



Literature in the Komnenan Age  
(1081-1204)

Stephanos Efthymiadis  
(Open University of Cyprus)

# Historical context

## Reigning emperors

- **The Komnenoi**
  - Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1118)
  - Ioannes II Komnenos (1118-1143)
  - Manuel Komnenos (1143-1180)
  - Alexios II Komnenos (1180-1183)
  - Andronikos I Komnenos (1183-1185)

### The Angeloi

- Isaakios I Angelos (1185-1195)
- Alexios III Angelos (1195-1203)
- Isaakios I Angelos & Alexios IV Angelos (1203-1204)
- Alexios V (1204)

## An empire surrounded by

- Seljuk Turks in the East
- Normans in the West (S. Italy)
- Pechenegs and Cumans in the North
- Crusaders ...passing by
- Italian merchants (Amalfitans, Venetians, Pisans & Genoese)



# The fall of Constantinople in 1204

- A disastrous termination of the period
- A disastrous break in the relations between the Christian East and West
- The schism between the Churches is felt in real terms





BLACK SEA

Serbs

Sinope

Empire of Trebizond

Constantinople

Kingdom of Sicily

Thessalonike

Nikaia

Prusa

Sultanate of Iconium

Epirus

Arta

LESBOS

Empire of Nikaia

AEGEAN SEA

Latin possessions

Iconium

Athens

Antioch

Venetian possessions

Cyprus

Crete

MEDITERRANEAN SEA

- A) 1081–1185: dynasty of the Komnenoi  
B) 1185–1204: dynasty of the Angeloi

### MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

- a) *Classicism and emergence of literature written in the vernacular* – a period of contradictions
- b) Secularization of the society and secularization of literature
- c) Commentaries on and Interpretation of classical Greek literature
- d) Decline of Hagiography and Liturgical Poetry (Hymnography)
- e) Emergence of professional literati as well as of polymath scholars: e.g. Theodoros Prodromos and Ioannes Tzetzes
- f) A new flourish of classicizing historiography and chronography
- g) A re-emergence of erotic novels: 4 preserved in learned language and style
- h) An interest in literary exoticism: translations of oriental works into classicizing Greek
- i) Literature in the demotic

## CLASSICISM AND THE EMERGENCE OF LITERATURE WRITTEN IN THE VERNACULAR

- Triumph of rhetoric in Constantinople
- Development of teaching which in terms of learning the Greek requires much sophisticated exercises
- Admittance of spoken language into the written one: a phenomenon not confined to Byzantium but also attested to the Medieval West and Persia
- Spoken Greek is introduced into the written/literary language

# Secularization of the society and secularization of literature

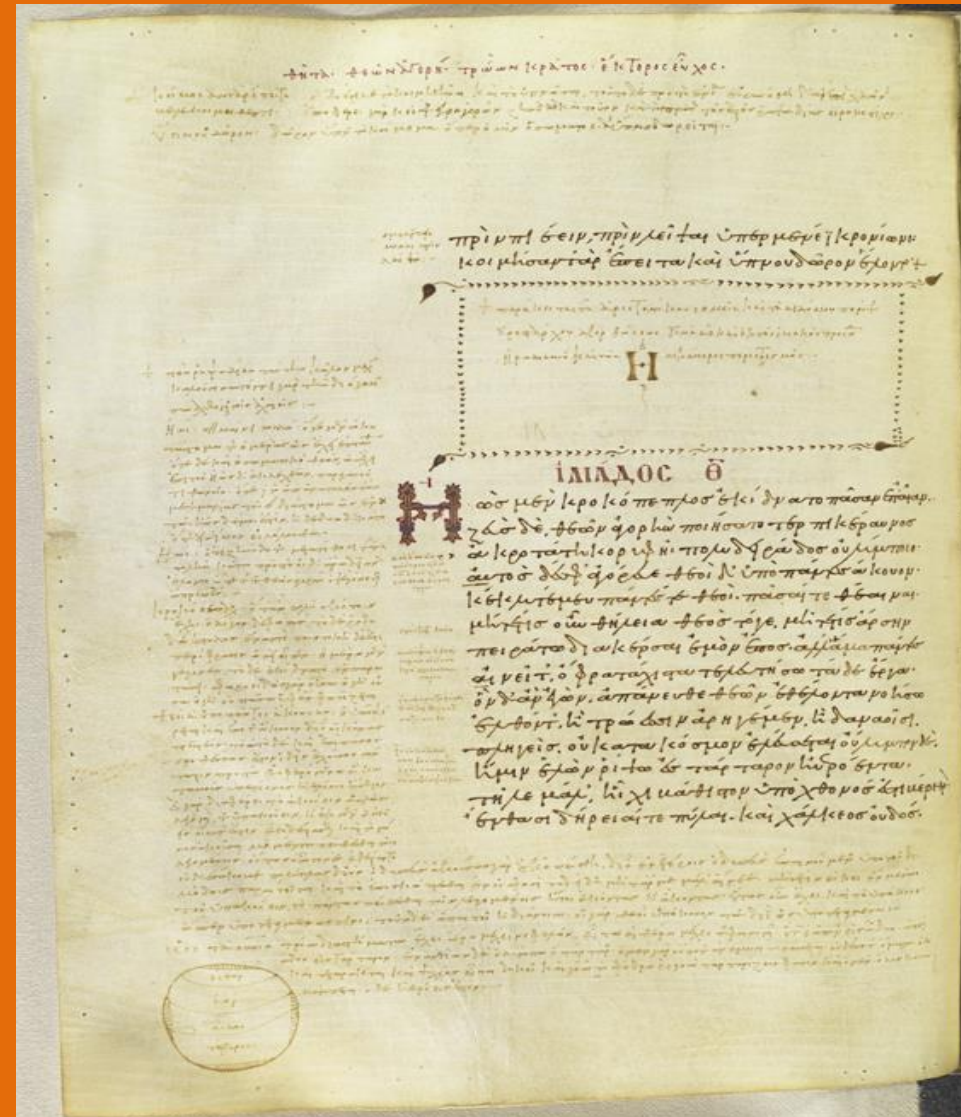
- A heightened interest in mundane values:
  - good food
  - dressing
  - travelling
  - literary salons and soirées
  - skepticism about monastic way of life
  - spirit of satire
  - down-to-earth approach



# Commentaries on classical authors

## A creative phenomenon

- Annotation of Homeric epic poems, Pindar etc → *parekbolai*
- Allegories
- Major figures: Eustathios of Thessaloniki, Ioannes Tzetzes
- Information on realia and everyday life



## Decline of hagiography and hymnography

- A spirit of secularization prevails...
- No major conflicts within the Church
- Perception that the age of saints has ended!
- The Metaphrastic Menologion has become a liturgical book – development of local *Synaxaria*
- A few exceptions: saints-abbots of monasteries in the provinces

## EMERGENCE OF PROFESSIONAL LITERATI AS WELL AS OF POLYMATH SCHOLARS

- Komnenan literature is a court literature performed in literary salons called in Byzantine Greek **θέατρα**.
- Ex.: Theodoros Prodromos → poet in the court of Ioannes Komnenos; yet also hagiographer, ‘playwright’ („Κατομυομαχία“), author of the Lucianic-like dialogue *Timarion*, etc
- Ioannes Tzetzes → didactic poems on ancient Greek authors and the *Χιλιάδες* in 15-syllable verse, letters etc
- Eustathios of Thessalonike → Commentator of Homer, highly sophisticated prose writer

# A new flourish of classicizing historiography and chronography

- Anna Komnene
- Ioannes Zonaras
- Niketas Choniates
- Eustathios of Thessalonike

# *Anna Komnena's Alexias* (ca. 1136/7-1148)

- History as an extensive biography – idealized portrayal of her father Alexios I Komnenos - 15 books
- Theory that Anna was based on the material of her husband Nikephoros Bryennios
- Filled with warlike and ethnographic references (e.g. Normans) – first attestation in Byzantium of a spirit hostile to Westerners
- Written in high style teeming with homeric loan-words. In the 14<sup>th</sup> c. it was 're-written' in a much less sophisticated language, devoid of mythological references

# Alexias, Preface

- Now, I recognized this fact. I, Anna, the daughter of two royal personages, Alexius and Irene, born and bred in the purple. I was not ignorant of letters, for I carried my study of Greek to the highest pitch, and was also not unpractised in rhetoric; I perused the works of Aristotle and the dialogues of Plato carefully, and enriched my mind by the "quaternion" of learning. (I must let this out and it is not bragging to state what nature and my zeal for learning have given me, and the gifts which God apportioned to me at birth and time has contributed).
- However, to resume - I intend in this writing of mine to recount the deeds done by my father so they should certainly not be lost in silence, or swept away, as it were, on the current of time into the sea of forgetfulness, and I shall recount not only his achievements as Emperor, "But also the services he rendered to various Emperors before he himself received the sceptre.
- II. These deeds I am going to relate, not in order to shew off my proficiency in letters, but that matters of such importance should not be left unattested for future generations. For even the greatest of deeds, if not haply preserved in [2] written words and handed down to remembrance, become extinguished in the obscurity of silence.

## *Alexias*, book VI, ch. 8

- Anna refers to her birth and the birth of her brother, another porphyrogenitus
- Novelties in the way of describing a man
- Emergence of 'authorial self'.

# Her own birth: Book VI, ch. 8

- The Emperor, as related above, returned to the capital in triumph with the Latins from Count Bryennius' army who had deserted to him on the first of December in the seventh Indiction. He found his wife in the pangs of [151] childbirth in the room which had of old been set apart for the Empresses' confinements, our forefathers called it the 'purple' room, and from it the name 'Porphyrogeniti' [\*=born in the purple] has become current in the world. And at dawn on a Saturday a female child was born to them who was exactly like her father, they said; that child was I. And once upon a time, I heard the Empress, my mother, relate that three days before the Emperor's entry into the palace (for he was returning then from the war with Robert and his other numerous battles and labours) she began to feel pains, so she made the sign of the cross on her womb and said, " Wait a little, child, for your father's coming! " When she said that, the 'Protovestiaire,' her mother, scolded her severely and said angrily, " How do you know whether he will come within a month? and how will you be able to bear the pains so long ? " Thus spake her mother, but the Empress' command took effect, which signified that even in the womb I felt that affection for my parents which was manifested so conspicuously in the future....



# The birth of her brother Ioannes Komnenos :

## Book VI, ch. 8

- For during the eleventh Indiction a son was born to them. Thereupon my parents were indeed overjoyed and no trace of sadness remained, as their desire had been fulfilled. The whole populace too rejoiced, seeing their masters so happy, and congratulated each other and were delighted. Then you would have seen the palace full of rejoicing and no shadow of sorrow or even care, for all the well-disposed rejoiced from the bottom of their heart, whilst the others feigned delight. A people, as a rule, is ill-affected to its rulers, but by much pretence and flattery win the favour of their superiors. However on this one occasion universal joy could be witnessed, as one and all were really pleased. The child had a swarthy complexion, broad forehead, lean cheeks, a nose neither snub nor aquiline but something between the two, very black eyes which betokened, as far as one can judge from an infant's face, a quick intelligence. As my parents naturally wished to raise this child to the rank of Emperor and leave him the empire of the Romans as his inheritance, they deemed him worthy of being baptised and crowned in the great church of God. This is what happened to us children, 'born in the purple' from the very starting-point of our birth. What befell us later, shall be narrated in due order.

# The *Epitome Historion* of Ioannes Zonaras

- An official who wrote a universal Chronicle when he retired as a monk on an island in the sea of Marmara
- The Chronicle ends with the reign of Alexios I Komnenos (1118) – Zonaras is quite critical towards the family.
- A revisionist attitude and a critical spirit which was not characteristic of previous chroniclers

## A re-emergence of erotic novels: 4 preserved in learned language and style

Produced by eminent literati:

- Eumathios Makrembolites (in prose)
- Theodoros Prodromos (in 12syllable verse)
- Niketas Eugenianos (in 12syllable verse)
- Konstantinos Manasses (in 12syllable verse)

All are placed in pre-Christian (pagan) antiquity with heroes taking ancient Greek names.

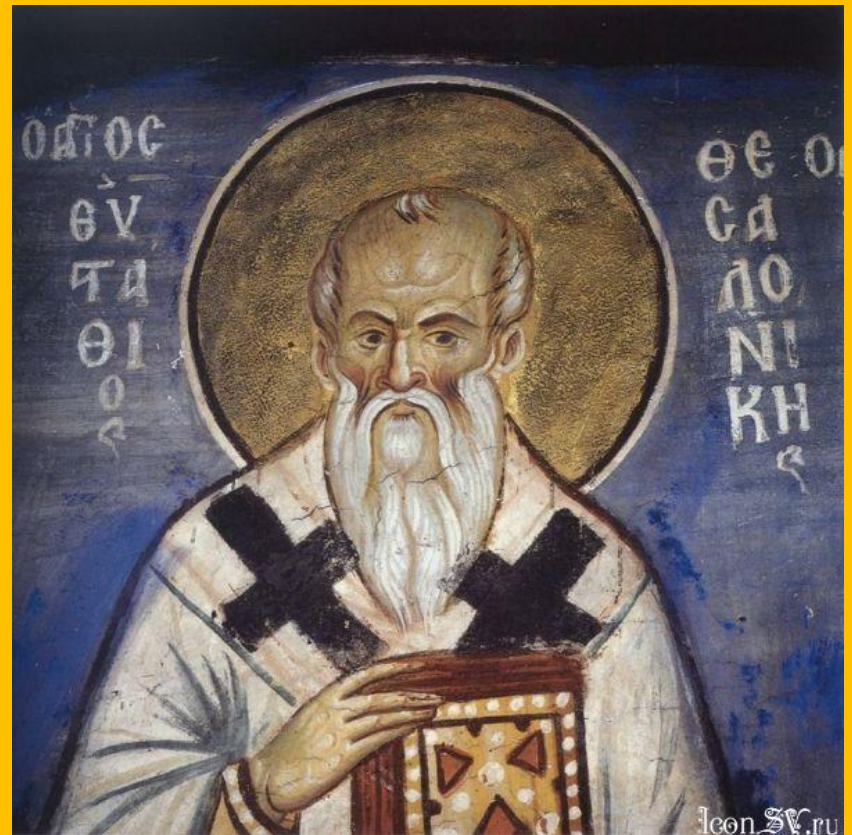
These novels are the prolegomenon to novels written in demotic Greek from the 13<sup>th</sup> c. onwards

# Eustathios of Thessalonike (ca. 1115–1196/7)

## CV

- Born and raised in Constantinople?
- Scribe in the patriarchate (position requiring a higher education) → functionary in patriarchal court → deacon of Hagia Sophia → *maistor/master of the rhetors* → archbishop of Thessalonike (ca. 1179–ca. 1194/1195)
- Distinguished classical philologist (commentator of Homer, Pindar etc)
- Author of texts which castigate monastic hypocrisy and excessive asceticism

## Saint of the Orthodox Church

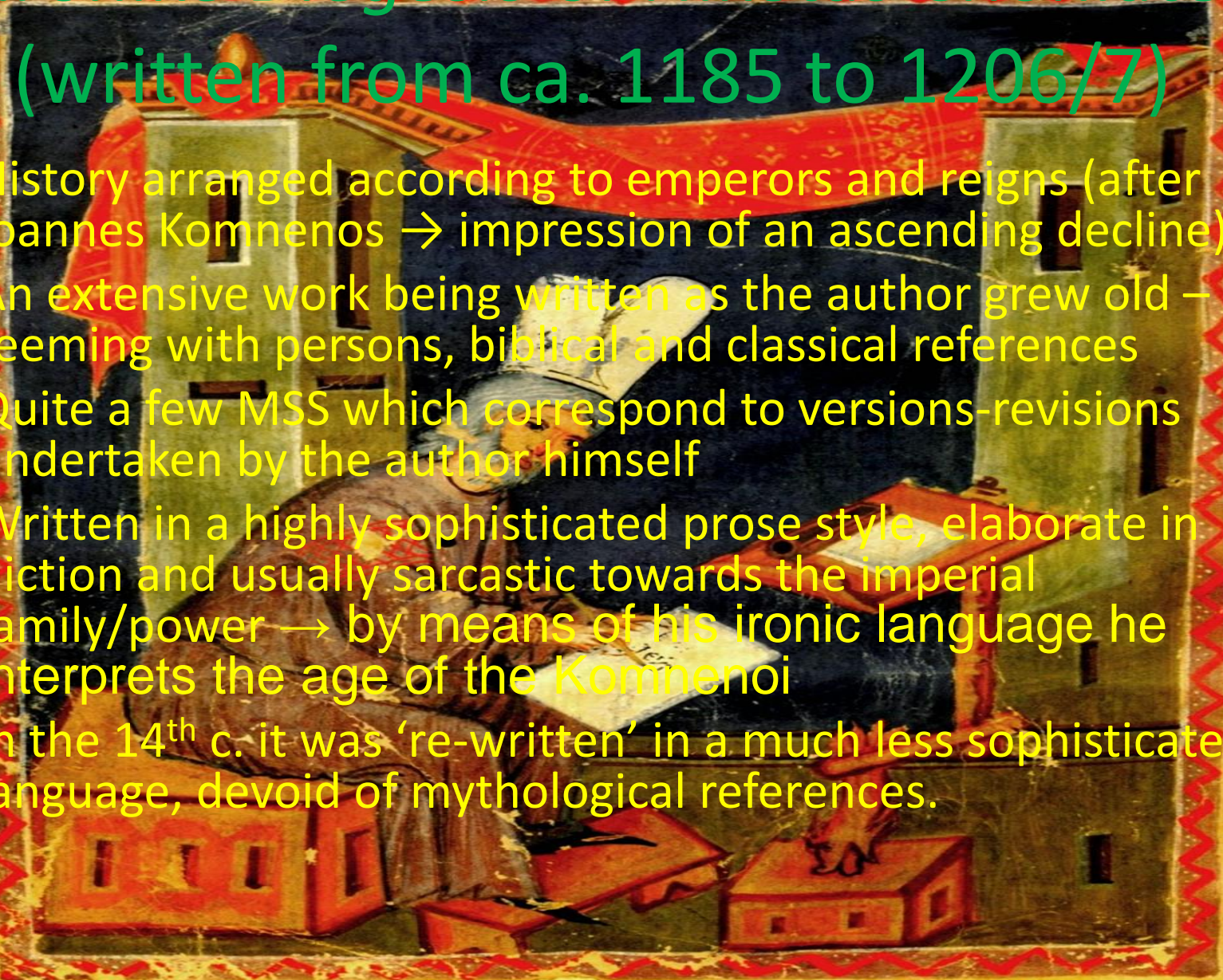


# *The Fall of Thessalonike*

- The event: the fall of the second biggest city of the empire to the Normans in 1185
  - Normans → conquerors of S. Italy (Byzantine territory) and Sicily since 1070 – their kingdom was based on Sicily (Palermo)
  - The event prefigures the fall of 1204 → Christians fight against and loot Christians
- Year of composition: 1186 (?)
- Elaborate work admitting many different readings
- Historiographical in form but much diverse

# *Chronike Diegesis* of Niketas Choniates (written from ca. 1185 to 1206/7)

- History arranged according to emperors and reigns (after Ioannes Komnenos → impression of an ascending decline)
- An extensive work being written as the author grew old – teeming with persons, biblical and classical references
- Quite a few MSS which correspond to versions-revisions undertaken by the author himself
- Written in a highly sophisticated prose style, elaborate in diction and usually sarcastic towards the imperial family/power → by means of his ironic language he interprets the age of the Komnenoi
- In the 14<sup>th</sup> c. it was 're-written' in a much less sophisticated language, devoid of mythological references.



# Kinds of demotic/vernacular literature

**12<sup>th</sup> century:**

- epic poetry
- satirical poetry
- Poetry of the prison
- Collection of proverbial sentences

# Epic poetry

- *Βασίλειος Διγενής Ακρίτης* (✓ akritic songs)
- Historical background: Arab-Byzantine wars of the 8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> c., warriors in the Byzantine frontier, oral tradition
- 6 Greek Mss – versions with significant differences in plot, length, structure, language, style



# Basic leit-motivs

- Epic element: duels and jousts - campaigns-hunting-kidnappings-speeches to fellow-warriors-heroic death
- Erotic-lyrical element: meeting with the beloved-wedding and marriage-descriptions of the nature – kidnappings – extramarital affair
- Often both are intertwined

# The main versions and the question of priority

## Grottaferrata (14<sup>th</sup> c.-MS): learned version

- 3.749 verses (15-syllable), split into 8 logoi-chapters

### Scholars in favour of its priority:

- Galatariotou
- Jeffreys
- Magdalino

## Escorial (15<sup>th</sup> c.): demotic-vernacular version

- 1867 verses (15-syllable) – beginning is missing
- Scholars in favour of its priority:
- S. Alexiou → initial redaction: 12<sup>th</sup> c. (Pontos – Cappadocia)
- R. Beaton → Constantinople

# Versions of Grotatferrata (G) & Escorial (E)

- some examples of variation -

G

Τοὺς ὀδόντας ἐκπάσατε πάντας τοὺς  
τοῦ θηρίου 102

ὡσαύτως καὶ τοὺς ὄνυχας τῆς δεξιᾶς  
χειρός του,

ἵνα, ὅποτε σὺν Θεῷ στραφῶ εἰς  
Ῥωμανίαν,

φορέσωμεν αὐτούς, φημί, τὸν  
πάγκαλον υἱόν μου

τὸν Διγενῆ Καππάδοκα Ἀκρίτην τὸν  
γενναῖον. 105

εἰκόνας δύο χυμευτᾶς ἁγίων Θεοδώρων  
907

καὶ τέندان χρυσοκέντητον, ὠραίαν,  
παμμεγέθη,

ζῶων ἔχουσιν συγκοπᾶς, πολυμόρφους ιδέας

τὰ σχοινία μεταξωτά, ἀργυροὶ δὲ οἱ πάλιοι,

κοντάρια κυπρίζοντα ἀραβίτικα δύο,

καὶ τοῦ Χοσρόου τὸ σπαθὶν τὸ διαφημισμένον.  
912

Ἐμοί οὐκ ἀντεστάθησαν στρατηγοὶ οὐ  
φουσαῖτα 1297

E

«πέξευσε σύντομα, γοργόν, νὰ  
ἐπάρης τὸ δερμάτιν, 522

τὰ ὀδόντια καὶ τὰ ὄνυχια ὄλων τῶν  
ποδαρίων

καὶ ἀπέκει ἄγωμέτε τὸν Διγενῆν  
Ἀκρίτην

<νὰ τὰ φορῆ,> νὰ τὰ θωρῆ καὶ ἄ λάχη  
μᾶς θυμᾶται.» 526

Καὶ χυμευτάρια ὀλόχρυσα, ὡς καὶ βαγίτσες  
δέκα 1075

καὶ ἀτσουπάδας δώδεκα ὡς διὰ ὑποταγῆν  
του

...

καὶ εἰκόνες ὀλοχυμευτῆς τοὺς τρεῖς  
ἀρχιστρατήγους

- καὶ εἶχεν λιθάρια ἀτίμητα, λυχνίτας καὶ  
ὑακίνθους

καὶ τοῦ Σχοδρόη τὸ σπαθὶν, τὸ θαυμαστὸν  
ἐκεῖνον. 1080

ἐμὲν ποτὲ οὐκ ἐπήντησεν οὐ στρατηγὸς ἢ  
τοπάρχης, 149 Φουσαῖτα πάλιν ἔντρεψα  
πέρσικα καὶ ρωμαϊκά 150

# Escorial version

## examples of epic and erotic discourse

v. 31-55

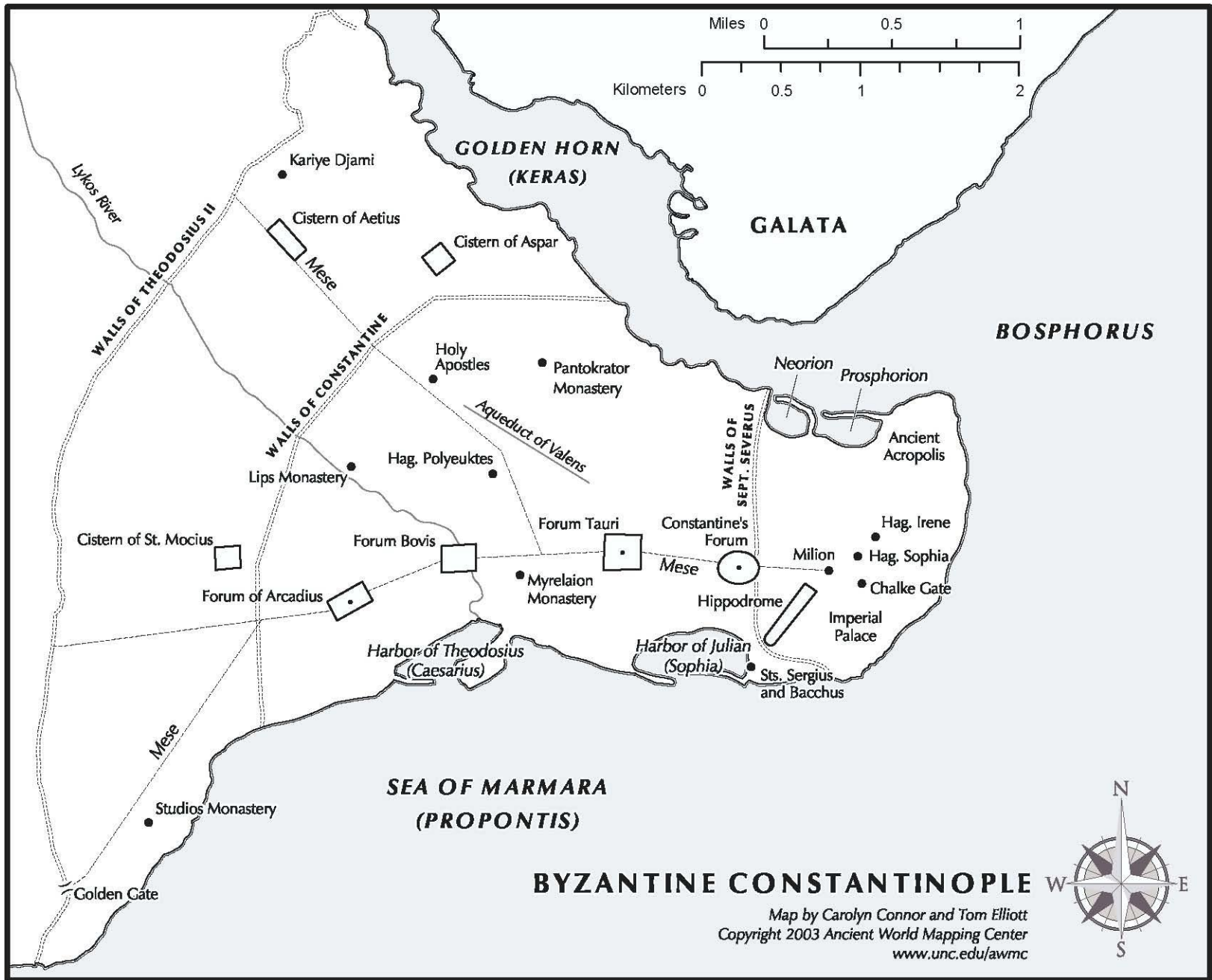
Ευθύς εκαβαλίκευσαν, 'ς τόν κάμπον κατεβαίνουν. .  
Ώς δράκοντες εσύριζαν και ως λέοντες εβρύχουντα  
και ως αετοί επέτουντα και εσμίξαν οι δύο.  
Και τότε να ειδής πόλεμον καλών παλλικαρίων  
και από της μάχης της πολλής κρούσιν διασυντόμως  
και από τον κρύπον τον πολύν και από το δός και λάβε  
οι κάμποι φόβον είχασιν και τα βουνά αηδονούσαν,  
το αίμαν εκατέρεεν εις τα σκαλόλουργά των  
και ο ίδρος τους εξέβαινε απάνω απ'τα λουρίκια.  
Ήτον γάρ του Κωνσταντή γοργότερος ο μαύρος,  
και θαυμαστός νεώτερος ήτον ο καβαλάρης.  
κατέβηκε εις τον αμιράν και κρούει του ραβδέα  
και εχέρισεν ο αμιράς να τρέμη και να φεύγη.  
Σαρακηνός ελάλησεν τον αμιράν της γλώσσης:  
"Πιάσε, μούλε, τον άγουρον, ταχέως να τον νικήσης,  
μή εις σύντομόν του γύρισμα πάρτη κεφαλήν σου.  
Αυτός καλά σ'εσέβηκεν τώρα να σε γκρεμνήση.  
Εγώ ουδέ τον εγνοιάζομαι να τον καταπονέσης,  
αλλά μή το καυχάσεται ότι έτρεψε φουσάτα."  
Και ο αμιράς ως το ήκουσεν, μακρέα τον αποξέβην,  
έριψεν το κοντάριν του και δάκτυλόν του δείχνει  
και μετά του δακτύλου του τοιούτον λόγον λέγει:  
"Να ζής, καλέ νεώτερε, εδικόν σου είναι το νίκος.

v. 702-708

Ο έρωσ τίκει το φιλίν και το φιλίν τον πόθον,  
ο πόθος δίδει μέριμνας, έννοιάς τε και φροντίδας.  
κατατολμά και κίνδυνον και χωρισμόν γονέων,  
θάλασσαν αντιμάχεται, το πυρ ου διαλογίζει  
και τίποτε ου λογίζεται ο ποθών δια την αγάπην  
εγκρεμνούς ου λογίζεται, τους ποταμούς ουδόλως  
τας αγρυπνίας ανάπαυσιν και τας κλεισούρας κάμπους  
στ. 1061-1068  
Τα βότανα ελαλούδιζαν και τα βουινιά εψηλώναν  
και τα άστροη παρασκύπτουσιν εις την χαράν εκείνην.  
και μετά πάσης ταραχής, μετά οψικίου μεγάλου,  
'ς τον οίκον του απέσωσεν, μέσα εις τα γονικά του,  
και των δύο των ευχήθηκεν η μήτηρ και ο πατήρ του.  
Και ο Έρωσ εξεπλήρωσε πάσας των τας ελπίδας  
και πάντα τα θελήματα και τα εξαρέσκιά του,  
του Έρωτος του ηδονικού, χαρμονικώς τελοΐσιν.

# Satirical poetry

- Poetry of Constantinople and poetry of the court
- Poetry of learned poets who consciously use elements of spoken language
- 12<sup>th</sup> century: rise of the middle-class, contacts with the West – secularization



# Works of satirical poetry

- *Πτωχοπροδρομικά*: 4 items of begging poetry [poet: Theodoros Prodromos (ca. 1100-1170?)]
- *Σπανέας*: mirror of princes – a sequence of *aphoristic sentences* (no coherence)-very popular text (40 Mss) preserved in different versions
- *Γλυκάς*: poem ‘written’ in prison [poet: Michael Glykas (Sikidites) jailed after a coup in 1159]

# Πτωχοπροδρομικά: their plot

- A. The poet is addressing the emperor Ioannes I Komnenos (1118-1143) asking for financial assistance so that he can meet the demands of his aristocratic wife
- B. The poet is addressing a person of the imperial court asking for financial assistance so that he can meet the demands of his life
- Γ. The poet is a wretched scholar (*γραμματικός*) who is addressing Manuel I Komnenos (1143-1180) in order to expose him the miserable life of those educated by contrast to that of the artisans and other craftsmen
- Δ. The poet, named Hilarion, is a poor monk of the monastery of Philotheos in Constantinople; he is addressing the emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1143-1180) and confessing his miserable life and suffering due to the abbot of the monastery and his entourage



# Πτωχοπροδρομικά Α: Fragment

- Τοῦ Προδρόμου κυροῦ Θεοδώρου πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα Μαυροϊωάννην (2t)
- Κἂν φαίνομαι γάρ, δέσποτα, γελῶν ὁμοῦ καὶ παίζων, (15)
- ἀλλ' ἔχω πόνον ἄπειρον καὶ θλίψιν βαρυτάτην
- καὶ χαλεπὸν ἀρρώστημα καὶ πάθος, ἀλλὰ πάθος!
- Πάθος ἀκούσας τοιγαροῦν μὴ κήλην ὑπολάβης,
- μηδ' ἄλλο τι χειρότερον ἐκ τῶν μυστικωτέρων,
- μὴ κερατᾶν τὸ φανερόν, μὴ ταντανотаρτάνην, (20)
- μὴ νόσημα καρδιακόν, μὴ περιφλεγμονίαν,
- μὴ σκορδαψὸν μηδ' ὕδερρον, μὴ παραπνευμονίαν,
- ἀλλὰ μαχίμου γυναικὸς πολλὴν εὐτραπελίαν,
- προβλήματα προβάλλουσα καὶ πιθανολογίας
- καὶ τὸ δοκεῖν εὐλόγως μοι προφέρεται πλουτάρχως. (25)
- Καὶ θέλω δεῖξαι προφανῶς τὴν ταύτης μοχθηρίαν,
- ἀλλὰ φοβοῦμαι, δέσποτα, τοὺς ἰταμωδεστέρους,
- μήπως ἐμὲ ἀκούσωσι καὶ ὑπάγουν εἰς τὸ ὀσπίτιν
- καὶ νὰ μὲ πιττακώσωσιν ἐκ τῶν ἀπροσδοκῆτων
- καὶ κρεῖσσον εἶχον, δέσποτα, τὸ νὰ μὲ θάψουν ζῶντα (30)
- καὶ νὰ μὲ βάλουν εἰς τὴν γῆν καὶ νὰ μὲ περιχώσουν,
- παρὰ νὰ μάθη τίποτε τῶν ἄρτι γραφομένων.

# Πτωχοπροδρομικά Γ' : Fragment

- Στίχοι τοῦ Θεοδώρου τοῦ Πτωχοπροδρόμου πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα κύρ Μανουήλ τὸν Κομνηνὸν (2t)
- Ἐδάρε καὶ τὰ γράμματα, ἂν μὲ ἐποῖσαν τεχνίτην,
- ἀπ' αὐτοὺς ὅπου κάμνουσιν τὰ κλαπωτὰ καὶ ζῶσιν,
- νὰ ἔμαθα τέχνην κλαπωτὴν καὶ νὰ ἔζουν ἀπ' ἐκείνην,
- νὰ ἦνοιγα τὸ ἀρμάριν μου, νὰ τὸ ηὔρισκα γεμάτον
- ψωμίν, κρασίν πληθυντικὸν καὶ θυννομαγειρίαν
- καὶ παλαμιδοκόμματα καὶ τσίρους καὶ σκουμπρία,
- παρ' ὅτι τώρα ἀνοίγω το, βλέπω τοὺς πάτους ὄλους,
- καὶ βλέπω χαρτοσάκκουλα γεμάτα τὰ χαρτία
- καὶ ἀνοίγω καὶ τὴν ἄρκλαν μου, νὰ εὔρω ψωμίν νὰ φάγω,
- καὶ εὔρισκω χαρτοσάκκουλον ἄλλον μικροτερίτσιν,
- γυρεύω τοῦ κελλίου μου τὰς τέσσαρας γωνίας
- καὶ εὔρισκω ἐκεῖσε κείμενα πολλὰ πολλὰ χαρτία,
- ἀπλώνω εἰς τὸ περσίκιν μου, γυρεύω τὸ πουγγίν μου,
- διὰ στάμενον τὸ ψηλαφῶ, καὶ αὐτὸ γέμει χαρτία.



Thank you for your attention and  
your questions!

εἰς ὕδατος τὸν μόνον θεὸν ὕδωρον; ὁ δὲ μόνος ὁὐδὲ θεὸς ὕδωρ καὶ ἄλλο. καὶ ὁ μὲν θεὸς ὕδωρ