

# The Formation of a Hero in *Digenes Akrites*

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THE PRESENT STUDY proposes to examine the nature of Digenes as a hero in *Digenes Akrites*.<sup>1</sup> For that purpose I seek to analyze the poem allegorically in order to identify and better understand the value-system of the work and to clarify the function of the poem in its historical context.

The poem consists of two parts, the *Lay of the Emir* and the *Digeneid*. Some geographical and historical elements are revealed in both parts that allow us to identify events reflected in the poem. The evidence of the Digenes epos shows that the historical background is the period of Byzantine-Arab peace in the tenth century that was established after the Byzantines reached Syria and the eastern borders of the empire had advanced to the Euphrates. In the *Digeneid* the action is centered well to the east in Commagene, beside the Euphrates in the neighborhood of Samosata. This part cannot have come into existence before the imperial advance eastwards from Cappadocia during the campaigns of John Kourkouas, who

<sup>1</sup> Six Greek versions of *Digenes Akrites* are preserved: Grottaferrata (G: 14<sup>th</sup> c.), Escorial (E: 15<sup>th</sup> c.), and the so-called TAPO group (Trebizond, Andros, Prose, Oxford: 16<sup>th</sup> c.). The principal editions are: C. Sathas and E. Legrand, *Les Exploits de Digénis Akritis* (Paris 1875); S. Lambros, *Collection de Romans grecs* (Paris 1880) 111–237; J. Mavrogordato, *Digenes Akrites* (Oxford 1956); E. Trapp, *Digenes Akrites: Synoptische Ausgabe der ältesten Versionen* (Vienna 1971); S. Alexiou, *Βασιλείος Διγενίης Ακρίτης* (Athens 1990); D. Ricks, *Byzantine Heroic Poetry* (Bristol 1990); E. Jeffreys, *Digenis Akritis, the Grottaferrata and Escorial Versions* (Cambridge 1998). I do not intend to address the relative priority of the different versions as I consider that the story of Digenes is equally narrated in all of them.

reached Melitene in 931. The historical context of the *Lay of the Emir*, in contrast, is the Cappadocian frontier before the imperial advance had begun. Here there are as well reflections of the bloody Byzantine-Arab wars: the *Lay* begins with an Arab campaign, the slaughter of Byzantine captives, and Byzantine-Arab combat.<sup>2</sup> The poem preserves and exalts the memory of a frontier society that was vital to the empire's existence for four hundred years, maintaining the defence against the Byzantines' chief ideological enemy and providing military leaders for the *reconquista* on all fronts in the ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>3</sup>

The historical and geographical references in the texts have been a major concern.<sup>4</sup> But excessive focus on historical iden-

<sup>2</sup> S. Alexiou, *Βασίλειος Διγενῆς Ἀκρίτης καὶ τὸ ἄσμα τοῦ Ἀρμούρη* (Athens 1985) 54; G. Huxley, "Antecedents and Context of Digenes Akrites," *GRBS* 15 (1974) 317–327, discussing historical aspects of the *Lay of the Emir* including possible historical identifications.

<sup>3</sup> P. Magdalino, "Digenes Akrites and Byzantine Literature: The Twelfth-Century Background to the Grottaferrata Version," in R. Beaton and D. Ricks (eds.), *Digenes Akrites: New Approaches to Byzantine Heroic Poetry* (Aldershot 1993) 1–14, at 1–2.

<sup>4</sup> The study of *Digenes Aktires* begins with historical identifications made by its first editors, Sathas and Legrand. This trend reached its highest point in the works of H. Grégoire: "Michel III et Basile le Macédonien dans les inscriptions d'Ancyre: Les sources historiques de Digénis Akritas et le titre 'Μέγας Βασιλεύς'," *Byzantion* 5 (1929/30) 327–346; "Le tombeau et la date de Digénis Akritas," *Byzantion* 6 (1931) 481–508; "L'épopée byzantine et ses rapports avec l'épopée turque et l'épopée romane," *BAB* V.17 (1931) 463–493; "Autour de Digénis Akritas: Les cantilènes et la date de la récension d'Andros-Trebizonde," *Byzantion* 7 (1932) 287–320; "Etudes sur l'épopée byzantine," *REG* 46 (1933) 29–69; H. Grégoire and R. Goossens, "Les recherches récentes sur l'épopée byzantine," *AntCl* 1 (1932) 419–439, 2 (1933) 449–472. On the basis of these historical and geographical identifications Grégoire created the Paulician theory, that the Digenes epos echoes the Paulician heresy that is reflected only in the Slavic version of the poem; the archetype of the Greek versions, especially G and E, is the result of loyalist revision: H. Grégoire, "Note sur le Digénis slave," *Byzantion* 10 (1935) 335–339; "Notes on the Byzantine Epic: The Greek Folk-songs and their Im-

tifications and their importance has led to a paradoxical and illogical conclusion—that the Greek versions of *Digenes Akrites* have survived in such modified and distorted form that they have almost nothing in common with the archetype. As G. Huxley points out, epics with historical contexts are not necessarily epics about historical individuals.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the poem evokes a world that was lost: “not only the mythical exploits of Digenes but also the world in which he moves are the products of creative and selective imagination.”<sup>6</sup> But that does not mean that we should ignore the historical context that stimulated creation of this pseudo-historic poem.

To turn to the issue of the heroic adventures of the protagonist: the problem is that Digenes’ heroic nature is questionable, because of his “suspect” heroic deeds and his at first sight unheroic death. As Theodore Papadopoulos claims, heroic action “must transcend the ordinary level of human behavior, must be exalted in relation to common experience, and must be so far as possible unique.”<sup>7</sup> This issue is to some extent related to the problem of genre of this poem.<sup>8</sup> E. Trapp points out a number of motifs that find parallels in hagiographic legends, and these motifs in fact form the backbone of the whole Digenes story.<sup>9</sup> These include the circumstances of the

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portance for the Classification of the Russian Version and of the Greek Manuscripts,” *Byzantion* 15 (1940/1) 92–103.

<sup>5</sup> Huxley, *GRBS* 15 (1974) 317.

<sup>6</sup> Magdalino, in Beaton and Ricks, *Digenes Akrites* 1–2.

<sup>7</sup> Th. Papadopoulos, “The Akritic Hero: Socio-Cultural Status in the Light of Comparative Data,” in Beaton and Ricks, *Digenes Akrites* 131–138, at 131.

<sup>8</sup> On identifying the genre of *Digenes Akrites* see C. Galatariotou, “Structural Oppositions in the Grottaferrata *Digenes Akrites*,” *BMGs* 11 (1987) 29–68; R. Beaton, “An Epic in the Making? The Early Versions of *Digenes Akrites*,” in Beaton and Ricks, *Digenes Akrites* 55–72, at 64–66. Beaton calls the poem a “proto-romance,” while Galatariotou calls it an “unsuccessful romance.”

<sup>9</sup> E. Trapp, “Hagiographische Elemente im Digenes-Epos,” *AnalBoll* 94

hero's childhood and up-bringing, his bravery, his living in solitude, fight with a dragon, encounter with a beautiful girl in the desert, honors paid to him by the emperor,<sup>10</sup> his prayer to God before death, the gathering at the death-bed. R. Beaton holds that the plot structures of the G and E versions represent a kind of "secular hagiography."<sup>11</sup> Traditional elements of Byzantine saints' lives occur in *Digenes Akrites* in modified form and constitute the kernels of the narrative structure: the conditions of the saint's birth and upbringing, the holy man's superhuman strength, the congregation around his death-bed, his death without producing posterity, and the prayers and curses uttered by the faithful at the tomb. The unrealistic episode of the emperor honoring the hero in the G version also comes from Christian Fathers' lives and is based on the tradition of noble personages and even emperors visiting and honoring hermits.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it is clear that the value-system of *Digenes Akrites* will be more intelligible when the work is considered from the viewpoint of hagiography as well.

The poem narrates the hero's story from the very beginning to the end—from his birth to his death. Furthermore, there is a genealogical introduction, the so-called astrological prologue<sup>13</sup> and then the exploits of his father (the *Lay of the Emir*). Thus the hero is closely connected to his genealogy. This is easily ex-

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(1976) 275–287.

<sup>10</sup> The authenticity of the last two episodes is questioned by a number of scholars. D. Ricks, "Is the Escorial Akrites a Unitary Poem?" *Byzantion* 59 (1989) 184–207, at 203: in contrast to E, in G episodes are added—the meeting with the emperor and the encounter with Haplorabdes' daughter.

<sup>11</sup> R. Beaton, *The Medieval Greek Romance* (Cambridge 1989) 198–200, and in Beaton and Ricks, *Digenes Akrites* 55–72.

<sup>12</sup> If the episode of meeting with emperor is not authentic, its presence in G and TAPO versions might be explained as an effect of saints' lives.

<sup>13</sup> The astrological prologue is considered a later addition and bears some resemblance to *Barlaam and Joasaph*. See E. Elizbarashvili, "Towards the Question of the Plot and the Topic of the Poem *Digenes Akrites* in Connection with *Barlaam and Joasaph*," *Caucasian Messenger* 2 (2000) 239–243 (in Georgian).

plainable when we consider that single combat between two heroes, before which each asserts his origin, ethnicity, or nationality, implies battle between two nations. Sometimes such surrogacy is all too evident.<sup>14</sup> The best example is the fight between Menelaus and Paris in the *Iliad*. The single combat between Emir Mousour and Constantine bears similarities to that in the *Iliad*: the two sides are in confrontation because of a woman, the abductor is defeated, and the terms made are broken.

The Emir's defeat by his future brother-in-law Constantine puts in question the Emir's standing as a hero. He rehabilitates himself later by killing a lion during his trip to Syria. Two important interpretations have been offered of the act of killing the lion in the E version. Ricks connects this act to the dilemma faced by Digenes' father: parents or wife, homeland or Byzantium, Islam or Christianity? Thus, the Emir is in conflict with himself, and he finds the way to end this inner conflict by killing the lion. As a proof, he takes his "trophy," the lion's teeth and claws, to Digenes in order to be a worthy father of his son. Thus he binds his past with his future.<sup>15</sup> B. Fenik discusses this episode not as a dilemma faced by the Emir, but from another point of view:<sup>16</sup> the Emir's standing as a hero became questionable after losing in single combat with Constantine; in killing a lion he kills his frustrated "Me" and returns to his natural "Me"—by splitting a lion he reunifies himself. He returns to his son and so he needs testimony: the teeth and claws of the lion show his bravery. But this also helps him to overcome his unsuccessful past and go forward.<sup>17</sup> Thus, according to both interpretations the act of killing the lion has the func-

<sup>14</sup> See I. V. Shtal, *Homer's Epos* (Moscow 1975) 74 (in Russian).

<sup>15</sup> D. Ricks, "Digenes Akrites as Literature," in Beaton and Ricks, *Digenes Akrites* 161–170.

<sup>16</sup> B. Fenik, "Epic Narrative Style in the Escorial *Digenes Akritis*," *Ariadne* 5 (1989) 67–70.

<sup>17</sup> Ricks, in Beaton and Ricks, *Digenes Akrites* 168–169.

tion of proving the hero's courage; but a significant incentive to this act is the Emir's desire to free himself from his inner conflict.

The versions differ from each other but the plot is the same in this passage of the poem. Accordingly there is no reason not to apply these interpretations to the other versions, as language and style are not so important in this case. In general, killing a lion or tiger by a hero is a wide-spread motif in the Middle Ages in both western and eastern literature. Such episodes usually have symbolic meaning and do not merely imply the physical strength of a hero.<sup>18</sup> In principle we should analyze the *Digenes Akrites* in the context of the Middle Ages. The literary conventions of the time show underlying organic ties between west and east, which remained as an unfulfilled dream for a world divided into two parts after the fall of Byzantium. Against this background, I propose an allegorical interpretation of the episode of the Emir's journey to Syria, including the act of killing the lion: the physical journey should be understood as a spiritual journey of the hero, as an act of initiation. The dilemma facing the Emir<sup>19</sup> and his weakened heroic status<sup>20</sup> are obstacles that are overcome by killing the lion; as a result he achieves a higher level of spiritual perfection, because the Emir must be the worthy father of his son—Digenes who now enters the scene.

All the action that follows in the poem happens around Digenes; his father appears only a few times with quite insignificant function. Henceforth the young Digenes passes through series of stages on his path to becoming a supreme

<sup>18</sup> I can mention here a passage from the twelfth-century Georgian epic "Knight in the Panther Skin." The protagonist Tariel kills a panther, a symbol of his lost beloved woman, with his bare hands and then dresses himself in its skin. See Shota Rustaveli, *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, transl. Venera Urushadze (Tbilisi 1968). The symbolism of a lion or tiger or panther is most fully developed in this epic, reflected even in its title.

<sup>19</sup> Fenik, *Ariadne* 5 (1989) 67–70.

<sup>20</sup> Ricks, in Beaton and Ricks, *Digenes Akrites* 168–170.

hero.

The hero is marked from his birth, and extraordinary birth is naturally bound up with his exploits—a hero is always in some way predetermined. Digenes' extraordinary birth is in his *διγένεια*, born of an Arab father (converted to Christianity) and a Christian mother. So too his protector St. George: with his mother Greek and his father Persian, he too is *διγενής*. Generally, *διγένεια* is the proper way of making a hero, if we accept it as defined in the G and Z (TAPO) versions:<sup>21</sup>

λέγεται δὲ καὶ Διγενὴς ὡς ἀπὸ τῶν γονέων,  
ἔθνικὸς μὲν ἀπὸ πατρὸς, ἐκ δὲ μητρὸς ῥωμαίας· (G 1001–1002)  
ἔθνικὸς ἦν ἀπὸ πατρὸς ἐκ τῆς φυλῆς τῆς Ἄγαρ,  
Ῥωμαῖος δὲ ἀπὸ μητρὸς ἐκ γένους τῶν Δουκάδων·  
διὰ τοῦτ' ἐπεκλήθηκε Διγενὴς ὁ υἱὸς των. (Z 1309–1311)

The other name of the hero, *Ἀκρίτης*, shows a token of determinism: he is one of those who guard the eastern border of the Byzantine Empire, but he is so named long before:

Ἀκρίτης ὀνομάζεται τὰς ἄκρας ὑποτάξας. (G 1004)  
Ἀκρίτης ὀνομάσθη γὰρ ὡς τὰς ἄκρας φυλάσσων. (Z 1316)

The *Digeneid* gives us a poetically composite picture of the akritic nobility, as George Huxley notes in discussing the poem in this akritic context.<sup>22</sup>

The hero has also the third name: *Βασίλειος*, the name given him when he was born:

καὶ ἐξ αὐτῆς γεννήσεως Βασίλειος ἐκλήθη. (G 1000)  
καὶ βαπτισθεὶς ἐν ὕδατι ἀγίας κολυμβήθρας  
Βασίλειος ὀνόμαστο ἐξαετῆς ὑπάρχων. (Z 1312–1313)

It is his baptismal name, but it is the least important in the

<sup>21</sup> References to the text are to the edition of E. Trapp.

<sup>22</sup> Huxley, *GRBS* 15 (1974) 228–238. The privileges and activities of Akritai are described by Constantine Porphyrogenitus in *De Cerimoniis* and by Cecaumenos in *Strategicon*; discussed by Alexiou, *Βασίλειος Διγενὴς Ἀκρίτης καὶ τὸ ἄσμα* 72–73.

poem.<sup>23</sup>

Digenes, to become a hero, must pass through stages of self-establishment and accomplish something beyond everyday action that makes him unique. A. R. Dyck suggests three basic acts: the first hunt, the abduction of a woman, and the visit of the emperor, marking three stages of Digenes' integration into society.<sup>24</sup> I would urge that those acts mark not only his integration into society, but also his steps toward spiritual perfection. Thus, the first stage is his first hunt, achieved by the persistence of young Akrites, who appears on the scene at the age of twelve, the traditional age of the hero's maturity. He asks to join his father in the hunt because he desires to test himself in combat with wild beasts (G 1024–1028, E 656–663, Z 1349–1357). Digenes kills the beasts alone, sometimes with his bare hands, which sends his father and his uncle Constantine into raptures. Only his uncle helps him—with advice.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> In G the hero is called *Ἀκρίτης* 37 times, *Διγενής* 22, and *Βασίλειος* 11; in Z (TAPO) *Ἀκρίτης* 131, *Διγενής* 89, and *Βασίλειος* 22; in E *Ἀκρίτης* 35, *Διγενής* 22, *Βασίλειος* 2, and *Βασίλης* 2.

<sup>24</sup> A. R. Dyck "The Taming of Digenes: The Plan of *Digenes Akrites*, Grottaferrata Version, Book VI," *GRBS* 35 (1994) 293–308: the episode of Digenes' meeting with the emperor serves to demonstrate the independence and importance of the hero, as does the meeting with the *Apelatai*. In particular, Digenes does not accept their invitation to become their leader, and thus strongly establishes himself as an outsider, free of any set hierarchy. It is noteworthy that *Apelatai* became legendary figures just after the *Digenes* cycle: L. Bénou "Les Apélates: bandits, soldats, héros. De la réalité au mythe," *ÉtBalk* 7 (2000) 25–36. Magdalino, in Beaton and Ricks, *Digenes Akrites* 6, shows that there is a reflection of local power, possessed by the military aristocracy in the 10–12<sup>th</sup> centuries in Asia Minor, or a reflection of the condition desired by powerless military aristocracy in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Constantinople. However, some scholars consider that episode to be a later addition; cf. Ricks, *Byzantion* 59 (1989) 203; Alexiou, *Βασίλειος Διγενής Ἀκρίτης καὶ τὸ ἄσμα* xciv and 65–66. By contrast C. Galatariotou, "The Primacy of the Escorial *Digenes Akrites*: An Open and Shut Case?" in Beaton and Ricks, *Digenes Akrites* 39–54, at 51, argues that the meeting with the emperor is an authentic and organic part of *Digenes Akrites*.

<sup>25</sup> The status of Digenes' uncle seems to be higher here than that of his father.



In knightly symbolism, the knight experiences catharsis in the hunt, mortifying the instincts, passions, and desires that are embodied in the wild beasts.<sup>26</sup> Of course, as P. Mackridge argues, the first hunt of Digenes becomes a proof of the hero's right to claim the most beautiful woman in the region.<sup>27</sup> It is not however a mere demonstration of his strength, but a step of consecration and catharsis. This idea is further sustained by the scene at the spring (G 1164–1204, Z 1499–1530): the successful Digenes is washed and honored and then is dressed in new attire adorned with precious stones and gold; mounted on a white horse with expensive trappings, he holds a precious lance in his right hand. In this adornment and on a white horse, Digenes evokes St. George<sup>28</sup> and other warrior saints (St. Demetrius, St. Theodore); and his bathing and being clothed in new garments suggests a ritual of second baptism.

Thereafter, Digenes is physically and spiritually ready to accomplish a great heroic deed—abducting a woman. He encounters his future bride for the first time upon his triumphal return home from killing wild beasts, and his father, called a second Samson (*δευτερος Σαμψών*, G 975) because of his heroic deeds, finally leaves the scene to his son.

There are several successful and unsuccessful attempts to abduct a woman in the poem: in general, women are constantly at risk of being stolen. This central motif is an important topic of debate for scholars.<sup>29</sup> There is an anthropological interpre-

<sup>26</sup> Z. Gamsakhurdia, *Tropology of 'The Knight in the Panther's Skin'* (Tbilisi 1991) 257 (in Georgian).

<sup>27</sup> P. Mackridge, "‘None But the Brave Deserve the Fair’: Abduction, Elopement, Seduction and Marriage in the Escorial *Digenes* and Modern Greek Heroic Songs," in Beaton and Ricks, *Digenes Akrites* 150–160.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Krumbacher was the first to recognize parallels between Digenes Akrites and St. George: *Der heilige Georg in der griechischen Überlieferung* (*Abh Münch* 25.3 [1911]).

<sup>29</sup> M. Angold, "The Wedding of Digenes Akrites: Love and Marriage in Byzantium in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," *Πρακτικά του Α' Διεθνούς Συμποσίου: η Καθημερινή Ζωή στο Βυζάντιο* (Athens 1989) 201–

tation, based on social reality.<sup>30</sup> Traces of the social status of women are of course observable in the versions of *Digenes Akrites*, and they reflect the character of Byzantine society—women’s secluded life and dependent status.<sup>31</sup> The Emir marries an abducted woman, who expresses no affection for her future husband before marriage and does not participate at all in making the decision. The same applies to Digenes’ future wife: she is locked in her father’s castle and no one asks her opinion—though she overcomes this isolation, unlike the previous case, and elopes with her beloved Digenes. In the end, however, she finds herself secluded, living with Digenes on the frontier and with no one allowed to see her beauty except her husband.

The more important point is not some reality exhibited in the poem, but the symbolism of a woman in Christian consciousness, performed in *Digenes Akrites* in a way that conflicts with the actual status of women in Byzantium. The opinions of Byzantine writers about women’s place in society will be helpful here: authors of hagiographic texts are significantly benevolent.<sup>32</sup> An allegorical interpretation of love is another way to elucidate this matter. To see how the abduction of a woman is a type of initiation, the meaning of this metaphor should be considered. As a literary theme, the abduction of a woman is widespread in the Middle Ages and in the ancient epic. The

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218; D. Ricks, “The Pleasures of the Chase: A Motif in *Digenes Akrites*,” *BMGS* 13 (1989) 290–294.

<sup>30</sup> P. Mackridge suggests that the *raison d’être* of this theme in modern Greek folk literature is to be found in the organization and customs of society, particularly exogamy: “Bride-snatching in Digenes Akrites and Cypriot Heroic Poetry,” *Epeteris Kentrou Epistimonikon Erewnon* 19 (Nicosia 1992) 617–622, and in Beaton and Ricks, *Digenes Akrites* 150–160.

<sup>31</sup> On the position of women in Byzantium see C. Galatariotou, “Holy Women and Witches,” *BMGS* 9 (1984/5) 85–87; A. Kazhdan, “Byzantine Hagiography and Sex in the Fifth to Twelfth Centuries,” *DOP* 44 (1990) 131–143.

<sup>32</sup> For hagiographers’ attitude towards women see Kazhdan, *DOP* 44 (1990) 131–143.

best example is in the *Iliad*, and the motif is often called the Helen motif. The reason for abducting a woman usually is love. In the Middle Ages, physical, earthly love—thus between the Emir and his wife<sup>33</sup> and Digenes and his beloved—was held to be the lowest form of the spiritual love of God.<sup>34</sup> Earthly love seen as an outward expression of spiritual illumination is an old phenomenon in literature. E. Bowie argues that the Greek romance is the Hellenistic myth expressing man's solitude and his quest to be united with another creature, either human or divine. According to R. Merkelbach's hypothesis, shared by Bowie, every romance is a mystery text that conveys an allegory of the progress of a person being initiated into a *secretum*, which is attained through tribulations, death, resurrection, acknowledgement, and unity with God.<sup>35</sup> In the heroic romances there are biblical parallels—allegorical narratives of the Creation and the Fall, the story of Adam and Eve—which symbolically prompt the journey of the spirit down to the material and then to its return to God through initiation.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the allegorical meaning of love is cosmic, and the hero Digenes, having appeared in the arena, strives towards a new mental and spiritual birth. In order to understand the mystery of world, he abducts a woman, the symbol of divinity and immortality. Moreover, Digenes is the only one who may see the beauty of his wife, so he is the only one to attain the wisdom of initiation.

After the marriage Digenes leaves his father's house and settles alone (if it is accepted that his wife is a symbol of divinity and not a real woman) in a borderland. In other terms, as a

<sup>33</sup> In the case of the Emir and his wife the meaning is evident—the Emir comes to know Christianity through love.

<sup>34</sup> J. Chydenius, *The Symbolism of Love in Medieval Thought* (Helsinki 1970).

<sup>35</sup> E. L. Bowie, "The Greek Novel," in *Oxford Readings in the Greek Novel* (Oxford 1999) 45; R. Merkelbach, *Roman und Mysterium in der Antike* (Munich 1962).

<sup>36</sup> Gamsakhurdia, *Tropology* 317.

genuine ascetic he renounces earthly pleasures and secludes himself in the desert. Now the hero continues up the path of spiritual enlightenment, during which Providence sends him trials. The saint and the hero realize themselves in the same way. The mature saint is a spiritual hero and superman. He struggles against the flesh and numerous seductions, the devil often appearing before him as a human being or a wild beast or an unnatural creature. Usually he works wonders, which raises him above the laws of nature. Epic heroes similarly are genuine supermen, and their exploits are as fantastic as a saint's miracles.<sup>37</sup>

This trial for Digenes consists of fighting and defeating a dragon, a lion, and Apelatai (who are depicted as attempting to abduct Digenes' wife). In all, there are three attempts to capture Digenes' wife, which offers variations on the motif of the woman's abduction. The dragon-slaying should be noted especially, for it makes allusion to the biblical Paradise before the Fall: the dragon, like the Edenic serpent, tries to seduce the woman, Digenes' wife, but fails. Dragon-slaying is a common mythological motif in all times and peoples. The serpent/dragon is a universal symbol of the netherworld—the chthonic creature linked with the world of the dead. Moreover, as a rule, the hero defeats the dragon.<sup>38</sup> In Georgian as in many other traditions, the dragon is related symbolically to water, rain, fertility, productivity. It is emphasized in Georgian popular tales that the dragon never lets someone approach a spring without a victim.<sup>39</sup> It is noteworthy that the dragon attacks Digenes'

<sup>37</sup> On the relations between epic and hagiographic heroes and epic and hagiographic texts see K. Kekelidze, *Division into Periods of Georgian Feudal Literature* (Tbilisi 1933) 40–41 (in Georgian).

<sup>38</sup> On the dragon-fighting hero in Georgian folklore see M. Chikovani, "Dragon-fighter Hero and the Holy Rider," *Studies of the Pushkin Pedagogical Institute* 7 (1949) 261–276 (in Georgian).

<sup>39</sup> On the symbolism of the serpent/dragon in Georgian folk tradition see N. Abakelia, *Symbol and Ritual in Georgian Culture* (Tbilisi 1997) 5–17 (in Georgian).

wife when she approaches the spring to satisfy her thirst. But transformed into a handsome young man, the dragon seeks to seduce the woman, not to kill her (G 2378–2381, Z 2811–2828). We see here a revision of the Fall, for Digenes' wife does not succumb to the temptation and calls to her husband for help. Digenes comes to save his beloved and kills the dragon (G 2406–2410, E 1103–1110, Z 2837–2842).

Thus, Digenes is presented as the dragon-fighter hero, who canonically embodies the grace of truth, good, and love. The dragon-fighter hero establishes life and overcomes death, delivering mankind from dark powers. St. George, St. Demetrius, and St. Theodore are his Christian counterparts. In the Middle Ages he was regarded as the embodiment of Christian dedication. The institutions of monasticism and knighthood were comparable; there were orders both of knights and of monks. The rituals of chivalry symbolically represented rituals of initiation; their theme was descent to the nether world even while alive and defeating the forces of the nether world.<sup>40</sup>

In general, the motif of slaying the dragon so frequent in the hagiography and iconography of warrior saints derives from the scene in Revelation (12) in which the archangel Michael defeats Satan. Warrior saints repeat Michael's act in its essence—they are fighters and victors over evil. The same prodigy done by Digenes, together with other evidence in the poem, supports the idea that the poem and its image of the protagonist are influenced by the cult of warrior saints that was much developed in the Middle Ages.<sup>41</sup> The motif can be illustrated

<sup>40</sup> On the institution of knighthood as Christian initiation see Gamsakhurdia, *Tropology* 160–166; J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London 1971) 169–172.

<sup>41</sup> Trapp, *AnalBoll* 94 (1976) 279–286, compares the Digenes epos to the two versions of the *Life* of St. Theodore: H. Delehaye, *Les legendes grecques des saints militaires* (Paris 1909), *Μαρτύριον τοῦ ἁγίου μεγαλομάρτυρος Θεοδώρου τοῦ Στρατηλάτου* (151–167), and the metaphrastic version *Μαρτύριον τοῦ ἁγίου καὶ ἐνδόξου μεγαλομάρτυρος τοῦ Χριστοῦ Θεοδώρου τοῦ Στρατηλάτου* (168–182). Trapp marks some parallels between passages of the

here by some examples from the hagiography and iconography of warrior saints, a theme discussed broadly by Christopher Walter.<sup>42</sup>

The *Life* of St. Theodore (*BHG* 1764) recounts a miracle in which Theodore slays a dragon. This scene was embroidered by Nicephorus Uranos in his *Life* of Theodore:<sup>43</sup> here Theodore rescued his mother from the jaws of a dragon while she was drawing water from a spring (like Digenes' wife). Theodore is reported to have slain a dragon already in the earliest account, the *Passio prima*:<sup>44</sup> in this version the dragon blocked the road; Theodore after making the sign of Cross cut off the dragon's head, and thenceforth the road was open of access.<sup>45</sup>

In the Coptic encomium to St. Theodore Stratelates (the General) and St. Theodore the Eastern, both are dragon slayers. This text too reveals a close relation of these saints to the archangel Michael and the metaphor of spiritual battle:<sup>46</sup>

Behold then, my beloved, the valour of these saints, who are equal with one another: the Eastern slew the dragon which was beneath the ladder, which troubled the angels coming down from heaven and adjured them in the name of the Exalted. For this reason when St. Theodore the Eastern trampled upon him, the angels rejoiced in coming down upon the earth, because there was none to hinder them again. For this reason the archangel Michael prayed for him while he did this valiance that his throne might be placed before his own in the skies. This very saint it was, who trampled on the great dragon that fought with

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epos and hagiographic texts and argues that the common episode of killing the dragon comes from the folklore tradition.

<sup>42</sup> C. Walter, *Warrior Saints in Byzantine Art and Tradition* (Aldershot 2003).

<sup>43</sup> F. Halkin, "Un opuscule inconnu du Magister Nicéphore Ouranos," *AnalBoll* 80 (1962) 313–323.

<sup>44</sup> *BHG* 1762d. W. Hengstenberg, "Der Drachenkampf des heiligen Theodor," *Oriens Christianus* N.S. 2 (1912) 78–106, 241–280, assembled most of the texts relevant of Theodore's dragon slaying.

<sup>45</sup> On St. Theodore and the dragon see Walter, *Warrior Saints* 51–66.

<sup>46</sup> E. O. Winstedt, *Coptic Texts on St. Theodore, the General, St. Theodore the Eastern, Chamoul and Justus* (London 1910) 75–76.

the angels. Again this saint too whose festival we are celebrating today, St. Theodore the General, slew the raging dragon, consoled the orphans, removed the grief of the widows, set free those in bonds, abolished unrighteous sacrifices, although none of his troop of soldiers fought with him, but he alone in the strength of Christ slaughtered this so great dragon. For this reason, when he saved the little child of the widow and slew the dragon, his sacrifice pleased the Lord, and he gave him this great valour. And he gave him power to crush every dragon upon the earth and those beneath the earth and those in hell: that, if they even hear of him, they tremble. For he it is who slew their father first; and therefore do his sons tremble before him. Again this true hero and mighty champion was not content with these favours. God gave his soul in honour to the holy Archangel Michael to take to the place of his fellow-martyr and saint, Theodore the Eastern, that their comradeship might abide for ever in the heavens.

Hagiographic and iconographic works dedicated to the leader of the warrior saints' echelon provide countless scenes of St. George slaying the dragon.<sup>47</sup> In the Mavrukan church in Cappadocia he is represented on horseback together with St. Theodore; they are attacking two serpents twisted around a tree.<sup>48</sup> After Iconoclasm, portrayals of St. George as a warrior proliferated greatly, especially in Cappadocia. He figured both as the protector of soldiers and as the conqueror of evil. His iconography varies: he may be represented as a martyr, but more often, especially from the tenth century, as a soldier, whether in bust form, standing, or on horseback, sometimes killing a dragon. The type of St. George saving a princess emerged and became dominant from the eleventh century.<sup>49</sup>

In the Grottaferrata version Digenes claims that warrior

<sup>47</sup> See Walter, *Warrior Saints* 109–144.

<sup>48</sup> Early seventh century, according to N. Thierry, "Haut Moyen Age en Cappadoce: l'église no. 3 de Mavrukan," *JSAV* (1972) 258–263; cf. Walter, *Warrior Saints* 125.

<sup>49</sup> Walter, *Warrior Saints* 126–127, 140–142.

saints help him—the two Theodores (Theodore Tiron and Theodore Stratelates), George, and Demetrius:

εἰς πολὺ δὲ οὐ γέγονεν ἢ ἐκείνων θρασύτης,  
ἀλλὰ ταχέως ἔσβεσται τοῦ θεοῦ βοηθούντος·  
ἔχων τε καὶ τοὺς μάρτυρας ἀγίους Θεοδώρους,  
Γεώργιον, Δημήτριον, τούτους ἔτρεψα πάντας. (G 3031–3034)

He swears by the Theodores, martyrs of Christ:<sup>50</sup>

μὰ τοὺς ἀγίους μάρτυρας τοῦ Χριστοῦ Θεοδώρους (G 1428)  
μὰ τὸν ἅγιόν μου Θεόδωρον, τὸν μέγαν ἀπελάτην (E 883)  
μὰ τὸν ἅγιον Θεόδωρον, τὸν μέγαν ἀπελάτην (Z 1893)

The *Life* of St. Theodore relates a miracle in which a woman has a vision of Theodore, armed and on horseback, warding off a barbarian attack, just at the place where he had protected the city once before.<sup>51</sup> Among the miracles of St. Demetrius recounted by archbishop John of Thessaloniki, Slav marauders attack the city and place their ladders against the fortifications; Demetrius appears on the walls in military dress and with his lance strikes the first attacker to mount the ladder, killing him and causing him to fall on those following him up.<sup>52</sup> In another miracle in John's collection, a man riding a white horse and wearing a white mantel alarmed and repelled marauders, who took him to be the leader of an invisible army.<sup>53</sup> Soldiers smeared themselves with St. Demetrius' *myron* before going into battle.<sup>54</sup> According to Skylitzes, on one occasion when the Bulgarians were besieging Thessaloniki, the garrison prayed all

<sup>50</sup> Trapp noted that in E and Z *στρατηλάτην* is replaced by the similar-sounding *ἀπελάτην*: *AnalBoll* 94 (1976) 278.

<sup>51</sup> Delehaye, *Les légendes* 196–198; Walter, *Warrior Saints* 47.

<sup>52</sup> P. Lemerle, *Les plus anciens recueils des miracles de saint Démétrius* (Paris 1979) I 131–133, 135–138 (§120), II 172. In an *Encomium* of St. Demetrius, Bishop John notes among the characteristics of the saint his “invisible alliance” in wars: Anna Phillipidis-Braat, “L'enkômium de S. Démétrius par Jean de Thessalonique,” *TravMém* 8 (1981) 406, line 33.

<sup>53</sup> Lemerle, *Les plus anciens recueils* I 144–145, 157 (§§160–161).

<sup>54</sup> Walter, *Warrior Saints* 82 n.57.



night by the saint's tomb; then they anointed themselves with his *myron*, went into battle, and defeated the enemy. Bulgarians who had been taken prisoner saw a young horseman leading the Greek army.<sup>55</sup>

In a miracle reported by Anastasius the Librarian, barbarians surrounded Thessalonica; when the city was about to be captured, they saw a crowd of armed men, like a swarm of bees, coming out, led by a red-haired youth, most beautiful to behold, bearing the sign of the cross in his hands. A white horse bore him. These charged forward and attacked; terror-stricken, the barbarians sought the protection of flight. But the citizens realized that the commander was the martyr Demetrius who had put the enemy to flight together with an army of angels.<sup>56</sup>

In the seventh century, Adamnan of Iona reports stories that the wandering bishop Arculf claimed to have heard in Constantinople concerning the shrine of St. George in Diospolis. In one, at a time when many thousands from every quarter were gathering to form an expedition, one person, a layman, mounted on horseback, entered the city. He came to the house that had the marble column on which was depicted the holy confessor George and addressed the image: "I commend myself and my horse to thee, George the confessor, that by virtue of your prayers we may both return safe from this expedition and reach this city, delivered from all dangers of wars and pestilences and waters." He joined his companions in the multitude of the army, and went off with the expedition. After many and diverse dangers in war, in which thousands perished, he returned safely to Diospolis mounted on the same beloved horse, having by God's grace escaped all evil mischances, since he commended himself to George the servant of Christ.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Skylitzes *Synopsis historiarum*, ed. I. Thurn (Berlin 1973) 412–414.

<sup>56</sup> The *Passion and Miracles* of St. Demetrius, *PL* 129, 715–726 (*BHL* 2122, 2123), at 722–723.

<sup>57</sup> D. Meehan, *Adamnan's De locis sanctis* (Dublin 1983) 115–117. Historical-legendary evidence of St. George's interventions in battles are discussed by Walter, *Warrior Saints* 133–134.

Thus, two miracles which are attributed to warrior saints in hagiography, iconography, and legends—slaying the dragon and intervening in battle—and which involve a metaphorical perception of battle are reflected in the Digenes epos. This provides one more argument for a symbolic interpretation of Digenes' adventure: he seeks not glory on the battlefield, but spiritual perfection.

In addition, two gilded icons of the Theodores are among the wedding presents for Digenes and his wife: *εἰκόνας δύο χυμειτὰς ἁγίων Θεοδώρων* (G 1861), *δύο εἰκόνας χυμειτὰς ἁγίων Θεοδώρων* (Z 2227). Digenes builds for St. Theodore a temple in the middle his garden on the bank of the Euphrates:

τούτου ἐν μέσῳ ἵδρυσε ναόν, ἔνδοξον ἔργον,  
 ἁγίου ἐν ὀνόματι μάρτυρος Θεοδώρου (G 3242–3243)  
 ἐν μέσῳ τούτων ἔκτισε περικαλλῆ νεών τε  
 εἰς ὄνομα τοῦ μάρτυρος ἁγίου Θεοδώρου (Z 3930–3931)  
 ναὸν λαμπρόν, ἡδύτατον, ποιήσας ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ  
 εἰς ὄνομα τοῦτ' ἔθηκεν ἁγίου Θεοδώρου (Z 4097–4098)

Thus Digenes claims to be a “new warrior saint.” He lives and fights alone. He fights not against Arabs, the historical enemies of Byzantium, but for his divine love, which is embodied in his beloved woman who is under perpetual danger of being abducted.

Before his death, Digenes changes his life style. He settles on the bank of the Euphrates, the river from Paradise, and digs a canal from the river to his own garden (G 3143–3151, E 1606–1616, Z 3771–3780). Because the Euphrates is one of the four rivers out of Eden, by bringing a canal from it Digenes makes a “new paradise.”<sup>58</sup> But the Euphrates is not the only allusion here to Paradise. Byzantine gardens, usually walled like that built by Digenes, are allegories of Eden—a beautiful garden full

<sup>58</sup> G 3151, *ἄλλον τερπνὸν παράδεισον*. Cf. U. Moening, “Digenes = Alexander? The Relationship between *Digenes Akrites* and the Byzantine *Alexander Romance* in their Different Versions,” in Beaton and Ricks, *Digenes Akrites* 103–115, at 105.

of pleasant scents, brilliantly colored flowers, plenty of fruit trees blooming, bearing fruit all year round, with wafting breezes. A most significant feature is the four rivers, according to Genesis (2:10–14): the Phison (identified as the Ganges), Geon (identified as the Nile), Tigris, and Euphrates. Earlier Christian commentators held that these rivers bring the blessings of Paradise to mortals by flowing from Eden into the inhabited world and watering it.<sup>59</sup>

As in Paradise there are beautiful plants and flowers in Digenes' garden: vines, flaxes, roses, narcissuses, violets, myrtles, apple-trees, date-palms, aloes, and balsam. And this wonderful garden is inhabited by peacocks, parrots, swans, eagles, and partridges, as well as lions and panthers and even nymphs (G 3155–3179, E 1629–1644, Z 3787–3804).

Moreover, there is an interesting detail. The Byzantines had a particular idea about the location of Eden. The “paradise” built by Digenes is very close to the Byzantines' concept of the earthly paradise not only in climate, flora, fauna, and landscape, but also in location.<sup>60</sup> Digenes builds a palace in this paradise and spends the rest of his life there. I think that the hero thus creates that world that is the eternal dream of sinful

<sup>59</sup> See A. R. Littlewood, “Gardens of Byzantium,” *Journal of Garden History* 12 (1992) 126–153; “Gardens of the Palaces,” in H. Maguire (ed.), *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204* (Washington 1997) 13–38; “Romantic Paradises: The Rôle of the Garden in the Byzantine Romance,” *BMGS* 5 (1979) 95–114; J. Wolschke-Bulmahn, “Zwischen Kepos und Paradeisos: Fragen zur byzantinischen Gartenkultur,” *Das Gartenamt* 41 (1992) 221–228; “The Study of Byzantine Gardens,” in *Byzantine Garden Culture* (Washington 2002) 1–11; H. Maguire, “Paradise Withdrawn,” in *Byzantine Garden Culture* 23–35; L. Brubaker and A. R. Littlewood, “Byzantinische Gärten,” in M. Carroll-Spillecke (ed.), *Der Garten von der Antike bis zum Mittelalter* (Mainz am Rhein 1992) 213–248; P. Booth, “The Symbolic Garden: A Practical Guide for the Care of the Soul,” *CahEtAnc* 34 (1998) 15–19.

<sup>60</sup> See E. Elizbarashvili, “The Idea of Earthly Paradise in Digenes Akrites,” *Caucasian Messenger* 8 (2003) 178–180 (in Georgian), and “The Byzantine Garden παράδεισος as an Allegory of Paradise,” *Byzantine Studies in Georgia* 2 (Tbilisi 2009) 246–260 (in Georgian).

man excluded from Eden: in other words, he returns to the lost paradise. Holy riders, especially Theodore Stratelates, assist him on his path to initiation; that is why he builds a church of St. Theodore in the “new paradise.” Thus, there is a revision of the Fall in the act of defeating the dragon: Digenes thereby acquires a moral right to “return to paradise.” As a result, the world’s harmony, destroyed by the Fall, is restored.

A holy man either ends his life in martyrdom, i.e. sacrifices himself to his ideals; or he dies peacefully after his long ascetic life. In either case, good wins over evil, the soul over the flesh, the spiritual world over the material. The end of Digenes seems to belong to the second model of the holy man’s death.

In G, Digenes dies of an incurable disease after bathing<sup>61</sup> in the pond in his own garden, while his friends were visiting him. When Digenes falls ill a doctor is summoned, but he cannot give any help. The hero, doomed to die, asks his wife to sit down on his bed and narrates his heroic exploits done out of love for her. Digenes’ wife begins to pray. By the end of the prayer she cannot endure seeing her husband in the agony of death, and so falls to the ground unconscious and dies. Thus Digenes and his wife die together<sup>62</sup> and are buried together.<sup>63</sup> The finale of the poem is the mourning over Digenes and his wife and the long speech on the vanity of earthly life.

Thus Digenes, whose adventures are filled with heroic prodigies, dies young in his bed, weakened by an incurable disease, and not on the battlefield with a weapon in his hand like epic

<sup>61</sup> Mavrogordato, *Digenes Akrites* 233, suggests that the episode of Digenes’ bathing is influenced by the episode of Alexander bathing in the Kydnos; Trapp, *Digenes Akrites* 67, points to an origin in folksongs. The relation between Digenes and Alexander in general and scholarly discussions on this problem (by P. Kalonaros, G. Veloudis, I. Anagnostakis, G. Saunier) are examined by Moening, in Beaton and Ricks, *Digenes Akrites* 103–115.

<sup>62</sup> In some folksongs, Digenes lying on his death-bed strangles his wife, in what seems an evident folklore exaggeration.

<sup>63</sup> In G 3604 near *Τρῶσις*, identified with Trush near Samosata by Grégoire, *Byzantion* 6 (1931) 499.

heroes. In light of the scenes described above, this death cannot be seen as a transition to the everlasting glory that comes of a *καλὸς* or *εὐκλεῆς θάνατος*. J.-P. Vernant suggests that Greek ideas of death, from archaic to Hellenistic times, represent heroes achieving self-fulfillment in battle (where a man could show his courage, chivalry, and supremacy), and they are rewarded with everlasting glory that overcomes death. They are endowed with the devotion and courage to die on the battlefield, weapons in hand, and young. That is the way to avoid decrepit old age, ordinary, quiet, resigned death, and burial in oblivion. Here was the opportunity to stay forever alive in the collective memory. The glory achieved by a *καλὸς θάνατος* makes the hero a model for one's existence, a foundation of traditional culture that unifies and consolidates society and helps it understand itself. Thus for individuals social existence acquires significance and value through the valor of dead heroes.<sup>64</sup>

In contrast to this ideology, the hero's death in *Digenes Akrites* does not serve to underscore the bravery and strength that would be a way to achieve ever-lasting glory. To the contrary, at first sight Digenes dies under shameful conditions for a hero, lying on his bed, with weakened hands and legs, fighting against death. But the purpose is not to show the hero's cowardice, but to make evident that there is no other way to defeat him (in combat, in war) and that death is the only invincible thing for him. Death is inevitable, and is so presented in the poem, in the case of both Digenes and his parents. Death absorbs the hero's mythic force and inescapably follows upon life.

These lines begin the last book:

ἐπειδὴ πάντα τὰ τερπνὰ τοῦ πλάνου κόσμου τούτου  
ἄδης μαραίνει καὶ δεινὸς παραλαμβάνει Χάρων  
καὶ ὡς ὄναρ παρέρχεται καὶ σκιά παρατρέχει,

<sup>64</sup> J.-P. Vernant, *L'individu, la mort, l'amour: soi-même et l'autre en Grèce ancienne* (Paris 1989).

καπνὸς ὥσπερ λυόμενος πᾶς πλοῦτος τοῦδε βίου (G 3368–3371)  
 ἐπειδὴ πάντα τὰ τερπνὰ τοῦ πλάνου κόσμου τούτου  
 θάνατος παραδέχεται, ἄδης παραλαμβάνει,  
 ὡς ὄναρ δὲ παρέρχεται πλοῦτος καὶ δόξα πᾶσα (Z 4229–4230)  
 ἐπειδὴ πάντα τὰ τερπνὰ τοῦ πλάνου κόσμου τούτου  
 θάνατος τὰ ὑποκρατεῖ καὶ ἄδης τὰ κερδαίνει (E 1684–1685)

Beyond the eternal exchange of life and death, a further point is made about the vanity of earthly life; this follows from the Christian attitude that is the ideological axis of the poem. From a Christian point of view death is a relief, liberation of the soul from the fetters of the flesh, transition to the next reality. A martyr's death is usually described as a significant and solemn event. So it is natural that the *Digenes Akrites* does not stress the strength and courage of a dying hero. In this respect, the poem is in harmony with the Fathers' lives.

Thus the four steps in the episode of Digenes' death are: bathing in water and falling ill, adventures told to his wife, death, and the funeral ceremony.

First, Digenes' bathing in water, in the Christian symbolism of water, signifies the hero's purification; the Euphrates has a sacral aura in the poem and generally in Christianity. The hero's falling ill after bathing in this "holy water" clothes the reason for his death in mystery and portrays it as a proclamation of divine will. Digenes does not die on the battlefield, but he does not die a natural death in old age. This serves as a means to avoid both, and yet to remain eternally young in the memory of the people.

Second, Digenes on his golden bed reminds his wife of all his heroic deeds devoted to her, and this is accompanied by numerous prayers and requests to God. This is typical of a scene of confession. In his deathbed speech, Digenes reminds his wife that all his feats since his marriage were performed in order to win and preserve her. Moreover, he strikes a tragic note in asserting that he could not achieve his purpose and that she

remained unattainable to him:<sup>65</sup>

ἐμὴ ψυχὴ, πεποίηκα, ἵνα σε ἐκκερδήσω  
καὶ τοῦ σκοποῦ ἀπέτυχον, ἡμαρτον τῆς ἐλπίδος. (G 3489–3490)

Moreover, to sum up the hero's exploits before his death implies logically that his life has been a preparation for death. Digenes by the end of his adventures attains the ideal of heroism, the level of perfection, after which death is the only logical ending.

Third, the simultaneous death of Digenes and his wife, as though a single body and soul, besides expressing the great love between them, symbolically indicates the major achievement of his bravery: his beloved woman disappears with him.

Fourth, and most important, the lamentation on the vanity of the world has the effect of ending the poem in a tragic mode. Death is inevitable, the will of God that no one can escape. It is a punishment of Man because of his Fall and even mighty Akrites is weak facing it—that is the pathos of the final speech, which is imbued with the Christian spirit.<sup>66</sup>

This attempt has been to interpret each stage of Digenes' life—his entering the scene, abduction of the woman, slaying the dragon, building the garden, and death—as implying Christian initiation, and to clarify that the portrayal of the hero is highly

<sup>65</sup> As Galatariotou has noted, Digenes is an unsuccessful lover, because he never really “gets the Girl,” and he is his own worst enemy. This is indicated by his desperate words to his wife before his death: C. Galatariotou, “Structural Oppositions in the Grottaferrata *Digenes Akrites*,” *BMGs* 11 (1987) 29–68, at 62–66. On Digenes' death see E. Elizbarashvili, “Interpretation of the Hero's Death in *Digenes Akrites*,” *Caucasian Messenger* 10 (2004) 188–191 (in Georgian).

<sup>66</sup> In addition to the Christian ideology of the whole poem, the main principle followed in the poem is the belief of the Byzantines that everything that is not confirmed in the Holy Scripture is false. Hence it is stressed repeatedly that the story is true and confirmed: ἀληθινὰ καὶ μεμαρτυρημένα (Z 1288). This should explain why Homer's works are called lies and fictions (G 978–979). See E. Elizbarashvili, “The Christian World Outlook of *Digenes Akrites* and its Attitude towards Antiquity,” *Academia* 3 (2002) 57–62 (in Georgian).

influenced by the images of warrior saints. Taking into consideration that *Digenes Akrites* was created in a society nostalgic for past imperial glory,<sup>67</sup> it is logical that Digenes is an idealized hero, one seeking the way to spiritual salvation.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> See Beaton, *Medieval Greek Romance* 46–47, and “Cappadocians at Court, Digenes and Timarion,” in M. Mullett and D. Smyth (eds.), *Alexios I Komnenos* (Belfast 1993) 332–337; Beaton dates the original composition of *Digenes* after the battle of Manzikert in 1071, when Anatolia was lost, and thus the underlying theme of *Digenes* is nostalgia for a lost frontier homeland.

<sup>68</sup> This article is based on my unpublished dissertation, Iv. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University Institute of Classical Philology, Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 2004. I would like to thank Professors R. Beaton, P. Mackridge, and E. Jeffreys for reading the abstract of my thesis and giving me the benefit of their comments. Only the author is responsible for the suggestions made in the article.