τάχει τε καὶ μεγέθει φύσεως μετερχόμενοι οὐχ ἥκιστα τὴν ἐκκλησιαστικὴν μετῆσαν θεοσοφίαν, ὧν τῆς γνώμης χωρὶς οὐ θεμιτὸν τι ποιεῖν ἐδόκει οὐδὲ τοῖς βασιλεῦσιν αὐτοῖς. τούτους ὁ Κόνων συχνῶς προσκαλοῦμενος ἐπέειπε πείσαι τῇ αὐτοῦ αἵρέσει. καταθέσθαι μὴ καταδεχομένους δέ, ἀλλ’ ἀντιπίπτοντας ἀτίμως κατακλεισθῆναι διεκελεύσατο ἐκεῖσε, διὰ δὲ τῆς νυκτὸς πῦρ κυκλόθεν ὑφάνας αὐταῖς ἐστίας καὶ βίβλοις πολλαῖς καὶ καλαῖς καὶ σκεῦεσιν ἱεροῖς ὁ μιαρὸς κατέκαυσεν.

⁴⁶ On the *oikoumenikos didaskalos*, head teacher of the Patriarchal School, see Browning 1962 and Speck 1974, esp. pp. 74-91.

⁴⁷ We may note that Manasses in general shows a slight interest in Church matters; see Rhooy 2014, 397, on the “untergeordnete Rolle” of Church politics in the chronicle.

There was an imperial building in the so-called Basilika close to the Chalkoprateia, in which were kept numerous books of pagan as well as more noble and divine wisdom. This was the abode of the one who far surpassed all in letters, whom they call the ecumenical teacher; and he had twelve fellows who lived with him, they too taking part in intellectual learning to the highest degree.⁴⁸

We recognize the *oikoumenikos didaskalos*, head of the patriarchal academy, with his twelve assistants, here explicitly engaged in both pagan and Christian learning. They function as teachers available for interested students, enjoying a public maintenance, and as advisors of the emperor, who tries to convince them of “his lewd opinion as regards the revered images”.⁴⁹

Not only did they not share his faith, but they also tried very hard to make him change his opinion in this matter, on the one hand caressing the lionlike beast [Leo] and praying for his delivery, on the other resisting even more nobly and refuting his impiety. But he plugged his ears like a shield and did not listen to the voice of prayers, nor was he cured by the wise. Thus often meeting with them and failing to change their mind, he had them walk to their school – that is, that imperial house – and he ordered that much flammable firewood be gathered and put around the house as night had come, and in this way he burned down the house, along with the books and these wise and reverent men.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ John Zonaras, *Epitome Historion* III, 259.18-26 (Büttner-Wobst): οἶκος ἦν ἐν τῇ καλουμένῃ Βασιλικῇ ἔγγιστα τῶν Χαλκοπρατίων βασιλείως, ἐν ᾧ καὶ βίβλοι τῆς τε θύραθεν σοφίας καὶ τῆς εὐγενεστέρας καὶ θειοτέρας πολλαὶ ἐναπέκειντο. ἦν δ' οὗτος ἀνέκαθεν τοῦ προύχοντος ἐν λόγοις κατοικητήριον, ὃν οἰκουμηνικὸν ἐκάλουσαν διδάσκαλον· ὃς καὶ δώδεκα εἶχεν ἑτέρους συνοικοῦντας αὐτῷ, κάκεινους τῆς λογικῆς παιδείας μετέχοντας κατὰ τὸ ἀκρότατον.

⁴⁹ John Zonaras, *Epitome Historion* III, 260.6-11: (Büttner-Wobst): τούτοις καὶ σιτήσεις ἀνεῖντο δημόσια ... τὴν περὶ τῶν σεβαστῶν εἰκόνων γνώμην αὐτοῦ τὴν πονηρὰν ...

⁵⁰ John Zonaras, *Epitome Historion* III, 260.11-26 (ed. Büttner-Wobst): οἱ δὲ οὐχ ὅσον οὐχ ὠμοδόξουν αὐτῷ, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτὸν μεταστῆσαι τῆς γνώμης ταύτης ἐπεχείρουν ὀλοσχερῶς, πῆ μὲν καταπῶντες τὸν θῆρα τὸν λεοντάνυμον καὶ κατεπάδοντες αὐτοῦ τὰ σωτήρια, πῆ δὲ γενναιότερον ἀντιβαίνοντες καὶ διελέγοντες τὴν ἀσέβειαν. ὁ δὲ ὡσεὶ ἀσπίς ἔβυε τὰ ὄψα καὶ φωνῆς ἐπαδόντων οὐκ ἤκουεν οὐδ' ἐφαρμακεύετο παρὰ

In line with Zonaras' general tendency, his version is longer and more detailed than that of Kedrenos, with more lively narrative elements and less focus on theological matters. It is not as literary and poetic as the garden scene depicted by Manasses, but rather another kind of personal reworking of the chronographical tradition. If we compare both versions to that of Manasses, a conspicuous detail is the simile used by the latter for the head teacher and his twelve colleagues: they are not indicated by formal titles, but as “a bright sun” and as “shining stars and torches of the night / completing the number of the zodiac circle”. Just like the garden imagery, this poetic expression ties in with the opening ekphrasis and the Creation of the heaven, planets, and stars (100-138), and perhaps also with the contemporary interest in astrology.⁵¹

Since the burning of the school by Leo appears also in earlier chronicles, it could be argued that Manasses based his version on one of those. However, he frequently turns to both Kedrenos and Zonaras in other parts of his chronicle;⁵² moreover, it is in these two chronicles that we find the grand finale of Manasses' episode – the destruction of the Homeric manuscripts. However, we have to leave Leo's reign and turn back to the fifth century and the short reign of Basiliskos (or rather his usurpation under Zeno in 475-476). Kedrenos offers the following account:

When he [Basiliskos] had been proclaimed, there was a fire in the city which destroyed its most flourishing part. Starting in the middle of the Chalkoprataia it consumed both porticoes and everything adjacent to them, including what is known as the Basilika, in which there was a library that had 120 000 books, among which was a dragon's intestine 120 feet long upon which Homer's poems, namely the *Iliad* and the

τῶν σοφῶν. πολλὰ κίς οὖν αὐτοῖς προσφιλικῶς καὶ τὴν αὐτῶν μετάθεσιν ἀπογνοῦς, τοὺς μὲν ἀφήκεν εἰς τὴν σφετέραν πορευθῆναι διατριβὴν, τὸν οἶκον ἐκεῖνον δηλαδὴ τὸν βασιλείον, αὐτὸς δὲ κελεύσας εὐπρηστον ὕλην συναχθῆναι πολλὴν καὶ περίξ τοῦ οἴκου τεθεῖσαν ἀναφθῆναι νυκτός, οὕτω τὸν τε οἶκον σὺν ταῖς βίβλοις καὶ τοὺς σοφοὺς ἐκεῖνους ἄνδρας καὶ σεβασμίους κατέκαυσε.

⁵¹ Manasses wrote a poem on astrology and the zodiac for sebastokratorissa Irene; Miller 1872, 1-112. The authorship of this text has been disputed, but see Rhooby 2009, 321-329; now also Nilsson 2021, 117-124.

⁵² See Jeffreys 1979, 209-11; Kiapidou 2009; Karpozilos 2009, 541.

Odyssey, were written in gold letters, together with the story of the heroes' deeds.⁵³

Zonaras narrates a very similar story: the fire starting at the Chalkoprateia and spreading to buildings nearby, reducing everything to ashes:

[...] indeed even the so-called Basilika, in which there was a library containing 120 000 books. Among them, it is said, was a snake's intestine, measuring 120 feet, with the poems of Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, written in gold letters, which Malchos mentions in his account of the emperors.⁵⁴

While Manasses mentions the reign of Basiliskos (2933-34) only in passing, he has lifted the fire destroying the library from that period and placed it in the reign of Leo III, clearly as a means of enhancing the latter's hostility towards books and learning.⁵⁵ By contrast, he has not adopted the tragic continuation of the fire narrated by both Kedrenos and Zonaras, spreading to the nearby palace of Lausos and incinerating an invaluable collection of ancient statues.⁵⁶ This may be somewhat

⁵³ George Kedrenos 384.3 (Tarataglia): τούτου δὲ ἀναγορευθέντος ὁ συμβᾶς ἐμπρησμός κατὰ τὴν πόλιν τὸ ἀνθηρότατον μέρος διέφθειρεν· ἐν γὰρ τοῦ μέσου τῶν Χαλκοπρατίων ἀρξάμενος αὐτάς τε ἀνάλωσεν ἄμφω τὰς στοὰς καὶ τὰ προσεχῆ πάντα, τὴν τε καλουμένην βασιλικήν, ἐν ἧ ἀπέκειτο βιβλιοθήκη ἔχουσα βίβλους μυριάδας ἰβ', μεθ' ὧν βιβλίων καὶ τὸ τοῦ δράκοντος ἔντερον ποδῶν ρκ', ἐν ᾧ ἦν γεγραμμένα τὰ τοῦ Ὀμήρου ποιήματα, ἢ τε Ἰλιάς καὶ ἡ Ὀδύσσεια, χρυσοῖς ἐγγεγραμμένα τῷ γράμμασι, μετὰ καὶ τῆς ἱστορίας τῆς τῶν ἡρώων πράξεως. Tr. Mango, Vickers & Francis 1992, 91 (revised).

⁵⁴ John Zonaras III, 131.1-8 (Büttner-Wobst): ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ αὐτὴν τὴν κεκλημένην Βασιλικήν, καθ' ἣν καὶ βιβλιοθήκη ἐτύγγανε δώδεκα μυριάδας βιβλίων ἀποκειμένων ἐν αὐτῇ ἔχουσα· ἐν οἷς ἀναγράφεται εἶναι καὶ δράκοντος ἔντερον, μήκους ὄν ποδῶν ἑκατὸν εἴκοσιν, ἔχον ἐγγεγραμμένα χρυσοῖς γράμμασι τὰ τοῦ Ὀμήρου ποιήματα, τὴν τε Ἰλιάδα καὶ τὴν Ὀδύσειαν, οὗ καὶ ὁ Μάλχος τὰ περὶ τούτων τῶν βασιλέων συγγραφόμενος μέμνηται. Tr. Mango, Vickers & Francis 1992, 91 (revised).

⁵⁵ This indicates that Manasses relied on Kedrenos and/or Zonaras rather than Leo 177.7-18 as indicated by Lampsidis 1996, 228-30, app., since Leo does not include the account of the destroyed manuscript. Cf. Karpozilos 2009, 545-546, and Rhoby 2014, 398-399.

⁵⁶ See Mango, Vickers & Francis 1992; Bardill 1997, esp. p. 85; Bassett 2004, 98-120 and 232-238.

surprising for an author so fond of description of works of art,⁵⁷ but such a narrative turn would have taken his focus away from the book and thus away from *logos*. Nor did he bother with the details of the book offered by his predecessors; that too might have disrupted the narrative flow,⁵⁸ and the names and titles would have been difficult to fit into the metre – an interesting indication of the limitation and yet dramatic potential of using verse.

The *Synopsis Chronike* apparently did not initiate a new trend in twelfth-century chronicle writing; no other chronicle in verse from the Komnenian period survives.⁵⁹ Manasses' versification stands out as a unique attempt to turn history into poetry, thus approaching the contemporary novels in both form and narrative technique. The difference from other chronicles of the same period is made very clear if we look at a successor of Manasses, as far as we know the only chronicler to have used Manasses as one of his sources: Michael Glykas.⁶⁰ Glykas' account of the burning of the school in Leo's reign may be seen as a return to Kedrenos or even earlier chronicles in its presentation of bare details:

Also the following is a sign of Leo's ill-doing, in addition to the other things. Near the precincts of the Divine Wisdom was built a beautiful house, in which books were stored, numbering about 36 500, having as their custodian and protector a noble and wise man. There were under him other wondrous men, about twelve, teaching without reward those who wanted; they were so famous with regard to excellence that even emperors should not act without them. The evil [Leo] shares with them the ideas of his ungodly opinion, and when he cannot convince them he piles up around the divine church flammable firewood and

⁵⁷ On Manasses' ekphrasis of objects of art, see Nilsson 2005, esp. 121-126, and 2011. See now also Foskolou 2018 and Nilsson 2021, 35-46.

⁵⁸ On Kedrenos' "story of the heroes' deeds" as, possibly, the *Chrestomathia* of Proklos, see Allen 1912, 259. Malchos, indicated as a source by Zonaras, was a fifth-century historian, surviving only in fragments. According to the *Suda*, he described the fire and the destruction of the statues. For the latest edition and study of Malchos, see Cresci 1982.

⁵⁹ On the other Byzantine verse chronicle, written by Ephraim of Ainos in the early fourteenth century, see Nilsson 2019, 524-530.

⁶⁰ On the chronicle of Glykas, see Karpozilos 2009, 585-604.

lights a bright fire, and he incinerates all together, both the divine men and with them the books.⁶¹

It could be argued that Glykas has been using another primary source here, but the choice of words indicate that Manasses' version has indeed been consulted.⁶² The prosaic brevity has, however, excluded all narrative detail and emotional pathos. As Manasses describes how Leo tries to convert the teachers of the school, he creates a dramatic suspense:

These men, so respectable, living such honorable lives / overflowing with all sorts of graces / the emperor thus thirsted to catch in his nets / and have them as partners in his ungodly madness. / When he had instigated all kinds of wiles he was perturbed / – for he could not persuade them by fear or threats, / and when he tried with gold, an ally hard to beat, / he realized he was pursuing an eagle or shooting for the stars – / and finally despaired.⁶³

Glykas leaves out such narrative devices and goes directly from the 'trying to convince' to the burning, as indeed also Kedrenos and Zonaras did. Manasses thus remains an exception in this and also as regards

⁶¹ Michael Glykas, 522.6-18 (Bekker): Δεῖγμα δὲ τῆς τοῦ Λέοντος κακοπραγίας πρὸς τοῖς ἄλλοις καὶ τοῦτο. ἐγγὺς τοῦ τεμένους τῆς ἁγίας τοῦ θεοῦ σοφίας οἶκος δεδόμητο λαμπρὸς, ἐν ᾧ βιβλίοι τεθησαυρισμένοι ἦσαν, τὸν ἀριθμὸν ὡσεὶ τρισμῦρια ἑξακισχίλια πρὸς ἄλλαις πεντακοσίαις, ἔχουσαι φύλακά τε καὶ προϊστάμενον ἄνδρα τίμιον καὶ σοφόν. ἦσαν δὲ καὶ ὑπ' αὐτὸν ἕτεροι ἄνδρες θαυμαστοί, ὡσεὶ ἰβ', ἀμισθὶ τοὺς θέλοντας ἐκπαιδεύοντες· ὁ γοῦν κάκιστος κοινοῦται καὶ τούτοις τὰ τῆς ἀθέου γνώμης αὐτοῦ, καὶ μὴ ἔχων καταπειθεῖς εὐρεῖν αὐτοὺς ὕλην περιωρεῦει εὐέξαπτον κύκλῳ τοῦ θεοῦ ναοῦ, καὶ πῦρ ὑφάπτει λιπαρόν, καὶ πάντα ὁμοῦ καταφλέγει, τοὺς τε θεοῦ ἐκείνους ἄνδρας καὶ σὺν αὐτοῖς τὰς βιβλούς.

⁶² Cf. also Karpozilos 2009, 541-542 and 594, and Rhoby 2014, 404-407, on the relation between Manasses and Glykas. We may also note that Glykas, just like Manasses, mentions the reign of Basiliskos only in passing.

⁶³ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike* 4216-4224 (Lampsidis): τοιοῦτους οὖν σεμνοπρεπεῖς ὄντας καὶ σεμνοβίους / καὶ χύσει πελαγίζοντας παντοδαπῶν χαρίτων / ἐντὸς ἀρκύων συλλαβεῖν ὁ βασιλεὺς ἐδίψα / καὶ σχεῖν κάκεινους κοινωνοὺς τῆς λύσεως τῆς δυσθέου. / ὡς δὲ κινήσας μηχανὰς ἀπάσας ἀπεκρούσθη / (οὐ γὰρ φοβῶν, οὐκ ἀπειλῶν ἴσχυσε τούτους πείσαι, / καὶ τῷ χρυσῷ χρησάμενος, συμμάχῳ δυσμαχίτῳ, / ἔγνω διώκων ἀετὸν ἢ βάλλων εἰς ἀστέρας), τὸ τελευταῖον ἀπογνοῦς, ...

the emotional and dramatic tone, which may be compared rather to historical narratives with autobiographical elements, such as the *Alexiad* of Anna Komnena. It has been suggested that it was the verse form that allowed Manasses to narrate history in such an emotional manner, and the literary representation clearly allowed him to be both personal and dramatic.⁶⁴ In his versified version of the reign of Leo III, the focus has been moved from the theological questions of iconoclasm to emotional and intellectual aspects: the destruction of the library as an act of utter disrespect for letters. It could of course be argued that Manasses moved the event in order to rewrite history as such, believing that the Homeric manuscript had survived the fifth-century fire (or that that fire had never taken place) and was still kept in the library in Leo's reign, but it seems more likely that his primary concern has been a choice based on the narrative potential of the episode(s) within the frame of his own chronicle.⁶⁵ The recasting allowed Manasses to create yet another literary garden of Eden, echoing the garden of Creation in the opening section of the *Synopsis Chronike*, while at the same time expressing his – and his patron's – devotion to ancient literature and ancient wisdom.

The heritage of Manasses: literary history and historical literature

The passage discussed above may not provide us with new historical details, but rather confuse historians by suddenly presenting events in the wrong order. The narrative choices as such do, however, offer us important information on narrative awareness and literary preferences. And even if modern scholars do not agree with this way of writing history, not respecting the 'truth' and reminding us rather of fictional strategies, the verse chronicle of Manasses seems to have met with quite some interest in subsequent centuries. It is not difficult to imagine how his playful rewriting of chronographical matter – a clear and comprehensive treatise, according to the patron's wish – won an audience beyond the

⁶⁴ Scott 2006, 43; Rhoby 2014, 393-394.

⁶⁵ Cf. Karpozilos 2009, 545-546.

intellectual circles of the capital.⁶⁶ Guided by a competent and constantly present narrator, the reader/listener could sit back and enjoy known stories in a new form, often with an entertaining and/or didactic twist.

Even if Michael Glykas seems to have recast some of Manasses's verses back into prose in the twelfth century, a later 'continuator' of the *Synopsis Chronike* is witness to a narrative urge to pick up where Manasses left off. Only 79 political verses have survived, narrating events that took place during the Fourth Crusade; they accordingly do not allow us to draw any conclusions as to whether the Continuation in fact picked up where Manasses left off, but it has been convincingly shown that the content and order of events are drawn from the *History* of Niketas Choniates (ca. 1155-1215/16). Based on the dating of Choniates' work and the manuscript transmitting the verses, we can place the Continuation of Manasses in the first half of the thirteenth century.⁶⁷ In the same period, or somewhat later, someone also undertook to adapt Manasses' chronicle into prose, changing the linguistic register into vernacular Greek. Surviving in no less than 24 known manuscripts this paraphrase seems to have been popular, inspiring also continuations of the chronicle, in some cases even as far as to include the Turkish sultans.⁶⁸ The oldest manuscript dates to the fifteenth century, but it is possible that the first paraphrase of the *Synopsis Chronike* was written earlier than that, perhaps not very long after its composition. While such procedures have often been seen as a sign of the audience's lack of education, it is in fact likely that well known works in lower linguistic registers were appreciated also by learned readers, simply for being easier to read and less time consuming.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ The large number of manuscripts witness of a wide circulation of the text, even if many of them belong to later periods; see Lampsidis 1996, lxxvi-cxlix.

⁶⁷ See Grégoire 1924, arguing for an early date (1204/5). Briefly on this matter from the perspective of Choniates, see Simpson 2013, 109-110; for an updated discussion of the composition process of Choniates' *History*, see 68-77.

⁶⁸ First discussed in Praechter 1895 and 1898, but note Genova 1993, adding new manuscripts and defining two redactions of the original paraphrase of Manasses' text. See also the recent edition by Iadevaia 2000-2008 (however not taking into account the manuscripts added by Genova).

⁶⁹ Cf. e.g. Horrocks 2010, 264, with Trapp 1993 and Davis 2013, esp. p. 163.

In light of the entertaining and literary character of the *Synopsis Chronike*, it is not surprising that it also seems to have influenced – or perhaps rather provided material for – works such as the vernacular romances the *Tale of Achilles* and the *Tale of Troy*, probably belonging to the fourteenth century. These late rewritings of Homeric heroes and deeds in a popular vein have met with little scholarly sympathy, but they do bear witness to the extreme tenacity of the Homeric tradition, and also to the proliferation of Manasses’s chronicle.⁷⁰ Yet another indication is the *Iliad* composed by Konstantinos Hermoniakos, a *metaphrasis* commissioned by the despot of Epiros at some point between 1323 and 1335. This extensive rewriting of the Homeric epics into a lower linguistic register draws primarily on the twelfth-century *Allegories on the Iliad* by John Tzetzes, but Tzetzes has been combined with material from Manasses and ancient literature.⁷¹ In the case of Manasses’ inclusion in the Troy romances, it is of course one particular episode that has been used, namely his fairly long account of the Trojan War (1108-1470).⁷² It is thus possible that late Byzantine writers had access to shorter or longer excerpts rather than the entire chronicle, something that is indicated also by the manuscript tradition and in particular the collections of excerpts from various periods.⁷³ Yet another witness to the wide diffusion of the *Synopsis Chronike* is its reception in the Slavonic tradition in the fourteenth century, most notably perhaps the translation into Bulgarian for Tsar Ivan Alexander, preserved in a richly illuminated manuscript now in the Vatican Library.⁷⁴

Manasses’ chronicle was also translated and circulated in the West, starting with the increasing interest for ‘Roman’ history and thereby also the Byzantine chronicles. The *Synopsis Chronike* was translated into

⁷⁰ Jeffreys 1979, 236-237; developed in Nilsson 2004 See now also Lavagnini 2016; Goldwyn & Nilsson 2019.

⁷¹ Jeffreys 1975.

⁷² On this episode, see Nilsson 2006, 23-26; Reinsch 2007; Karpozilos 2009, 558-583 (text and commentary).

⁷³ Lampsidis 1984 and 1985; Nilsson & Nyström 2009, esp. 52-59.

⁷⁴ For the text and images, see the facsimile publication *Constantine Manasses, Synopsis chroniki* and the notes of the translation by Yuretich 2018. For an analysis, see Boeck 2010 and 2015, with further references.

Latin in 1573, some forty years before the *editio princeps* (Meursius 1616). The translator was a certain Johannes Leunclavius (Löwenklau) (1541-1594), a German historian and orientalist who had studied Greek with Philip Melanchthon in Wittenberg and who translated also ancient authors such as Xenophon (1565) and Plutarch (1565).⁷⁵ A contemporary reader, Martin Crusius (Kraus) (1526-1607), a renowned Hellenist in Tübingen, produced a copy of Manasses' chronicle in 1578/79 and enjoyed it so much that he recommended it for, among other things, its clear and lucid style.⁷⁶ Manasses was not yet seen as a bad historian – because history was not yet seen as void of rhetorical devices – and the *Annales Constantini Manassis* in the Leunclavius translation must have circulated rather widely.

Let us return to the episode discussed above, the burning of the school along with all its books under Leo III, and take a brief look at a seventeenth-century reader of Manasses, the Danish physician and anatomist Thomas Bartholin (1616-1680). Bartholin was a learned man who had studied and travelled in Europe, gathering an impressive collection of books and manuscripts. In 1670 they all went up in flames as his estate was destroyed in a fire, and Bartholin composed a text addressing his sons, *De bibliothecae incendio* – in fact a sort of self-consolation in which he enumerated past destructions of important libraries. As he reaches the fire of the “Library of Constantinople”, he brings up “the intestine of a dragon twenty feet long on which the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Homer had been written in letters of gold” (*draconis intestinum longum pedes 20, cui Homeri Ilias & Odyssea aureis litteris erant inscripta*) and the fact that some chronicles placed its destruction in the reign of Basiliskos. He, however, is prone to believe in a different version: that of the Annals of Manasses, placing the event in the reign of Leo the Isaurian. He then cites the entire passage (*Synopsis*

⁷⁵ The edition of Meursius included also the translation by Leunclavius; for a list of early editions and translations, see Lampsidis 1996, clv-clix. Some forty years after the appearance of the *editio princeps*, the chronicle appeared in the Paris *Corpus Byzantinae Historiae* (revised ed. by Meursius and tr. by Leunclavius).

⁷⁶ See Rhoby 2014, 392; Lampsidis 1988, 99. For the manuscript, see Lampsidis 1996, xcv.

Chronike 4188-4136) from the translation of Leunclavius (*ex versione Lewenclavii*), finishing with “This according to Constantinus” (*Tantum Constantinus*).⁷⁷ Manasses’ version of this particular episode indeed seems to have been quite widely accepted, as even Edward Gibbon refers to it a century later. He places the fire of “the royal college of Constantinople” under the reign of Leo and goes on:

In the pompous style of the age, the president of that foundation was named the Sun of Science: his twelve associates, the professors in the different arts and faculties, were the twelve signs of the zodiac; a library of thirty-six thousand five hundred volumes was open to their inquiries; and they could show an ancient manuscript of Homer, on a roll of parchment one hundred and twenty feet in length, the intestines, as it was fabled, of a prodigious serpent.⁷⁸

Gibbon refers to Du Cagne in turn referring to Kedrenos, Zonaras, Glykas and Manasses, but as we have seen above this particular version of the event appears only in Manasses. One of the rewritings of Manasses has thus found its way into the modern era, where it still lingers in popular accounts of the legendary ‘college’ of Constantinople.⁷⁹

A new way of looking at history in general has certainly appeared over the last few decades, and our scholarly attitude towards Byzantine chroniclers is clearly changing as our understanding of their own attitudes increases. We no longer see the boundary between history and chronicle in Byzantium as absolute, and there is nothing provoking in

⁷⁷ Thomas Bertholin, *De bibliothecae incendio*, 16-21. English tr. O’Malley 1961, 1-42, here 7-8.

⁷⁸ Gibbon 1841 (1788), 24.

⁷⁹ Cf. Manguel 2007, 70: “Principal among the schools of higher learning was the Royal College of Constantinople whose president was pompously called the Sun of Science, while his twelve assistants, the twelve professor of the various faculties, were known as the Twelve Signs of the Zodiac. The College possessed a library of over 35 000 volumes, including many Greek works, among them a manuscript of Homer written on a roll of parchment 20 feet long, said to be the intestines of a fabulous serpent.”

stating that “history *is* literature”.⁸⁰ Constantine Manasses broke free from the traditional form and wrote a literary chronicle. If chronicles are indeed to be seen as advocates of the Byzantine worldview,⁸¹ perhaps in the case of the *Synopsis Chronike* we are dealing rather with an advocate of the twelfth-century view of literature. In spite of that – or perhaps thanks to the literary devices that such an endeavour entailed – his representation of history proved to be a long-lived story.

⁸⁰ Macrides 2010, xi.

⁸¹ Tocci 2014, 62-63.

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