



The Public Defense of the Doctoral Dissertation in Medieval Studies

of

Roman Shlyakhtin

on

From Huns into Persians: The Projected Identity of the Turks in the Byzantine Rhetoric of
Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries

will be held on

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Senate Room – Monument Building

Central European University (CEU)

Nádor u. 9, Budapest

Examination Committee

Chair Matthias Riedl (Department of History – CEU)

Members Daniel Ziemann, primary supervisor (CEU, Medieval Studies Department)

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External Readers Jonathan Shepard – not present (Cambridge University)

Dimitri Korobeinikov – not present (University at Albany, SUNY)

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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ABSTRACT
ABSTRACT

This dissertation entitled “*From Huns into Persians: The Projected Identity of the Turks in the Byzantine Rhetoric of Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*” studies the emerging collective identity of the Turks in Byzantine discourse. The Seljuk Turks migrated from Central Asia to Anatolia in the eleventh century. In the period between the battle of Manzikert (1071) and the First Crusade (1097), they captured the core territory of Byzantine Asia Minor. The Byzantine literati reacted to these events and created the image of the migrating group in their works of rhetoric. The dissertation studies the development of the collective identity in the discourse. The present summary of the dissertation covers the conclusions on the chronology of the Turks’ identity formation (1), results of the study of particular aspects of this identity (2), and evaluates the contribution of this dissertation to different areas of Byzantine studies (3).

1. Identity Formation: Emergence, Localization, Legitimization

The dissertation argues that the identity of the Turks was not a product of any unified system of description but rather a creation of individual literati who constructed this identity in their works, often pursuing their own ends. The study allows us to identify three chronological phases in the formation of the projected identity of the Turks in Byzantine rhetoric. The first phase sees the identity emerging. In the period between Manzikert and the First Crusade, Byzantine authors used military treatises, diplomatic sources and prophecies to describe the sultanate of the Great Seljuk. The second phase, which I label ‘the localization of the Turks,’ encompasses the span of time from 1097 to 1176. In this period, Byzantium waged long and inconclusive wars with Turkic polities in Asia Minor. The demise of the Danishmendids (in the 1160s) and the consequent rise of the sultanate of Ikonion (1170s) presented a new challenge to the Byzantine empire. The battle of Myriokephalon (1176) significantly reduced the scope of Byzantine actions in Asia Minor. The decline of Byzantine influence stimulated Byzantine literati to change their tone. Even panegyrists like John Kinnamos

grudgingly recognized the Persians as legitimate masters of Anatolia. I suggest calling this last period ‘the legitimization of the Turks.’

2. Aspects of the Identity

Byzantine literati constructed the identity of the Seljuk Turks by applying to them existing collective labels – “Persians,” “Turks” and “Hagarenes.” The key question of this dissertation lay in the deciphering of these terms. Contrary to previous scholarship on the subject (Shukurov, Kaldellis) the dissertation suggests to read the three collective labels not as a coherent and immovable classification of the Other but as separate discourse blocks, which Byzantine authors combined in various ways to convey their messages about certain aspects of the described group.

In Byzantine rhetoric of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, one label was primarily applied to the elite and figures of authority (“Persians”), another term referred to pastoralists and raiders (“Turks”), while the third term was used to define the Turks as a part of the community of Islam (“Hagarenes.”) Combining these collective labels differently Byzantine writers were able to produce nuanced images that suited the changing agenda of the day. The literati of the Komnenian era used terms and labels borrowed from Herodotus, the Old Testament, military treatises and polemics against Islam, but manipulated them in a very peculiar way always corresponding to self-identification of the Turks.

The image of the space and place of the Turks was a constitutive element of the projected identity. John Skylitzes placed the story about the migration of the Turks into the spatial framework of the *Tabula Peutingeriana*. The dissertation claims that Komnenian writers never actually described a systematic reconquest of Asia Minor. After the military losses of the 1170s, they acknowledged the ‘Persians’ as legitimate masters of the Anatolian landscape.

Contrary to the earlier point of view (Vryonis) that the ‘Islamization’ of the Christian population is literally absent from Byzantine sources, my dissertation insists that Byzantine authors articulated the religious otherness of the Turks and expressed a negative attitude towards Islam. However, they did not perceive the Islam of the Turks

as an intellectual challenge. Only at the end of the twelfth century, Niketas Choniates began to express anxiety about the possible forced conversion of Christians to Islam. On a more popular level, Byzantine authors did not produce *vitae* of neo-martyrs in the way it was done by Spanish-Iberian or Palaiologian writers of the later era.

In all aspects of the projected identity of the Turks, Byzantine authors constructed an imagined border between the two communities. In the spatial sense, the borderlands were permeable, and many travellers crossed them on their way. The existence of borderlands, imagined and real, stimulated the emergence of cultural brokers. The dissertation applies this term to two particular clans, the Gabrades and Axouchoi, who established themselves at the courts of Ikonion and Constantinople as cultural intermediaries and helped both emperors and sultans to negotiate with their counterparts on the other side of the border.

While rhetorical images of the cultural brokers are nearly three-dimensional, the images of individual Turks remain mostly black-and-white. In general, the Persian and Turkic characters of Byzantine rhetoric either supported the idea of imperial dominance or highlighted Byzantine vices, or performed these two roles at the same time.

3. Contribution and Perspective

First, this dissertation contributes to the methodology of Byzantine studies. The dissertation proves that the philological concept of semantic change provides valuable results in the analysis of the Byzantine Other. Careful application of some post-colonial notions like “imperial gaze” yields promising results as well. Therefore, the dissertation adds new methodological instruments to the arsenal of Byzantine scholarship. The same method of analysis can be productively applied to other ‘Others’ of Byzantine rhetoric, e.g. the Cumans or Latins.

Secondly, the dissertation clarifies a number of problems in the history of Komnenian Byzantium. For example, it provides an explanation for the rise of John Axouch to the position of *megas domestikos* at the court of John II Komnenos. Axouch was a ‘Persian’ and this label implies that he came from a noble family, either from the

elite of the sultanate of Nicaea or even from the very clan of Qutalmish. The association of Axouch not with the ‘Turks’ but with Seljuk elite alters our understanding of Komnenian elite and system of governance, which absorbed talented foreigners of high social standing.

Third, the dissertation contributes to the history of Byzantine literature. It draws up a chronological scale of labels describing the Turks that can be a helpful tool for dating of Komnenian writings. The dissertation argues that panegyrists of the period tended to use one label (“Persians”), while history writers used many. Another finding specifically pertains to historiography – the fact that twelfth-century historians often applied collective labels that they borrowed from their sources rather than those in active use at the time of composition of their works.

The dissertation also argues that the Byzantine image of the Turks influenced the way they were represented in Latin chronicles and letters from the period of the First Crusade. When the Crusaders arrived at the Bosphorus, the Byzantines informed them about the size and political situation of Asia Minor, contributing to the image of Islam in the chronicles of the First Crusade and even in the contemporary western documentation. The charter of Clementia of Burgundy (c. 1078-1133) in 1097 explicitly labels the oppressors of the Christians in the East as Persians, the Byzantine *terminus technicus* for the sultanate of the Great Seljuks. The connections this dissertation reveals between Latin chronicles and Byzantine rhetoric pave the way for the study of the Byzantine influence on the “western” image of the Turks that affected the Renaissance image of the Eastern Other and late Orientalism.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Teaching Experience:

2014 – *Caucasus Project Lecturer* . Course: Barbarians Inside: Internal Diasporas in Byzantium, Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia

2012 - *Teaching Assistant*, Course: An ‘Epic Age’? Byzantium and Its Neighbors (c.1025-1204). CEU, Medieval Studies Department, Budapest

2011- *Teaching Assistant*, Undergraduate Seminar in Medieval Studies, Department of History, Moscow State University

Studies:

2009- 2016 - Central European University, Budapest, Hungary; Doctoral Candidate, Medieval Studies Department. Dissertation: From Huns into Persians: The Projected Identity of the Turks in the Byzantine Rhetoric of Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries

2006 – 2007 - Central European University, Budapest, Hungary; Master’s Degree in Medieval Studies, Medieval Studies Department. MA Thesis: Image of the Enemy in the Byzantine-Seljuk Military Conflict. Case Study on the Battle at Myriokephalon (1176)

2002 - 2008 - Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia; Specialist’s Degree in History. Specialist Thesis: Byzantine-Seljuk Military Confrontation in the reign of John II and Manuel I Komnenos.

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2015/2016	Washington	Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection Junior Fellowship
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2013	Heidelberg	DAAD-CEU Joint Project Grant (“Trans-European Diasporas: Migration, Minorities, and Diasporic Experience in Medieval and Early Modern East/Central Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean”)
2013	Moscow	„Dynamic Middle Ages“ Summer School Participation Grant
2009/2014	Budapest	Multiple CEU Travel Grants

Conference Papers Related to the Subject of the Dissertation:

2016	Belgrade	23rd International Congress of Byzantine Studies. Roundtable Presentation delivered: “The Evolution of the Barbarian? Image of Kaykhusraw of Ikonion in different versions of Niketas Choniates’ <i>History</i> .”
2015	Budapest	International Conference: “Piroska and the Pantokrator: Dynastic Memory, Healing and Salvation in Komnenian Constantinople.” Paper delivered: “Empress Eirene in the Poems of Nicholas Kallikles.”
2014	Leeds	International Medieval Congress. Paper delivered: “Space of the Seljuks, Place of the Seljuks. The Seljuk

Turks in the Byzantine Rhetoric of the Komnenian Era.”

- 2014 Oxford XVI Oxford Graduate Conference. Paper delivered: “Master of Kastamon, Emperor of the Universe: John Komnenos as Border-Maker and Border-Breaker in the Theodore Prodromos’ Poem on the Advance to Kastamon.”
- 2012 Oxford 45th Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies. Paper delivered: “The Empire’s ‘first’ Seljuk: Erisgen-Chrysoskoulos in Byzantine Historical Narratives of the Eleventh-Twelfth Centuries.”
- 2011 Sofia 22nd International Congress of Byzantine Studies. Paper delivered: “*Myriokephalon* Revisited: Note on the Sources, Context and Consequences of one Battle”
- 2011 Oxford International Graduate Conference 2011. Paper delivered: “Manzikert reversed? The last campaign of Alexios I Komnenos in Alexiad of Anna Komnene.”
- 2010 St. Louis The Second International Symposium on Crusade Studies. Paper delivered: “Turks on the Hills: Seljuks of Asia Minor fighting Crusaders and Byzantium.”

Publications:

Shlyakhtin, Roman. “Master of Kastamon, Emperor of Eternity: Ioannes Komnenos (1118-1143) as Border-maker and Border-breaker in Theodoros Prodromos’ poem ‘On the advance to Kastamon.’” In *From Constantinople to the Frontier: The City and the Cities*, ed. N. Matheou et al. (Leiden:Brill, 2016), 425-435.

Shlyakhtin, Roman. “Betrayal at Pontos: Renegades and Traitors in the Byzantine-Seljuk Military Conflict (1070-1204).” In *Betrayal: A Historical Analysis*, (Moscow:Nauka, 2012),74-98. [in Russian].

Shlyakhtin, Roman. “Why did Manuel Komnenos lose the battle at Myriokephalon?” *Annual of Medieval Studies* 14 (2008): 137-150.