

Medieval Oral Literature

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Karl Reichl

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17 Medieval Greek Epic Poetry

Elizabeth Jeffreys

I Preamble

Greek has a very long linguistic and literary tradition, with a complex history. In the ancient world Greek speakers were proverbially scattered round the Mediterranean like frogs round a pond (Plato, *Phaedo*, 109.b), but the heartland of Greek speech was to be found in the Balkan peninsula.¹ From here in the fourth and third centuries BCE, in the wake of the conquests of Alexander the Great, the use of Greek spread widely throughout the East beyond the fringes of the Mediterranean. Great cities established by Alexander, most notably Alexandria, became centres of a Greek literary culture. From the second and first centuries BCE, following the rise of Rome, Greek became the language of culture for the Romans (for whom skill *utrius linguae*, that is, in both Latin and Greek, was the mark of a civilised person), although throughout late antiquity a linguistic divide continued, with Latin the dominant language for day-to-day purposes in the Western Mediterranean and Greek in the East. Latin however remained the language of government throughout the Roman Empire. Subsequently, from the late sixth century CE, Greek became the main language of administration, education, literature and the church for the Byzantine world, the continuation of the Roman Empire in the East, based in Constantinople. The Byzantine Empire endured for nearly a millennium, with fluctuating boundaries and an interlude of Frankish domination in the thirteenth century following the diversion of the Fourth Crusade in 1204. Reduced to little more than the city of Constantinople itself, it finally fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. Throughout the period of the Tourkokratia, that is, the period when the Balkans and Anatolia were under the control of the Ottoman Empire prior to the independence movement of 1821 and the creation of the modern Greek state, Greek retained its cultural and linguistic significance in these areas – largely because of the major role taken by the Orthodox Church, in politics and education as well as in religious matters.²

Given then that there is a linguistic continuity in Greek in the east Mediterranean and given also that the South Slavic oral tradition analysed by Parry and Lord in the 1930s came from part of this region, *prima facie* it might not be unreasonable to look

¹ In areas now more or less co-terminous with the modern Greek state. For a convenient survey of the development of spoken Greek, see Horrocks 2010.

² The Ottoman *millet* system, defining subject peoples by religious affiliation, devolved much authority to their religious leaders, in this case, the Greek Patriarch; see, e. g., Clogg 1992: 10–15.

for a continuity of oral epic poetry. The factors that had led to the creation of the Homeric epics, that is, bards who composed orally on traditional subjects, might have lingered in the Greek-speaking world over the millennia with an unbroken tradition of orally narrated tales. Certainly this thought is present in Lord's writings, and the medieval Greek epic-romance *Digenis Akritis* is one of the texts examined in *Singer of Tales* (1960:207–20).

However, unsurprisingly, this approach is too simplistic and produces meagre results. Examination of literature in medieval Greek for poetry with connections to an oral poetic tradition must proceed without reference to the ancient world.

2 Medieval Greek

Some background points are needed. Like all languages Greek has evolved, but whereas Latin, the dominant language of the Roman empire in the West, broke up into the modern Romance languages with the dissolution of the empire in the first centuries CE, the Greek of that time remained a unity. While there developed some distinct regional dialects, most notably now Cypriot and Pontic Greek, the differences have never become such as to lead to mutual incomprehensibility.³ For this there were arguably two reasons. Greek had become the language of administration of the Byzantine empire, which was extensive, and on the whole stable; in a virtuous circle, regional vernaculars were not needed, as they were in the West, to confirm separate identities and ensure accurate communication, and so were under no pressure to stress their differences. Furthermore, Greek remained the language of an education which enshrined a culture whose linguistic rules, standards and literary canon had been established during the so-called Second Sophistic of the second and third centuries CE, a literary movement which urged a return to the norms of fifth-century BCE Attic Greek.⁴ Christianity added another privileged stratum, based on the Septuagint and the Gospels. A consequence of this quasi-canonisation of different strata of the language was the development of what might be called a *diglossia*, the expectation that distinct registers of the language would be used for different purposes. In the case of Byzantine, or medieval, Greek, the register required for formal purposes – state administration, ecclesiastical texts, literature (however defined) – aimed at a close approximation to the Attic Greek of the Second Sophistic, and had to be formally learned by all Byzantines. Ecclesiastical texts used the Biblical register. The register for spoken Greek, which differed from the others in vocabulary, syntax and morphology (which had simplified steadily since the early years CE in the direction of today's Modern Greek),⁵ was censored out of writing – with very occasional exceptions. Linguistic censorship of this sort does not provide conditions conducive to the recording of the special spoken discourse of oral epic or ballads. It is important to remember this when searching for evidence for epic or oral poetry in the medieval literature of Byzantium.

³ Horrocks 2010:84–88, 281; Mackridge 1985:4–6.

⁴ The First Sophistic was the period of the sophists and rhetors of the fourth century BCE, to whose literary and linguistic standards the Second Sophistic harked back; see Anderson 1993, Whitmarsh 2005.

⁵ Gignac 1976–81: II, 414–21; Browning 1983:29–38; Horrocks 2010:273–324.

This leads to a further background point. Modern terminology for the registers of post-classical Greek can give rise to confusion. A convention has grown up, in English-based scholarship at least, that restricts 'Byzantine' to the Greek used for texts written in the higher linguistic registers (which, seen from today's perspective, represent a literary and linguistic dead-end) whilst the register used for texts written in something that approximates to the vernacular (and which may be seen as an antecedent for literature in Modern Greek) is termed 'medieval'; the implication is that these are two different forms of the language. However, this terminological distinction is misleading (M. Jeffreys 2007). Gradations between registers were flexible and dependent on context and training. Greek was constantly evolving in every register, whether formal or informal.⁶ While committing a text to writing imposed one of the formal linguistic registers, nevertheless informal and vernacular forms were in use for spoken communication at all levels of society, elite and non-elite alike, whether measured by social status or level of education; orally circulating songs, ballads or stories in the vernacular would have been universally accessible.⁷ However, literacy in the vernacular developed in Greek more slowly and less comprehensively than it did in the Romance languages (McKitterick 1994), and the taboos produced by linguistic censorship were broken only rarely between the sixth and the twelfth centuries, and not frequently after that.⁸ When the taboos are broken one needs to ask why.

There are two moments when the Byzantine linguistic watch-dogs relaxed their vigilance and writing in the vernacular appeared in literary contexts: the first was in Komnenian Constantinople in the middle years of the twelfth century and the other came in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries under the Palaiologan emperors.⁹ The texts discussed in this chapter are the products of each phase, *Digenis Akritis* from the twelfth century and the remainder from the fourteenth.

3 Twelfth-Century Background

The middle years of the twelfth century were one of the most fertile periods in Byzantine literary history. For reasons that are not well understood, from the 1120s onwards there were present in Constantinople more lively well-trained writers and scholars than

⁶ As demonstrated in every chapter of Horrocks 2010.

⁷ The evidence for this is scattered, dependent on haphazard recording and transmission; examples would be the vernacular phrases occasionally cited in the *Peira*, the records of an eleventh-century judge (M. Jeffreys 2007:63–64).

⁸ The standard handbook on the texts involved in the breaking of these taboos is Beck 1971; M. Jeffreys 1996 offers some suggestions for the scenarios involved.

⁹ Komnenian emperors: Alexios I (1081–1118), John II Komnenos (1118–1143), Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180), Alexios II Komnenos (1180–1183), Andronikos I Komnenos (1183–1185). Palaiologan emperors: Michael VIII Palaiologos (1259–1282), Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282–1328), Michael IX Palaiologos (1294–1320), Andronikos III Palaiologos (1328–1341), John V Palaiologos (1341–1391), John VI Kantakouzenos (1341–1354), Andronikos IV Palaiologos (1376–1379), John VII Palaiologos (1390), Manuel II Palaiologos (1391–1425), John VIII Palaiologos (1425–1448), Constantine XI (XII) Palaiologos (1448–1453). For an over-view of these periods, see Mango 2002:169–213, 248–83.

in the previous generation. There were also patrons who were willing to commission texts of all sorts. Sometimes these were encomiastic celebrations of national or domestic events or short dedicatory epigrams to accompany items of liturgical furnishing but they also included longer, more ambitious material, in prose as well as verse, though verse predominated. The patrons ranged over the social scale from the emperors through their courtiers and their families to abbots of monasteries.¹⁰ The experiments produced under this patronage ranged from a verse chronicle to four novels which were pastiches in verse of the novels of late antiquity, to a handful of verse satires on contemporary Constantinopolitan life which switched from formal to vernacular levels for literary effect.¹¹ The satires are known as the *Ptochoprodromika* (Poems of Penniless Prodromos [the Fore-Runner]).¹² Of the writers perhaps the most versatile was Theodore Prodromos (c. 1100–c. 1157). In addition to producing commentaries on ecclesiastical texts, some hagiography, letters and much encomiastic verse (and quite probably also the *Ptochoprodromika*),¹³ he dedicated his novel, much indebted to Heliodorus' *Aithiopika*, to a Caesar, almost certainly Nikephoros Bryennios, who died in 1138.¹⁴ For their plots all four of the Komnenian 'novels'¹⁵ draw heavily on the novelists from late antiquity,¹⁶ but much of their content can be viewed as a loosely linked sequence of *ekphraseis* (descriptions) or other rhetorical exercises set against tales of hazardous elopement in a vaguely sketched ancient world. These are products of a competitive educational environment where bright young men are demonstrating their skills to prospective employers, often in a *theatron* or literary salon where texts were performed and discussed. The novels are but one of the literary genres inherited from antiquity to be the subject of *mimesis* (imitation) at this time;¹⁷ they will have a place in the discussion of *Digenis Akritis*. The *Ptochoprodromika* and the other texts that slip into the vernacular are a little different, though the intention was undoubtedly also to attract notice from potential employers.¹⁸

¹⁰ Magdalino 1993a: 335–356, with a list of patrons at 510–12.

¹¹ For the standard account of these texts, see Hunger 1978: I, 419–22, II, 119–42, and Beck 1971: 101–9.

¹² The best edition is Eideneier 1991.

¹³ For a full list of his works, see Hörandner 1974: 37–72. The authorship of the *Ptochoprodromika* is a vexed issue, further confused by the existence of a contemporary anonymous poet conventionally known as Manganeios Prodromos (*ODB* s. v.).

¹⁴ E. Jeffreys 2000; Agapitos 2000. Nikephoros Bryennios, son-in-law of Alexios I, brother-in-law of John I and husband of Anna Komnene, was a man of letters (author of a history and member of a literary salon) as well as a man of war: E. Jeffreys 2003.

¹⁵ *A&K*: Manasses' *Aristander and Kallithea*; *D&Cb*: Eugenianos' *Drosilla and Charikles*; *H&H*: Makrembolites' *Hysmene and Hysmenias*; *R&D*: Prodromos, *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*. A convenient edition of all these, with an Italian translation, is Conca 1994; note also a forthcoming English translation (E. Jeffreys 2012).

¹⁶ For an excellent analysis of the use made of Achilles Tatius by Makrembolites in his *H&H*, see Nilsson 2001; for a thoughtful analysis of all novels, see Roilos 2005.

¹⁷ On Byzantine educational goals, see Markopoulos 2008. On *mimesis*, the classic statement is Hunger 1969–70. Other genres for which pastiches were produced in the first half of the twelfth century include tragedy (*Katomyomachia*, *Christos Paschon*) and essays in the style of Lucian (*Charidemios*, *Timarion*): Hunger 1978: II, 142–56.

¹⁸ The chief texts are the poem of advice known as *Spaneas*, the poem from prison of Michael Glykas, the *Eisiterioi* for Agnes of France and some passages in Manganeios Prodromos' petitions to the

There the shifts in register might be attributed to the poets' response to the developing tastes of their imperial patrons, influenced perhaps by the realisation, following the influx of crusading Westerners, that the vernacular could be used to good effect.¹⁹ The results however were limited in extent and brief in duration.

4 *Digenis Akritis*

At this point the discussion turns to *Digenis Akritis* (*DA*), the only text that can be classed as a medieval Greek – or Byzantine – epic, though that classification is frequently challenged. Primarily it is epic because the central figure, Digenis, is male, performing valiant deeds against wild beasts and other foes, both human and supernatural, in a historical setting that is reminiscent of one of Byzantium's more heroic periods in the ninth and tenth centuries. But there is a certain amount of romance, in two love-stories, first between Digenis' parents and then between Digenis and his bride. The hero is literally 'di-genis', that is, 'double-born' or 'of Double Descent'. He is also a man of the frontier: his life was spent patrolling the territory lying between the shifting Byzantine-Arab borders (*akra*). Digenis' father was an Arab emir, who is the major character of the first part of the story, part of which is told from an Arab point of view. The emir, on a raid into Byzantine Cappadocia, seized a Greek girl, daughter of the provincial governor. Out of love for her, when defeated by her brother in single combat, he decided to be baptised, to marry her and to come over to the Byzantine side. When their son Digenis was born, he grew up very quickly, passed a *rite de passage* in hunting, and then followed family tradition by stealing a bride from another Byzantine castle. After a sumptuous wedding, he settled down to a solitary life (with his wife) as a kind of policeman of a large tract in the east of the Byzantine Empire, near the river Euphrates and the Arab border. But the criminals he defeated seem to be largely Christian Greek irregular troops or shape-changing *drakontes* rather than the Arab forces who were the most prominent of Byzantium's external foes. He finally built a palace by the Euphrates and died young and childless, with his wife immediately expiring beside him from grief.

This episodic tale survives in six manuscripts dating from the early fourteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries, discovered and published between 1871 and 1926. All manuscript versions tell recognizably the same story but with variants in wording and choice of episodes. All are written in the fifteen-syllable line, first found in written form in the tenth century and later becoming the standard metre for Greek folk-song.²⁰ From 1871, when a version of the text was found (in the Soumela monastery near Trebizond), it was immediately recognised as an extended version of the tales about Digenis or Akritis long known from ballads sung and collected in Anatolia and throughout Greek-speaking lands.²¹ The text was commandeered to serve as the National Epic of the Greek

emperor; all are written in the fifteen-syllable line. In all these imperial patronage plays a role. Dedictees of the *Ptochoprodromika* include the emperors John II and Manuel I.

¹⁹ The points made in E. Jeffreys 1980 are still valid.

²⁰ The fifteen-syllable line became the national metre of Modern Greece; on its history see M. Jeffreys 1974 and Lauxtermann 1999.

²¹ This version is referred to as T. All manuscripts (= versions) of *DA* are conventionally known by

state, the modern equivalent of Homer or the European *Beowulf* or *Cid*. These nationalistic overtones have long haunted *DA*, exacerbated by the Greek Language Question, the long struggle between the vernacular (*demotike*) and learned (*katharevousa*) versions of Greek for the status of national language. The two primary versions of *DA* could be seen as forerunners of these two registers. In the language debates of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was important to know which was the authentic language of the nation's epic.²²



17 – Digenis and a Princess, Byzantine glazed plate (12th c.), Archaeological Museum of Ancient Corinth

Work over the last thirty years has clarified much about the transmission of the six versions.²³ It is now clear that the four sixteenth- and seventeenth-century manuscripts are derived from an early sixteenth-century compendium (lost long ago; it has been christened Z by Erich Trapp). Whilst of interest in their own right, these later versions can be

initials of their find spots or first editors. On the ballads, see Beck 1971:87–93, Beaton 1980:78–82.

²² Browning 1983:100–15; Mackridge 1985:6–10.

²³ For bibliography and a survey of earlier work, see Beck 1971:63–97. Subsequent bibliography can be found in the standard editions: Trapp 1971, Alexiou 1985, E. Jeffreys 1998.

left to one side when the origins of the poem are considered.²⁴ For this, focus has to be on the two earliest, the Grottaferrata version (= G) and the Escorial version (= E).²⁵ Further back than these two in the reconstruction of the earliest form of the text it is impossible to go. While extensive passages show a virtually identical sequence of episodes (see Table on p. 478 for the structure of *DA*) and much wording in common²⁶ this commonality of material frequently breaks down, and is then obscured further by variations of register when choices have to be made at the lexical level. The question then arises as to whether G, in a more learned but also clumsy register of Greek, or E, in a much more fluid vernacular, better represents the text which must lie behind them both. The academic debate was not aided by the fact that E was for long only available in a poor edition – a situation remedied with Stylianos Alexiou's interventionist edition in 1985 which revealed the text's quality. Recent editorial work has suggested that both G and E need to be accepted as equally valid representatives of a text that has been through a complex transmission process; they are probably also equally deficient representations of earlier forms.²⁷ It has also become quite clear that both in their present forms are the product of a copying process, as Alexiou's work on E has demonstrated.²⁸ G is plainly a version created in writing, but the irregularities of E in its old edition were such that plausible suggestions were made that it could be an oral dictated text (notably Morgan 1960).

It is possible to comment on the nature of the text that lies behind G and E, which for convenience can be called **Digenis*. It was episodic and abrupt,²⁹ made up of discrete events loosely strung together to make a biography of the hero, as can be seen from the sections listed in the Table;³⁰ its language combined both vernacular and high-level features;³¹ and names and incidents involving its characters arguably reflect scattered incidents in the wars of the ninth and tenth centuries against Arab invaders and heretic Christians.³² However both G and E, and so **Digenis* also, echo some of the romantic interests, and phrases, found in the novels of the 1130s–1150s and derived from models

²⁴ The interdependence of manuscripts T (Trebizond), A (Athens), P (now in Thessaloniki), O (Oxford) was shown by Kyriakidis 1946, whose conclusions were put into practice in Trapp's edition (1971). On the nature of Z, see Trapp 1971:26–33 and M. Jeffreys 1975.

²⁵ G is a South Italian manuscript of c. 1300; editions: Trapp 1971, E. Jeffreys 1998 (with English translation). E is late fifteenth century; editions: Alexiou 1985; E. Jeffreys 1998 (with English translation).

²⁶ Beaton 1993a; E. Jeffreys 1998:26–30.

²⁷ Editorial theory for the treatment of texts like *DA* was the subject of the conference Neograeca Medii Aevi IVa (Hamburg, 1999), published as Eideneier, Moennig and Toufexis 2001: debate was vigorous and the conclusions mixed.

²⁸ E. g. the word division at E792 demonstrates that the text was copied from a manuscript with a lacuna; see further Alexiou 1985: ιζ'-κβ'.

²⁹ Alexiou 1985: λβ'-λγ'; Ricks 1989.

³⁰ On the development of biographical love-stories which end with the death of one or both of the protagonists, which include *DA*, *Ach* and *A&S* (for abbreviations see notes 49–51 below), see Moennig 2004:46–49, 65–69.

³¹ Beaton 1993b, using a computer generated concordance of G and E, lists core material attributable to the 'Lay of the Emir' which demonstrates the shifts in register. For the concordance, see Beaton, Kelly, and Lendaris 1995.

³² See Oikonomides 1979 for a good discussion of the issues, and also Alexiou 1985: νδ'-ζη'.

from the Second Sophistic, especially Achilles Tatius.³³ Moreover the lion-wrestling scene from G4.112–29 is parodied in the *Ptochoprodromika* (I.160–177), dedicated to John I Komnenos (d. 1143) and almost certainly by Theodore Prodromos, author of one of the novels.³⁴ There is thus a good case that **Digenis* should be attached to the novel-writing movement of Komnenian Constantinople. One could argue that it represents the results of a, not very successful, experiment, an attempt to set a ‘novel’ in Byzantium’s own recent past rather than a blurred late antiquity, taking some intriguingly vernacular ballads and structuring them as a biography ending in death rather than as a romance with a happy end in the protagonists’ marriage, as in the novels.³⁵

From this it follows that, although *DA* is set in Byzantium’s eastern frontier on the Euphrates, the connection with the Constantinopolitan literary elite makes the capital the most likely, indeed the only probable, place for the poem’s composition.³⁶ Arguably the raw material for the ‘epic’, by this scenario consisting of ballads dealing with the hero’s exploits on the frontier and his father’s battles in the Byzantine-Arab wars of ninth and tenth centuries,³⁷ circulated orally in his ‘home territory’ and was then brought to Constantinople. It has been suggested that refugees were responsible for this, in the wake of Turkish invasions in the decades around the battle of Manzikert in 1071.³⁸ Movement between Constantinople and the frontier areas was constant and from the late eleventh century onwards the appearance of the Western Crusading armies added to the traffic. Byzantine armies, whose leaders included Nikephoros Bryennios, the probable dedicatee of Prodromos’ *R&D*, were in Cilicia, and *Digenis* territory, in the 1130s.

All that has been said thus far deals with the written aspects of the *Digenis* text as we now have it, referring back to ballads on *Digenis*’s exploits hypothetically circulating in an oral form from the ninth and tenth centuries onwards. Certainly ballads with *Digenis* as the central figure were sung in Greek-speaking areas until very recent times (though contamination from electronic as well as written versions is now very likely) (Beaton 1986). It is simpler to deal with the later ballads first since the evidence for their existence is undeniable. Examples were collected from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century onwards with an influential collection edited and translated by Fauriel in

³³ E. g. G4.276–80, see Achilles Tatius 1.4.4–5 (effects of love); G7.14–41, E1657–8, see Achilles Tatius 1.15.1–8 (a garden); G6.782, see Achilles Tatius 1.1.11, *H&H* 2.4.3 (a girl’s tunic).

³⁴ The scene is also found in E764–77 but without the phrases for cap, kilt and club that here link G and the *Ptochoprodromika*. *Ptochoprodromos* 4.539–52 refers to John’s son Manuel as a second Akritis. Eideneier cautions that the dedicatory titles of the *Ptochoprodromika* are not necessarily reliable.

³⁵ Not all students of this subject would agree with this formulation; Beaton, for example, puts the composition of the earliest form of *Digenis* in the late eleventh century (Beaton 1996a: 50). The present author, whilst linking **Digenis* with the fashion for writing novels, has previously suggested a date in the 1150s, when Manuel I was on campaign on the Euphrates borders (E. Jeffreys 1998: lvi–lvii). Debate continues.

³⁶ Evocations of a Syrian monk musing on the deeds of *Digenis* deal with the physical but not the literary context of the poem (e. g. Mavrogordato 1956: lxxix).

³⁷ Names cited in the emir’s genealogy have been identified with the Paulician heretics Chrysocheir (d. 878/9), Karbeas (d. 863) and ‘Umar, emir of Melitene (d. 863), who fought with the Muslims against Basil I (Lemerle 1973: 85–103).

³⁸ Magdalino 1993b; Beaton 1996b.

1824–1825; other collections followed.³⁹ An early written witness to ballad material is found in a seventeenth-century manuscript, with musical notation attached, now kept in the Iviron monastery on Mount Athos (Bouvier 1960); this group of songs is of especial interest because one seems to link the *Digenis*-story of the nineteenth-century ballads to the medieval narrative. Do the Iviron texts show a continuous tradition of transmission from the middle Byzantine period through to the early years of the Tourkokratia and beyond? There is no satisfactory answer: the seventeenth-century texts are brief and the resemblances to either later or earlier texts are of episode rather than details of wording. There are some marked resemblances between the wording, metrical usages and line structure of some of the nineteenth-century ballads and the text in E, and this has given rise to debate as to whether the ballads are really independent survivals or merely a worn-down reflection of the Byzantine text (Beck 1971: 48–63). There are enough tantalising similarities to indicate a relationship of some sort.⁴⁰ But it must be remembered that copies of the Z text were available in the Balkans in the eighteenth century and could well have contaminated whatever singing tradition was in existence. Two at least of these manuscripts were seen by the learned monk Kaisarios Dapontes (1714–1784), who lamented that *Digenis* had never been printed.⁴¹ The wider question whether the oral ballads of the Tourkokratia still preserve something of the ballads from the ninth and tenth centuries (the likely origin of **Digenis*) is even more problematic. Evidence for the very existence of these earlier ballads is slight: besides hazy memories of the past surviving in G and E, there are scanty references in historians, most notably the comment in Psellós’ *Chronographia* (c. 1080) on the tales (not necessarily songs) told of the Doukas clan. It is noteworthy that this is a family which figures prominently in *Digenis*’ genealogy.⁴² Yet *Digenis* himself shows no interest in historical epic; though the hero has been well instructed in the art of music (G4. 396–40, E826–34), he sings love-songs, not tales of heroic valour.

A search in formal aspects of G and E for signs of contact with an oral past gives limited results. The presence of repeated phrases and lines is usually taken as one of the most indicative tests as they may be oral formulas. There are a few repeated phrases in G and rather more in E. Lines already mentioned as virtually identical in both manuscripts⁴³ are evidence for the existence of the earlier **Digenis*, not formulaic density. Other repeated phrases and lines, whether appearing only in one version or – less commonly – in both, suggest that both versions (and so **Digenis*) are drawing on a shared pool of phraseology, arguably oral in origin (Beaton 1993b). But the statistics which these phrases generate are very low,⁴⁴ with most consisting of name and epithet, of the type ‘Akritis the bold’ (*Akriten ton gennaion*, Ἀκρίτην τὸν γενναῖον). When G and E are examined separately, G emerges as having been thoroughly worked over in a literate and

³⁹ Fauriel 1824–25; Passow 1860.

⁴⁰ Prombonas 1985; Sifakis 1989; Fenik 1991.

⁴¹ Dapontes’ paraphrases of the texts he had seen (one in an illustrated manuscript) allow these to be connected to the O version of *Digenis*, which has a (probably authorial) date of 1670; his comments are cited from (the still) unpublished *Biblos Basileion* (Book of Kings) by Lambros 1880: xcix–ci.

⁴² E. Jeffreys 1998: xxxix, and genealogy at xxxvi.

⁴³ Beaton 1993a for the 14 lines completely identical in both and lists of others that are nearly so.

⁴⁴ E. Jeffreys 1998: lv; Lord 1960: 213.

literary manner by a redactor who added gnomic sayings and allusions from hagiography.⁴⁵ E, however, which – as noted above – shows rhythms and phrases that have parallels with later folk song, including songs independent of the *Digenis* material, also has rather more repetitions (Alexiou 1985: πζ-πθ). These are the features that have driven the arguments that E both reflects the genuine, uncorrupted language of the people and must be closest to the original form of the *Digenis* poem.

Very striking is the *Son of Armouris*, a poem of some 200 lines, essentially a long ballad, which is preserved in two manuscripts of which one is dated scribally to 1461 and is thus more or less contemporary to E.⁴⁶ Many phrases and many of the plot situations in the *Son of Armouris* echo the Arab-Byzantine environment envisaged in the *Digenis* poem and, more particularly, details found in E. This suggests that the *Digenis* material continued to circulate, though whether orally (as the style implies) or only in written form is debatable: both manuscripts of the *Son of Armouris* have palaeographical errors produced in copying and so neither was transcribed from performance (Alexiou 1985: 160).

Byzantium's only epic poses many riddles. Its generation and transmission must at some point have involved orally disseminated material: stories, almost certainly in verse, about the legendary past and a lone hero of Arab-Byzantine parentage would have circulated in the frontier areas on the banks of the Euphrates. Our evidence for their existence comes from Psellos' comments on tales told of the Doukas family. At some point these ballad stories were brought to Constantinople. Using the evidence of G and E it can be argued that they were limited in scope: they reflected the Arab-Byzantine society of the frontier and told of the hero's clashes with groups of bandits, how he hunted wild beasts, abducted a bride, built a palace and met an early death. It was probably in the 1130s and 1140s, when it became fashionable in Constantinopolitan literary circles to write narratives in the manner of the novelists of late antiquity, that an attempt was made to string this material about the hero Digenis into a biographical sequence and trim it with appropriate romantic elements. It may well have been this material's vernacular background that attracted those who were then experimenting with varied genres and language levels. This novel, or romance, on Digenis was never rounded out and it remained a sketch, a loosely linked sequence of episodes: it is this, **Digenis*, which lies behind G and E. It would have been in the fifteen-syllable line, linguistically and metrically awkward, with imitations of Achilles Tatius and Heliodoros at some key points. It thus exemplified the difficulties that even the boldest spirit faced when attempting to break through the cultural barriers imposed by Byzantium's linguistic taboos. Before the middle of the twelfth century one of its episodes was lampooned in the *Ptochoprodromika*.

5 The Fourteenth Century and Oral Poetry

However, even if linguistic censorship has removed almost all the possible written evidence for Byzantine epic, there are sufficient pointers of other sorts from texts of the

⁴⁵ Odorico 1989; Trapp 1976.

⁴⁶ The best edition is that in Alexiou 1985; English translation in Ricks 1990.

fourteenth century, to construct arguments that oral traditions existed and exerted influence at that date. The works concerned are all in the fifteen-syllable verse, and also in a register of Greek which, despite variations, is closer to the vernacular in morphology and syntax than was normally permitted. Their language also includes a puzzling mix of forms which normally belong to different dialects or different temporal strata of Greek.⁴⁷ There are some indications that these features made up an artificial poetic language for the fifteen-syllable verse, but also that the Greek of the period was itself full of linguistic variants. The texts appeared at some point in the early fourteenth century (and possibly the late thirteenth), in Palaeologan Constantinople and the Greek-speaking lands in which Frankish rulers had established states following the division of Byzantine territory after the sack of Constantinople in 1204. The most significant of these Franco-Greek areas was that of the Morea, in the Peloponnese.⁴⁸ The texts are, with one possible exception, anonymous and their dates of production continue to be debated. They include chronicles;⁴⁹ romances, some with French, Italian or Turkish originals, others apparently original compositions;⁵⁰ animal-fables and satire, including a retelling with fourteenth-century overtones of the legendary career of the sixth-century general Belisarios;⁵¹ and narratives of contemporary warfare.⁵²

Despite their disparate subject-matter, these texts share sufficient common characteristics to justify their being treated as a group, notably their metre and their language. Furthermore, when a text survives in more than one manuscript then the variants are such that it is impossible to collate the readings into one primary version by conventional editorial principles. Finally, these texts share a noticeably large number of repeated lines, repeated both within a given poem and also across several, even the whole corpus. Because none of these features were fostered by the regular Byzantine education, these texts have had low esteem, derided as the inefficient products of semi-literate would-be poets.⁵³ However it was precisely this combination of features that led Constantine Trypanis (1963) to claim for this group an oral poetic composition of the type described in *The Singer of Tales*, thus vindicating their 'uncouth' style and other oddities. This initial

⁴⁷ Browning 1983: 5–12, 69–87; Horrocks 2010: 342–67.

⁴⁸ The history and culture of this area is usefully surveyed in Lock 1995.

⁴⁹ *CoM*: Chronicle of the Morea (Schmitt 1904); *CbTocco*: Chronicle of Tocco (Schirò 1975). On the texts listed in this and the following three notes, see Beck 1971; Knös 1961 is also worth consulting, particular on post-1453 material.

⁵⁰ *A&S* (*Alexander and Semiramis*): Moennig 2004 (version of Persian-Ottoman *Ferec baid eš-šide*); *Ach* (*Tale of Achilles*): Cupane 1995; *ByzIl* (*Byzantine Iliad*): Nørgaard and Smith 1975; *K&Ch* (*Kallimachos and Chryssorrhoe*): Cupane 1995; *I&M* (*Imberios and Margarona*): Kriaras 1955 (version of French *Pierre de Provence et la belle Maguelonne*); *L&R* (*Liwistros and Rhodamme*): Agapitos 2006a (recension α), Lendari 2007 (ms.V); *Ph&P* (*Phlorios and Platzia-flora*): Cupane 1995 (version of Tuscan *Cantare di Florio e Platzia flore*); *V&Ch* (*Velthandros and Chryssantzza*): Cupane 1995; *Peri E&D* (*On Good and Bad Fortune*): Cupane 1995; *WoI* (*War of Troy*): Papathomopoulos and Jeffreys 1996 (version of Benoît de Ste Maure's *Roman de Troie*).

⁵¹ *Poul* (*Poulologos*): Tsavari 1987; *Quadrupeds*: Nicholas and Baloglou 2003; *Belis* (*Belisarios*): Bakker and van Gemert 1988.

⁵² Such as the *Battle of Varna* of 1444 (Legrand 1875). For post-1453 examples, such as Achelis' *Siege of Malta* (1572) or Diakrousis and Bounialis on the Veneto-Turkish Cretan Wars, see Knös 1961: 227–32 and, e. g., Kaklamanis 2005.

⁵³ Often classified in manuscript catalogues as written 'graeco-barbare'.

claim was taken up by others in close studies of several texts, most notably the romance *I&M* and the chronicle *CoM*.⁵⁴ These studies accepted from the start that these works were composed and circulated in writing, though their poets were under fairly direct influence from oral poets. Trypanis himself, on the other hand, went on to make sweeping claims for the role of oral composition throughout Greek literature of the time (1981: 498–505).

The most convincing evidence that this group of fourteenth-century texts has been produced against a background in oral poetry takes the form of a high 'formula' count in certain of them, using the terminology and definitions of Milman Parry and Albert Lord (1960: 3–12). The text that has been used most rigorously to demonstrate a formulaic texture is the *CoM*:⁵⁵ analyses by Michael Jeffreys produced a formulaic density of 31.7%. This figure (meaningless in itself) is to be contrasted with a formulaic density of 12% in an almost exactly contemporary text, the Byzantine *Alexander Poem*, in the same metre and similar language, thus suggesting different circumstances of composition.⁵⁶ Analyses of several more texts in this group demonstrated that they show a formula count which ranges from around 35% to a barely perceptible level, around 12%.⁵⁷ The *WoT*, with a high formula count (29.3%),⁵⁸ is also a translation of the twelfth-century *Roman de Troie* of Benoît de Ste Maure; the relationship is sufficiently close that the French original can often be used in the selection of readings from the Greek manuscript variants. This is a classic combination of a text undoubtedly produced by literate means with elements of an orally based style, with parallels, for example, in the Middle High German texts examined by Bäuml (1980 and 1984). His conclusion that the stylistic features represent an attempt to give texts validation by reference to an earlier authoritative traditional style is relevant to the Greek situation. Moreover, the *WoT* is not unique: *Ph&P* is similarly close to its Italian original and similarly has a significant proportion of repeated phrases.

Other indices are regularly used as signs of the influence of oral composition, for example, themes. Recent work by Teresa Shawcross on *CoM* shows that this text has a thematic system for the presentation of speech acts arguably deriving from a degenerate oral poetry.⁵⁹ The analysis made by Ulrich Moennig of narrative techniques in *A&S* also reveals a patterning of meetings and speeches (2004: 115–30).

Attempts to find references to singers in contemporary Byzantine writers have produced disappointingly scanty – though nonetheless suggestive – results, such as the references in the historical work of Gregoras to travellers singing of the 'deeds of men' (E.

⁵⁴ E. Jeffreys and M. Jeffreys 1971; M. Jeffreys 1973.

⁵⁵ As will be discussed below this was composed in the fourteenth century and survives in several languages; see Shawcross 2005 and 2009, for a careful recontextualising of the Greek and the French versions.

⁵⁶ M. Jeffreys 1973: 11 (formulaic density of *CoM*), 12 (formulas in *Alexander*).

⁵⁷ M. Jeffreys 1993: 54, note 12; other figures for formulaic density: *I&M* 35.7%, *Ach* (Oxford version) 35%, *Belisarios* 34.2%, *Ach* (Naples version) 29.2%, *Ph&P* 22.4%, *V&Ch* 19.4%, *K&Ch* 12.1%; preliminary investigations into *L&R* suggest that this has a high formula count. Moennig 2004: 146–55 discusses the formulaic texture of *A&S*.

⁵⁸ E. Jeffreys and M. Jeffreys 1979: 119; Papatomopoulos and E. Jeffreys 1996: lxxxi–lxxxvi.

⁵⁹ Shawcross 2005. *DA* is more productive of themes: Fenik 1991.

Jeffreys and M. Jeffreys 1986: 507–9). Within the texts themselves and most notably in *L&R*, as with *DA* earlier, characters are not infrequently shown singing, but songs of love rather than brave deeds. However, many of the texts include a conventional summons to an audience to gather round to hear the tale that is to be told.⁶⁰

This is an ambivalent situation, of a sort regularly encountered in the literatures of medieval Europe, where a high incidence of repetitions is balanced against a relative paucity of other markers of orality. The explanation for the Greek texts must be, as elsewhere, that they were composed in writing by poets who were familiar with a tradition of orally composed and performed poetry and wished to emulate this in a written form. Other relevant issues concern the audience to whom these texts were directed and whether the texts were to be heard or read.

Detailed suggestions made in the 1970s that the repeated phrases and lines could be interpreted as a marker of indebtedness to traditions of oral composition were read as claims for direct oral composition. One immediate reaction, without addressing the issue of internal repetitions, was that the common lines shared between several texts were due to a school of poets who plagiarised each other's work (e. g. Spadaro 1975, 1976 and 1978). Subsequently Arnold van Gemert suggested, with good examples from the problematic ending to *Ach*, that copyists might have been responsible for some of the variants (van Gemert and Bakker 1981). Hans Eideneier, who has different arguments for an oral stratum in medieval Greek literary texts, pointed out examples of errors in manuscripts apparently attributable to an internal dictation, introducing another aspect of orality (1982–83 and 1999). Roderick Beaton attempted a compromise position which allowed for elements of a traditional oral style in combination with a school of poets (1996a: 164–88). Others remained in general unsympathetic to the texts under analysis (to discover the formula-level of the *CoM* did not make it any the better as poetry)⁶¹ and were unwilling to accept that an oral background gave any insights into their nature: a major stumbling block would appear to be the differences between the medieval texts and the folksong and ballads in Modern Greek, thus postulating (improbably) the existence of two distinct traditions. Others again did not confront the issue of oral backgrounds overtly but responded by implication. Thus Panagiotis Agapitos has pointed out the bookish features of the manuscripts in which many of these texts survive: the integral role of rubrics and illustrations, the learned scribes, the internal references to reading and literate composition.⁶² His insights are driven by detailed work on the structures and narrative devices of *L&R*, *K&Ch* and *V&Ch* which show an authorial mind-set developed in a literate literary culture (1991).

Since the early stages of this debate a number of issues have been clarified, to a greater or lesser extent. These include: the texts' language, their manuscripts, the scribes, their indebtedness to twelfth-century antecedents, the court environment to which they allude. On-going editorial work has resulted in clearer insight into dating. Editorial tech-

⁶⁰ Cupane 1994–95. For an intricate discussion of the interweaving of recitation and writing in the Palaeologan romances see Agapitos 2006b.

⁶¹ Mackridge 1990, reporting a colloquium debating the nature of orality, set up in response to current debates stimulated by modish interest in Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (1982).

⁶² Agapitos and Smith 1994; Agapitos 2006b.

niques have been problematised.⁶³ It cannot be sufficiently stressed that it has long been clear that all these texts were produced by written means, and that not one can be an oral dictated text: they are the products of a literate culture which has retained some of the trappings of orality.

Language. The mixed nature of the vernacular of these texts had caused much debate in the early years of the twentieth century when tensions over the Language Question in Greece were high.⁶⁴ Suggestions that this phenomenon might have a parallel in the mixed Homeric language, preserved by metrical pressures, were mentioned in the initial proposals for an oral background to the fourteenth-century texts (M. Jeffreys 1973: 193). These proposals assumed too much regularity in the spoken language of the time which contained many variations. In particular, an appreciation of the language of vernacular prose, admittedly largely post-Byzantine rather than Palaeologan, indicates the morphology and syntax found in vernacular verse is not as unusual as once thought.⁶⁵

Manuscripts and scribes. It is now much better understood that careful consideration must be given to each manuscript in which a text of this type survives, that each has played an individual role in the transmission of the text and that to attempt to produce a unified edition is often unrealistic. Each manuscript has its own validity as a version of the text. It is significant too, as Chatizyakoumis has pointed out (1977), that most of the manuscripts are late (i. e., sixteenth century) and a noticeable proportion were copied in the West for western scholars. Furthermore, many others make up collected volumes, put together when vernacular Greek culture was under pressure of dissolution in the early years of the Tourkokratia.⁶⁶ A number of the scribes can be shown to have copied material in a range of registers (ecclesiastical and high-register secular as well as vernacular).⁶⁷ The rubricated titles, and also the illustrations (or rather, spaces for illustrations), that accompany many of the texts (*Wot*, *L&R*, *Peri E&D*, etc) have been shown to be authorial and not scribal (Agapitos and Smith 1994), thus firmly locating these texts in a literate environment.

Indebtedness to twelfth-century novels. One of the motifs that recurs in the romances in this group of texts is that of the castle, its associated garden and the heroine it protects: it appears in *L&R*, *K&C*, *Be&C*, *Ach*, *Peri E&D*. The origins and function of this motif have been debated at length but inconclusively.⁶⁸ However, a consensus is now emerging that, for example, the elaborately allegorical castles of *L&R*, with their figures of the Virtues and the Months (*L&R* recension α 1023–1252, *L&R* ms. V 801–1012),

⁶³ See the discussions in Eideneier, Moennig and Toufexis 2001. Each text imposes its own issues and editorial solutions: these include reliance on stemmatic relationships (*Poul*: Tsavari 1987; *Wot*: Papathomopoulos and Jeffreys 1996), presentation of versions synoptically (*Belis*: Bakker and van Gemert 1988), edition of single manuscripts (*Ach*: Smith 1990, 1999), or eclecticism (*L&R*: Agapitos 2006a).

⁶⁴ The chief protagonists in this aspect of the debate were Jean Psycharis (1824–1929) and Georgios Chatzidakis (1848–1941); Browning 1983: 9–10, 107–8.

⁶⁵ See the studies on early vernacular prose by Eleni Kakoulidou-Panou and her team of researchers in E. Jeffreys and M. Jeffreys 2005: 461–539.

⁶⁶ Such as Vindob. theol. gr. 244. See the papers in Holton 2005, deriving from a conference which focused on the nature of collected manuscripts of Byzantine and early vernacular Greek texts.

⁶⁷ E. g. Reinsch 2005; Hinterberger 2005.

⁶⁸ Recent useful discussions include Cupane 1978, Littlewood 1979, Agapitos 1991.

were devised with full knowledge of the equally elaborate *ekphraseis* of the twelfth-century *H&H*.

Court environment. Studies on *K&C*, *V&C*, *A&S* and to a lesser extent *L&R* have shown the extent to which references to procedures derived from practices of the Palaeologan imperial court, such as *proskynesis* (ritual prostration), titles of officials, the issuing of decrees, are embedded in the settings of the romances.⁶⁹ However, the presence of such details does not necessarily imply composition at court.

Insights into dating. The cumulative effect of recent work is to push the dating of several of the texts in this group towards the middle of the fourteenth century. The *CoM* survives in multiple versions, in Greek, French, Aragonese, and Italian; each has its own rationale and for each it is possible to suggest a date. From a combination of internal evidence and manuscript watermarks, it can be concluded that the basic version was initially constructed c. 1320, while the oldest surviving Greek version (in verse) dates from the 1380s and the French prose version from c. 1340; Teresa Shawcross (2009) argues both that the Greek and the French versions conform to the contemporary conventions of the language in which they are composed, and that Greek was the language of the original text.⁷⁰ This text can only have been produced in the Morea, the Peloponnese. There are now several new points that can be made about dating the romances, to supplement the long-standing suggestion placing *K&Ch* c. 1310–1340 with Andronikos Palaiologos, cousin of the emperor Andronikos II (1281–1328), as author (Knös 1962). The work of Panagiotis Agapitos on *L&R* has produced a convincing series of arguments on the transmission history of this romance which take its composition back before 1330, though his attribution to Laskarid Nicaea and the thirteenth century is less well-founded.⁷¹ Spadaro (1966) made a good case for linking the introduction of the Italian text on which *Ph&P* is based to the entourage of Niccolò Acciaiuoli, who came to the Morea in 1348. Maria Politi has shown that the watermark of the Leipzig manuscript for *Peri E&D* can be dated to the mid-fourteenth century (Politi-Sakellariadi 1987: 286). The Ottoman model for *A&S* circulated widely with the first attested copy dated to 1382 (Moennig 2004: 24). It is however still not clear at what point in his long career as a teacher and ecclesiastical administrator did Theodore Meliteniotes (c. 1320–1393), putative author of *To Chastity*,⁷² produce this amalgam of romance motifs with echoes of *DA* and *L&R*. However, whilst this work confirms the clustering of the romances towards the middle and in the first half of the fourteenth century, little more can be added about their relative dating, which remains problematic.⁷³

It might be noted that references in this discussion have been made to romances and one chronicle while the relevant texts were initially stated to include animal-fables and satire. Lack of discussion here of these latter types is not an indication of intrinsic

⁶⁹ Notably Hunger 1965 and 1968; most recently Gaul 2007.

⁷⁰ Jacoby 1968 remains a convenient summary for the dating issues.

⁷¹ Agapitos 2006a: 197–98 for composition before 1330, 51–53 for composition in Nicaea c. 1240–160. The grounds for this are the indebtedness of *L&R* to the Komnenian novels, copies of which are found in thirteenth-century manuscripts, and an innovation in coronation ritual (which became the norm subsequently).

⁷² On *To Chastity* (*Eis te Sofrosynen*) see most recently Schönauer 1996, with older literature.

⁷³ Despite the arguments presented in Agapitos 1993.

stylistic difference but rather a reflection of the balance of recent scholarly investigations – as well as the pressures of space in this chapter. However, now that the issue of orality versus literacy, or literariness, has ceased to be a fashionable matter for discussion, for the most part there seems to have developed a tacit acceptance that the stylistic features and peculiarities of this group of late Byzantine verse texts are best explained against a background of orally composed and orally disseminated poetry.⁷⁴

Although much still remains obscure, with a better understanding of the nature of this poetry and a more nuanced appreciation of interaction between Byzantine writers, some suggestions might be made that take into account both the traditional style and the signs of authorial interaction, though the texts have still to lose their anonymity. Much of the earlier discussion about schools of poets and their exchange of material was conducted in a vacuum, with little attempt to pin down dates or places. Here it seems relevant to draw analogies with the social and literary environment of Komnenian Constantinople which produced the twelfth-century novels and *DA*. At that time, it can be argued, a group of teachers and taught vied in literary virtuosity, combining learned and vernacular elements across the breadth of the Greek linguistic and literary heritage, pushing at the boundaries of cultural conventions and parading their wares before each other and their patrons. Palaeologan Constantinople after 1261 saw a similar grouping of teachers, with figures such as Maximos Planoudes (c. 1255–c. 1305), the best known, Theodore Hyrtakenos (early 1300s), Manuel Bryennios (c. 1300) and others.⁷⁵ This was a continuation of the revival of education that had begun in Nicaea after 1204 at the instigation of the emperor Theodore Laskaris, in an attempt to reaffirm Byzantine cultural values after the disaster of 1204. The taught are perhaps less visible, except as recalcitrant youths who were inclined to prefer the excitements of the streets to the classroom, as Planoudes complains in his letters; the more conscientious worked through the system to become the prelates and administrators of the next generation. It would seem a not unreasonable scenario that some lively individual, who was stimulated – once again – by knowledge of Western vernacular texts and romances and familiar with the Greek vernacular traditions (folktales with witches, magic horses and cruel *drakontes* told in a traditional style), combined these with the Greek learned literary tradition (this time adding the twelfth-century novels to those from late antiquity): the result would have been a text like *K&C*, which then challenged others. Is it significant that Planoudes, the most distinguished of the teachers, translated Ovid's *Heroides* and his *Amatoria*, one of the key texts for the Western writers of romance,⁷⁶ and that Hyrtakenos, one of his fellow teachers, wrote an *ekphrasis* of the garden attached to a monastery dedicated to St Anne that can only be compared to the garden *ekphraseis* of the romances, especially that of *Ach*?⁷⁷ As in Komnenian Constantinople, all this takes place at an elite level, socially and educationally. The audience for these texts would have been, once again, partly fellow-students, partly members of the court or aristocratic house-

⁷⁴ As was evident in many of the contributions to the conference *Neograeca Medii Aevi VI: Glossa, paradose kai poietike*, held in Ioannina, Greece, in September 2005.

⁷⁵ Constantinides 1982: 90–110; Mergiali 1990: 49–50.

⁷⁶ *Heroides*: Papathomopoulos 1976; *Ars Amatoria*: Easterling and Kenney 1965. I owe this point to Tina Lendari.

⁷⁷ Dolezal and Mavroudi 2002.

holds, who would have appreciated the mixture of traditions. Yet it need not be restricted to these since the language register was very accessible. In 1326 Anna of Savoy, accompanied by a train of Italian courtiers, arrived in Constantinople to marry the young emperor Andronikos III. One is tempted to think that this might have been a pivotal moment in the energising of competing poets. Once again a *theatron*, with an attendance composed of the erudite and the fashionable, women as well as men, would have provided the environment for a reading, a performance, a display. This line of argument suggests that these texts are indeed the work of a small group of writers exchanging ideas, though not in a minutely plagiarising way. Rather they would be drawing on a pool of commonly recognised phrases, and – in good Byzantine manner – using the style appropriate to their chosen genre; one might even call this *mimesis*.

But it is wrong to focus on Constantinople to the exclusion of other areas. Indeed some previous discussions of these texts assumed that they were produced away from the capital in areas where Frankish customs predominated and where Greek linguistic censorship was meaningless to multi-cultural communities (Beck 1971: 7–8). A significant region on which to focus is the Morea, the Peloponnese, where the Frankish state of Achaia and its successive suzerains co-existed with the Byzantine Despotate in Mistra, which had wrested back much territory from the post-1204 invaders and which maintained an active Greek cultural presence (Zakythinos 1975). It was from this environment that the *CoM* appeared, probably in the 1340s, as a document in both Greek and French which was to appeal to the symbiotic society of Greeks and Franks. The resonances carried by *WoT* in its original French form and also in the translated Greek version suggest that it too has to be located in the Peloponnese, at some date that can only be guessed at.⁷⁸ However, its phraseology is thoroughly part of the mix found in *L&R* and other poems of the romance group; indeed some phrases apparently adopted by the translator of the *WoT* in an attempt to render the *Roman de Troie* precisely into Greek (E. Jeffreys and M. Jeffreys 1979) are also found in *L&R*; the implications of this have yet to be resolved. The Morea was no isolated backwater: in the Greek sphere traffic back and forth from Constantinople was frequent while the Frankish communities were closely tied to the Angevin kingdom in South Italy.

Ultimately, at this stage of our knowledge, there are no clear answers to the inter-relationship of the Palaeologan vernacular verse texts. Despite the advances that have been made, not least in rehabilitating much of this material as worthwhile literary constructs, there is much scope for further research. The time is probably right for a new book-length study that covers all these texts, replacing Beck's encyclopaedic *Handbuch* (1971), expanding the scope of Beaton's *Medieval Greek Romance* (1996), and considering both the continuing influence of a vernacular poetry rooted in a tradition of orally composed material as well as the more literary influences. One question worth pursuing, for example, is the knowledge of *DA* shown by the Palaeologan poets: *DA* is strongly present in the *Ach* and *A&S* at the level of plot structure, in *I&M* at the level of individual scenes and also offers phrases common to *L&R* and Melitiniotis' *On Chastity*. Does this suggest that *DA* was viewed as part of the traditional oral material which provided the phraseology for the style emulated by the Palaeologan poets, or was it seen as part of

⁷⁸ E. Jeffreys 1993: I, 310–24; Shawcross 2003.

the group of literary novels that were to be emulated? Does it indicate that there was little else available?

6 Epic

Thus the case concerning verse romances and chronicles in the vernacular in the fourteenth century can be said to be parallel to that of the twelfth century and *DA*. In both cases there is circumstantial evidence for the existence of orally disseminated poetry (internal evidence from the nature of the texts and scanty external references to poets) but the surviving texts have either been thoroughly revised according to the contemporary literary conventions or composed with a homage to the oral styles. The Byzantine linguistic censorship prevented the preservation in their raw form of texts expressed in the spoken form of the language, leaving a tantalisingly circular situation in which glimpses of what might once have existed serve also as evidence for that existence.

There are a few other texts which might come under a broad definition of epic. These include *Belis*, already referred to. But though this deals with a sixth-century figure and there are signs that the story (or legend) developed in the twelfth century the text as it now exists (in several versions, thoroughly interwoven into the net of Palaeologan romance vocabulary) is a literary construct of the late fourteenth century.⁷⁹ The *CoM* is a more complex case and has been referred to at several points in this chapter. It functioned as the foundation epic of the post-1204 Frankish kingdoms of the Morea; multiple versions exist of which the primary are those in Greek verse and French prose. The Greek has a high formula count but while it offers little scope for thematic analysis it does show many other stylistic features ultimately derived from techniques of oral composition – an instance of validation via a now lost oral poetry (Shawcross 2005 and 2009). The *ChTocco* (written 1429 and surviving in what may be an authorial copy) shows some of the markers of the traditional style, notably a number of repeated phrases, and would repay deeper investigation.⁸⁰

The enduring validity of this style for quasi-epics recording heroic conflicts can be observed in the series of texts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries recording the Veneto-Turkish wars and the wars in the Balkan principalities, using the fifteen-syllable verse and with a network of common lines – though of a different order from the Palaeologan texts (Vlassopoulou 2000).

7 Conclusion

Thus, the issue of epic and oral poetry composed in medieval Greek in the Byzantine world, where Greek was the language of communication for most of the territories covered by the long-lasting empire of East Rome, produces a series of conundrums. Deeply instilled literary conventions dictated the types of texts that were esteemed and pre-

⁷⁹ As set out in Bakker and van Gemert 1988.

⁸⁰ Schirò 1975; Ilieva 1995.

served. A small number of examples, however, produced in certain circumstances where the conventions were flouted, have been preserved in writing, bearing witness to material and styles that were normally censored out of existence. These are *DA* in the twelfth century, when a literary effervescence encouraged rule-breaking and experimentation in general, and a mixed group, with romances predominating, from the fourteenth, when there was again a period of literary effervescence. These breaches in censorship have usually been attributed to pressures resulting from upheavals in the Byzantine world, either after the unruly passage of the Crusades in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries or after the traumas of 1204. That must be part of the answer. Other parts of the answer lie in a deliberate intention to shatter conventions. In both the twelfth- and the fourteenth-century situations there was a superfluity of bright young intellectuals looking for employment and seeking to display their employability (Ševčenko 1974). It need be no surprise that both periods saw the expected norms of style and genre pushed to their limits. A further element may be found in the fact that Constantinople under both the Komnenian and the Palaeologan emperors saw influxes of travellers, mercenary soldiers and indeed residents from western Europe, from areas where the vernacular was becoming an accepted tool for literary expression.

It cannot be stressed too highly that in both periods the types of texts surveyed in this chapter were exceptions. The preferred genres of Byzantine literature, as preserved and as produced (to judge by comments from the Byzantines themselves), were theology, hagiography, historiography, epistolography, and epideictic oratory. Writing in verse normally entailed composition in the highest registers of Greek, according to the rules of ancient prosody. Based on a syllable length that had long since become meaningless, these conflicted with the stress rhythms of Byzantine Greek, and the exercise focused on demonstrating the writer's expertise in this most stylistically demanding of techniques. Recent modern discussion of the small number of exceptions produced in verse in vernacular, or near-vernacular, Greek has been obscured by an unwillingness to recognise this, by an unwillingness to see these texts in the entire context of the society and literary culture that produced them, and by an obsession with viewing them only as fore-runners of the literature of the modern Greek state.⁸¹

Postscript. Since this chapter reached its final form an argument has been developed that places the composition of the *WōT* in the Peloponnese in the years between 1267 and 1281; it would thus be the earliest of the group of texts whose characteristics it shares (E. Jeffreys 2011).

⁸¹ This discussion has left out of account the contemporary literature of Veneto-Greek Crete and writers such as Stephanos Sachlikis (c.1331–after 1391) and Leonardo Dellaporta (c. 1346–c. 1420); Dellaporta alludes to *L&R* (Agapitos 2006a: 123–36).

TABLE. *Digenis Akritis*: outline of contents in the Grottaferrata and Escorial versions (from E. Jeffreys 1998).

Episode	G	E
<i>Lay of the emir</i>		
The emir raids, carries off the girl; her brothers pursue and defeat the emir	1.1–197	[lacuna in E] 1–55
They cannot find their sister, emir produces her, converts, marries; birth of DA	1.198–337; 2.1–49	56–224
Emir's mother writes, he quarrels with the brothers, leaves his bride, returns to Syria, converts his mother and returns	2.50–300; 3.1–343	225–609
<i>Romance of DA</i>		
Education of DA	–	610–20
Digenis visits Philopappos and asks to join the guerrillas	–	621–701
Emir's exploits; education and first hunt of DA	4.1–47; 4.48–253	702–91
Digenis serenades the girl and carries her off	4.254–855	[lacuna in E's exemplar] 792–1065
The wedding of DA and the gifts	4.856–952	1066–88
DA on the borders with the girl	4.953–70	1089–94; 1095–96
Visit from the emperor	4.971–1093	DA's parents die
<i>DA's exploits</i> (1st pers. narrative)		
DA's encounter with Apoloravdis' daughter	5.1–289	–
Meadow in May, the encounter with the serpent, lion and guerrillas	6.1–175	1097–196
Defeat of the three guerrillas	6.176–310	1197–315
Guerrillas summon Maximou and Melimitzis	6.311–475	1316–420
DA defeats guerrillas and Maximou	6.476–713	1421–351>
DA defeats Maximou again and commits adultery	6.714–805 [lacuna at 785/6] (6.795–8 kills Maximou)	1352–605
(<i>end of exploits</i> and 1st p. narrative)		
<i>Palace and garden</i>		
Garden and palace by Euphrates; DA keeps peace on borders	7.1–229 (7.106–55 death and burial of father; 7.189–98 death of mother)	1606–59, 1660–94 tomb on bridge
<i>Death</i>		
DA falls ill, recalls his past life with the girl, advises her; they both die	8.1–141; 8.142–98	1695–793; 1794–867
Funeral and mourning	8.199–313 (8.238–44 tomb at Trusis)	–

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18 The *Song of Igor* and its Medieval Context in Russian Oral Poetry

S. N. Azbelev

Are all basic genres of Russian oral poetry sufficiently known to scholarship? Such a question is justified when we talk not about the contemporary or recent state of folklore, but about a more or less distant past. The traditional ideas about the generic composition of Russian oral poetry is almost exclusively based on material which was written down in the nineteenth and in the first half of the twentieth century. If the scholarly collection of works of oral poetry had begun only half a century ago, after the great collections of the nineteenth century, then, for instance, the characterization of the *bylina* as one of the basic genres would only be hypothetical.¹ For its substantiation one would have to compare the rare and fairly worthless transcriptions from the second half of the twentieth century with the 'Collection of Kirsha Danilov' and with the scanty records of the seventeenth century, which have sometimes undergone considerable literary adaptation.² The study of other classical genres would present a similar picture.

It is clear that the disappearance of several types of oral poetry and their substitution by others also happened earlier. There is no foundation for the assertion that in the records of the nineteenth century all genres that were widely distributed, for instance, in the twelfth or fourteenth centuries, are appropriately reflected. The great historical upheavals as well as the economic and social changes that took place in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the radical break-down of the traditions of the Old Russian civilization which began in the time of Peter the Great, all this was certainly reflected in the further history of folklore genres, in the same way in which, for instance, the social cataclysms of the twentieth century are reflected in the fortune of the *byliny*. One can assume *a priori* that those forms of oral poetry which completed the period of their productive development at an earlier time and which existed as a heritage that was only barely continued by new creations were destined to disappear from a living repertoire.

¹ [For a general background to this chapter, see ch. 1, section 5.2, pp. 33–38 above. In English, for the plural of the word *bylina* both the Russian form (*byliny*) and the Anglicized form *bylinas* is found. The former is used in this book.]

² [The *byliny* collected by Kirsha Danilov in the second half of the eighteenth century were first published in 1804 under the title 'Old Russian Poems' (*Drevnie russkie stikhotvoreniya*). The standard edition is Evgen'eva and Putilov 1977.]