

# THE POEM OF DIGENES AKRITES: THE FRONTIER AND THE BYZANTINE IDENTITY

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The Poem of Digenes Akrites is the nearest thing we have in Byzantine studies to *el poema de mio Cid*. They are of course very different. At the heart of this difference is the fact that the Byzantine frontier with Islam collapsed in the late eleventh century, while in Spain it was the Muslim frontier which collapsed before finally stabilising around Granada. There is no need to dwell on the importance of the frontier for a sense of identity, nor that there will be some sort of correlation between a sense of identity and the condition of the frontier: whether it is stable or unstable; collapsing or expanding. Byzantium's eastern frontier is instructive in this respect. From the mid-tenth to the mid-eleventh century it expanded with great rapidity. At the beginning of the tenth century the frontier zone stretched from the Taurus mountains in the south to the Pontic Alps in the north. The rich lands of the middle Euphrates –the rough equivalent of the Tagus or possibly Guadalquivir valleys– were still firmly under Muslim control. By the middle of the eleventh century the Byzantines controlled the Euphrates lands all the way to the Syrian desert; they also controlled the Armenian highlands to the north which dominated the region. It represents an advance of some five hundred miles. But within fifty years not only had Byzantium lost control of its new territories, but it had failed to reestablish its old frontier line and the Turks were in the process of settling Anatolia all the way to the Aegean. Part of the interest of the poem of

Digenes Akrites is that its historical materials come from the period of expansion but its literary composition from the time of collapse.

*The story:* an Arab emir raids across the frontier and comes to the palace of a Byzantine magnate from the Doukas family - historically one of the great Anatolian military families. The emir seizes the daughter of the house and carries her back to Syria. Her brothers set out to rescue her. The emir demands that they select one of their number to fight in single combat against him. The honour goes to the youngest brother who duly vanquishes the emir. The latter then gives the brothers permission to take their sister back across the border, but only if they can find her, for he has hidden her away. In the end, he relents and hands the girl over. But more than that, for love of the girl he proposes to convert to christianity, with the proviso that they accept him as their brother-in-law; in other words, on condition that he can marry their sister. And so it happens. They return to Byzantine territory and the emir marries the girl. The product of their union was the hero of the poem –Digenes Akrites– the «Frontiersman of mixed race». But before we learn of the hero's upbringing we are treated to a long episode that interrupts the flow of the narrative: the emir's transfer of his mother and his family from Syria to Byzantine territory. This episode has a double interest: in the first place, it is based on an historical incident, when a Syrian tribe went over to Byzantium in the early tenth century and, in the second, it was used quite deliberately by the poet to celebrate the superiority of Christianity over Islam. We can now return to the childhood of Digenes Akrites. By the age of nine he is ripping bears apart with his bare hands, thus precociously proving himself in the hunting field, which was such an important part of an aristocrat's upbringing. To complete his martial education he sought out the brigands who infested the border region. He stayed with them and proved his manliness. Next it is time to get married. Digenes's marriage is one of the high points of the poem, for with marriage you enter into a man's estate. Our hero went courting a daughter of the Doukas family, famed for her beauty and the wealth of her dowry. Though secluded in the usual Byzantine fashion, the girl sees Digenes and immediately falls in love. Her family disapprove of the match for obvious reasons. They belong to the old Anatolian aristocracy; Digenes is a parvenu. But the girl's nurse does all she can for her charge and facilitates her abduction by Digenes. Her brothers together with the family retainers give chase, but our hero is able to deal with them. The girl's father is so impressed by his prowess that he drops his objections to the marriage and outlines the mouth watering dowry that awaits him. The price was high: it would mean staying with the girl's family. Digenes marries the girl, but turns the dowry down and departs with her for the frontier. There he built up such a reputation that the

Byzantine Emperor Basil decided that he must meet him in person, so he sets out for the eastern frontiers of his Empire. There follows a famous interview between them, in which Digenes Akrites gives the emperor advice about how he should rule, while the latter raised Digenes to patrician status and appointed him Warden of the Marches—to use the English equivalent. We now pass to the trials of office: President Clinton would recognise them immediately, since they came largely in the form of sexual temptation. Digenes meets a girl lost and abandoned—not in the corridors of power—but out in the desert. His instincts are to help her, but he ends up by seducing her. He squares his conscience by fixing her up with a suitable marriage. He returns to his «Hillary», who is herself in danger: she is abducted by a dragon masquerading as a handsome young man—an allegory of political ambitions of her own? Nothing daunted our hero sets out to rescue her. In doing so he overcomes all the terrors of the borderlands: wild beasts and brigands—not a word is said about Muslims. But Digenes has not counted on his final adversary—the Amazon Maximo. They fight a duel, in which Digenes finally overcomes the Amazon, who allows herself to be seduced as a token of her submission. Digenes is so appalled by this lapse of his that he kills Maximo on the grounds that it's all her fault—she is the adulteress! To show his wife that he is a changed character Digenes builds a wonderful palace—lovingly described—on the banks of the Euphrates. But they have little time to enjoy its delights. Digenes starts to have back trouble and realises that he won't survive much longer. He doesn't know what will happen to his wife after his death, but ever obliging his wife expires just before he does. And the poem ends with Christian pieties about eternal life. A bit of an anti-climax.

I hope that this brief summary of the poem of *Digenes Akrites* has underlined its oddities. In terms of genre it drifts from epic to romance. Down to the meeting between the emperor and Digenes the story is very largely based on relatively recent historical incidents and personalities in however distorted a form. It is not without interest that the Russian version of the poem ends with this episode. It has been argued—convincingly in my opinion—that the Russian version went back to an earlier version of the poem than any that has survived. It also treats the meeting of hero and emperor in a rather different manner. It is far more hostile to the emperor. The incident is presented as a triumph for Digenes over imperial authority. The first half of the poem consists of a series of episodes that don't quite fit together. I have already mentioned the clumsy interpolation of the story of the emir fetching his mother and family from Syria. Already in the early tenth century we hear of Anatolian minstrels celebrating in song events that occurred along the frontier. It is a fair assumption that some of these were worked together

into an epic around the figure of *Digenes Akrites*. He is not the only hero celebrated by Byzantine ballads, but was the only one who attracted an extended piece of poetry. Hard as historians have tried they have not been able to tie Digenes down to some historical original. He seems from the start to have been a figure of fantasy, unlike his parents. But he did serve to underline the ambiguities of frontier life: a melting pot for all sorts of different peoples.

The second part of the poem after the meeting with the emperor is much closer to those Hellenistic romances by such authors as Achilles Tatius which became increasingly popular among educated Byzantines in the eleventh century and which would be imitated by Byzantine authors in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The literary style of the poem of *Digenes Akrites* is close to the pastiches of Hellenistic romances which were produced at the Byzantine court in the mid-twelfth century, but scholars are agreed that its composition precedes these romances by several decades. The material of the second part of the poem owes nothing to Hellenistic romances. It is specific to Byzantium's eastern frontier but looking back not to the recent but the distant past. Take the name Maximo given to Digenes's Amazon opponent. It was in fact the title accorded in late classical times to the high priestess of Amazon cults that were popular in north eastern Anatolia. Take Philopappos the brigand chieftain. This was the name of the dynasty which reigned over Commagene—the lands east of the Euphrates—when it was a client kingdom of the Romans in the first centuries A.D. His second in command Ionnakes or «Little John» has been identified with Justinian's great minister John of Cappadocia. The assumption must be that stories rooted back in the classical era continued to circulate becoming more and more fantastical.

We come to the vexed question of the dating. The poem of *Digenes Akrites* is one of those medieval literary texts that literary purists have put off bounds to historians because it is impossible to establish any very close dating for its composition. The fact that it survives in a variety of versions in different linguistic registers does not make the question of dating easier. It is also bedevilled by an essentially academic controversy which from the late nineteenth century until today has had serious political repercussions in Greece: the question of whether education and public life in Greece should be conducted in the demotic or the learned language. Liberals opting for the former and conservatives for the latter. The poem of *Digenes Akrites* means an enormous amount to the Greeks; it is their medieval epic which they can set beside *Poema de mio Cid* or the *Chanson de Roland*. The two oldest manuscripts date from the fourteenth century. The shorter of the two is preserved in the Escorial and is in a form of the popular language. The longer is preserved in the Greek monastery of Grottaferrata outside Rome and

is in educated speech. There is general agreement that the latter represents the fullest and most coherent version; less general agreement that the Escorial version represents a popular reworking of the Grottaferrata. What can't be denied is that quite suddenly in the early twelfth century court circles pick up on the legends and the figure of Digenes Akrites; equally that after 1204 such references disappear. It has always struck me that this brief interest in Digenes Akrites at the Byzantine court was symptomatic of the stories being given literary form, a form that owed much to Hellenistic romance. There are, for example, plenty of reminiscences of Achilles Tatius in the Grottaferrata version – some of which are also to be found in the Escorial version. This is quite out of character for a supposedly popular provincial version and suggests its dependence on the Grottaferrata version.

The language and the literary form points to the Comnenian court of the early to mid-twelfth century as the place of origin of the poem of Digenes Akrites. This may seem to be a large assumption too make, but it accords with all that we know about Byzantine education and literary and intellectual life, which was concentrated in the capital. The taste for romance literature was fashionable in the Byzantine capital from the late eleventh century. It has become usual to explain the interest at court in the exploits of Digenes Akrites by the flight of the great Anatolian families to Constantinople in the face of the Turkish advance in the late eleventh century. The most successful of these refugee families was the house of Komnenos, which secured the throne of Constantinople. We are very well informed about Alexius I Komnenos's rise to power thanks to the history of his early life written by his son-in-law Nicephorus Bryennios: a history incidentally which has been characterised as a «forerunner of romance». It is built around the marriage of Alexius I Comnenus – a new Akrites? – to a daughter of the house of Doukas. One of the scenes is of the young Alexius making his way to his family home at Kastamon in north western Anatolia and finding it infested with Turks. But the Komnenoi had made alliances with old families, often from Europe like the Bryennioi and had established a new power base. Other Anatolian families were far less lucky. They struggled for places at Constantinople, but unless you had blood or marriage ties with the Komnenoi you had precious little chance of anything but some minor position. They were soon disaffected. Alexius Komnenos's reign was notable for the number of conspiracies. Almost all of these emanated from these Anatolian families, who objected to Alexius's concentration on the affairs of the European provinces of the Empire and his neglect of the Anatolian. They looked back nostalgically to the great days under Basil II. This is reflected in the throwaway line in the poem of Digenes Akrites which describes how «imperial glory « was buried along with the Emperor Basil. It was also an indication of their di-

saffection from the imperial regime of their own day. But their influence decreased after Alexius Komnenos had suppressed the last serious conspiracy of his reign ca. 1106. It has become fashionable to locate the origins of the early literary version among this group of disaffected Anatolian families. There are certainly hints of criticism of imperial authority in the poem, but they are suitably veiled. The form that we have points to a slightly later period when this group had ceased to count at the imperial court. To my mind it is more likely that what emerged from this group was something like the Russian version of the poem.

The circumstances of the composition of the poem allow us to look at the role of the frontier in the Byzantine identity at two, if not three, distinct moments. It is possible to disentangle the sense of identity of the great Anatolian families at the height of their power in the tenth century but also how this turned in the aftermath of the defeat at Manzikert in 1071 from aristocratic defiance to compliance with imperial power. The frontier zone described in the opening books of the poem is that of the early tenth century. The administrative geography, at least in the first books of the poem, is surprisingly accurate. The emperor invested Digenes Akrites with authority over the frontiers by virtue of an imperial Golden Bull. This was exactly what happened at the beginning of the tenth century when the Emperor Leo the Wise established a frontier command for an Armenian warband leader called Melias who had been playing off Byzantine against Arab. In legendary form this man makes an appearance in the poem as one of the leaders of the gang of brigands. The frontier itself in the poem is a land of «unpeopled passes» through the Taurus mountains, which separated the Byzantine Empire from the lands of Islam. It was also a frontier which had to be defended. The passes had garrisons at either end. When the girl's brothers went to her rescue, they were stopped by the Muslim sentries at the other end of the pass known as «Difficult». Their request for an interview with the Emir was duly passed on. This is a detail which suggests a relatively well defined frontier. The Anatolian families and their retainers defended christianity against Islam. It was not enough for the Emir to go over to the Byzantine side, receive baptism and marry a Byzantine princess. It had to be demonstrated that christianity was superior to Islam. Much of the episode of the Emir and his mother is taken up by a disputation between them on the relative merits of christianity and Islam. The poem, as you would expect, presents a travesty of Islam, but nothing like the western presentations of Islam. The poem has nothing about idol worship or perverse sexuality –the usual western accusations against Islam– but presents it as a religion of miracles and relics. The Mother asks her son: «Don't strange miracles occur in Romania, like those at the Prophet's tomb....? Didn't you see anything in Romania more marvellous than the

cloth of Naaman...king of the Assyrians?» The Emir tells her that he has dismissed from his mind all these ridiculous stories that will only earn you eternal fire. He goes on to provide a very straightforward version of the Christian creed, which is so eloquent that it convinces his mother to convert. It emphasises the superiority of Christianity. It is the revealed truth against mere superstition. The detail that once they were on Byzantine soil the emir baptised his mother was poetic license –a way of underlining the emir's achievement.

The importance of the fight against Islam for the warriors of Anatolia is illustrated by one historical incident. In the mid-tenth century the throne of Constantinople was seized by Nicephorus Phokas –«the Pale Death of the Saracens» as he was known. He was at the head of one of the greatest of the Anatolian clans and a renowned general. Once in power he insisted to the patriarch of Constantinople that those Byzantine soldiers dying in battle against the Muslims should be accorded the status of martyrs of the faith. This was a notion that was evidently espoused by the soldiers of the eastern frontiers. At a slightly later date you find one of these war band leaders lamenting all those retainers of his who had «shed their blood...for the Holy Cross and Byzantium». It did not, however, commend itself to the Byzantine patriarch, who rejected Nicephorus Phokas's request. It went counter to St Basil of Caesarea's insistence that the shedding of human blood was in any circumstances wrong. Otherwise, christianity ran the danger of ceasing to be a religion of peace and becoming a religion of war. This high-minded attitude which distinguished Orthodoxy was possible in the comparative safety of Constantinople. It is extremely interesting that the official Byzantine ideology found it very difficult to incorporate Islam. The 'enemy' that it singled out continued to be the Jews and there were periodic persecutions. Islam which was at different times an infinitely greater threat was more or less ignored. This was possible because after the middle of the ninth century Islam was kept at arm's length thanks to the achievements of the Anatolian warriors. The Byzantine establishment treated Islam not as a rival religion, but as a diplomatic equal. There is a letter from a patriarch of Constantinople to the Caliph of Baghdad dating from the early tenth century, in which he stated that «there are two lordships, that of the Saracens and that of the Romans, which stand above all lordship on earth, and shine out like the two mighty beacons in the firmament.» But the poem of Digenes Akrites makes clear that out on the frontier it was Islam that remained the enemy of Christianity, if not the only enemy.

Whereas the Byzantine identity in the capital revolved around a civilian ideal represented by the bureaucrat, out on the Anatolian frontier it revolved around the warrior. In western Christendom at the same time the ideal of the knight was

beginning to take shape. The profession of arms was given respectability by associating it with the church and the protection of Christian society. It was a French phenomenon but seeped over the Pyrennees into the Iberian peninsula, where in the developing figure of the Cid it fused with the frontiersman who protects the limits of Christendom against the enemy of the faith. Byzantium never developed a warrior ideal comparable to that of the knight. The closest parallel was the borderer in the shape of Digenes. The first thing to note is that a Christian meaning is ascribed to his activities. The birth of Digenes was part of Christ's wonderful dispensation which secured and advanced the frontiers of Byzantium at the expense of Islam and initiated a reign of peace. But Digenes's christian mission was not only directed against the insolence of the Hagarenes —one of the favourite Byzantine names for the Muslims. He was also engaged in cleaning up the badlands of the borders which were home to all kinds of ne'er-do-wells. His chief opponent was old Philopappos, the head of an outlaw gang. Digenes defeats the gang single handed. When the members begin to discuss him they think that he must be a magician or «a spirit of place», but Philopappos puts them right. He judges Digenes to be a man of proven worth «endowed by Christ with all the virtues: beauty, manliness, discretion and great daring». But he still wants vengeance for the defeat that his gang has suffered at Digenes's hands. He suggests that they take him by stealth. The prize will be Digenes's wife, but other counsels prevail. The gang decides to bring in the Amazon Maximo as their secret weapon. This incident raises Digenes's prowess on to a different plane. It faces Digenes with a sexual dilemma once he has got the better of her on the field of battle. As Digenes put it: «For she was a lovely virgin, young and beautiful. Good sense was overcome by tainted lust.» However, he was so ashamed of what he had done that he returned and slew the Amazon on the grounds that she was an adulteress. The Cid does not have to face up to such problems. Sexual temptations do not apparently come his way. His moral stature is vindicated by the love of his wife. It would equally be true to say this of Digenes. A very large part of the long drawn out death scene is given over to Digenes's deathbed confession made to his wife. Its theme that all his achievements were done for love of her; even murdering Maximo. Digenes, just like the Cid of the poem, is an exemplary figure. One of the oddities of the poem of Digenes Akrites is the emphasis there is on his marriage and his infidelities. It sets the poem apart from any western counterparts. This can be explained very largely in terms of the influence of romance which puts more stress than epic on sexuality morality and uses women as a means of testing the moral stature of a hero. One of the puzzling features of the poem of Digenes Akrites is the hero's death. He dies not in battle, but from a back spasm brought on by taking a bath. The poet gives the medical term —*opisthotonos*. It is not a heroic death. The pur-



pose of the long drawn out death scene, as I see it, is to privilege the role of Digenes's wife as she helps her husband both as his comfort and his conscience to prepare for death.

Until the eleventh century Byzantine literature was as little interested in women as was western literature. It would almost certainly be naive to think that the new interest in women was a sign that their status had suddenly improved, except, perhaps, at the level of the aristocracy, but in the eleventh century aristocracy was a new phenomenon in the capital of Constantinople. Again it would be naive to think that Constantinople never had an elite, but the elite was not an aristocracy. Meritocracy would be a far better description, since education was the normal means of entry into the elite. Of course, education is rarely cheap, which meant that the core of the elite comprised a relatively small number of families, but in one way or another education was available to the talented, which, in its turn, meant that it was never a question of an elite defined by birth. This changed over the eleventh century when a hereditary aristocracy –often with its roots in Anatolia– became a feature of the Constantinopolitan elite. It was connected with a change in political life. These aristocrats were politicians, not bureaucrats. They did not dominate the mechanism of administration from within, as happened in the past, but from outside. They brought with them the values of the eastern frontier. Among other things this included family values dominated by women.

Among the great aristocratic families which came to preside over Byzantine society from the eleventh century the power of women is palpable. It was women who ran the aristocratic household and set the moral tone of the family. Perhaps the most powerful moral sanction was a «mother's curse». The brothers of the girl taken by the emir went to her rescue «not fearing death, but only mother's curse.» The power exercised by a mother can be illustrated from one episode from the *Alexiad*. Alexius I Comnenus called together his brothers and other close relatives for a family council to deal with a quarrel he had with his elder brother Isaac. It was serious and threatened to tear the family apart. A compromise was reached with Alexius saying to his brother: «Go in peace now and tell our mother what has passed between us.» Their mother was the formidable Anna Dalassena who governed the Byzantine Empire in the early part of her son's reign. This incident illustrates the way the Comneni imposed the habits of aristocratic life and household organisation on the government of the Byzantine Empire, once they came to power. It was not just a question of the emperor's mother being put in charge of things or his brothers being given positions of command. It was also that other families allied by blood or marriage to the Comneni equally shared in the benefits of Empire, while family retainers were given military command or fiscal of-

fice. This contrasted with what had happened previously at Constantinople, where the emperor's extended family had counted for next to nothing; where real power lay in the hands of a bureaucracy –admittedly one which displayed considerable continuity since it was recruited from a core of civil service families.

The rise of the Comneni represented a radical reshaping of the structure of power at Byzantium. It presented real problems of identity. The elite ideal at Byzantium had previously been a civilian one; a mandarin ideal, not a military one. Although there were many well educated members of the house of Comnenus –Anna Comnena is not alone– it was imperative that they found a way of justifying a military take-over of the top echelons of society. This is one of the undercurrents of the *Alexiad*. Anna Comnena roots the ideal of military prowess in the pages of Homer, but this was not entirely satisfactory, whence her fascination with the crusaders. They were in her words «like the heroes of old» with the difference that they were inspired by the Christian faith. The crusaders represented the ideal of Christian militancy that the Comneni were looking for. However, as relations worsened, it became clear that a new elite identity could hardly be built around a western ideal.

The image of Digenes Akrites –of the frontiersman– had already been appropriated by families opposed to the Comneni –the losers in the struggle for power. Once it was clear that there would be no reconquest of Anatolia these families fade from the scene, creating the conditions that allowed the Comneni to exploit the ideal of military prowess contained in the poem of Digenes Akrites. Indicative is the way the most fashionable poet at the court of Alexius I Comnenus's grandson Manuel I Comnenus addresses the emperor as a «New Akrites» and wishes that «Another Akrites had been there, to pin up his cloak and pick up his mace». This is an appeal to the emperor to assume the role of an Akrites.

Manuel I Comnenus was a warrior emperor who appealed to westerners on their own chivalric terms. He admired Frankish prowess and introduced the tournament into Byzantium as a form of military training. But his apparent partiality to western ways created a backlash among members of his family and the Byzantine elite. The invocation of the tradition of Digenes Akrites was a way of recalling that Byzantium too had its own warrior tradition. However, deprived of the frontier conditions that had nourished it this tradition became increasingly artificial and scarcely survived the disaster of 1204. The Byzantine aristocracy sought solace in a romance literature of fairy tales, where the setting was no longer the frontier but a fantasy of imperial courts and castles of love. The tragedy of Byzantium was its failure to find a new identity to fit the times.

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