

Interpreting the Fall of Constantinople in Sixteenth-Century Muscovy: Marginal Notes in the Troitsa Manuscript of Nestor Iskender's »Tale of the Capture of Tsargrad«

The Tale of Nestor-Iskender (also spelled Iskander), or as the current critical edition names it *Повесть о взятии Царьграда турками в 1453 году* [Tale on the Taking of Tsargrad by the Turks in the year of 1453] is one of the main sources for the Fall of Constantinople that circulated in Muscovy in the sixteenth century¹. The only complete manuscript of the text, Troitsa 773, is currently held in the Russian National Library and is available in digital form. The quality of the digitization makes it possible not only to read through the lines of the manuscript, but also study the marginalia. More than 30 handwritten notes not only accompany the text of the *Tale* but also provide an example of how to read the text. The present article is a first attempt to study the main set of marginal notes in the manuscript.

The study consists of four parts. After a brief introduction to the *Tale*, the second part describes the manuscript and the third part summarizes the notes. The fourth part is an analysis of the notes in their present form. The article is not a critical edition of the text, but is an attempt to draw the attention of scholars to hitherto overlooked material.

A Story With No Title

Together with another later text, the so-called *Memoirs of a Janissary* by Constantine Mihailović, *The Tale* of Nestor Iskender is part of the corpus of literary works related to the events of 1453². *The Tale* represents an important body of literary impressions that claim to be the work of eyewitnesses who allegedly fought on the Ottoman side. In the Muscovite discourse, *the Tale* is known as the »most authoritative source« on the siege preserved from that period³.

The »Tale« survives in two versions: a short one and a full one⁴. The short version is part of a wider chronological work, the so-called Chronograph of 1512. The subject of

the present discussion is the full version and its manuscript. The author, Nestor-Iskender, is an enigmatic figure, and, as Oleg Tvorogov puts it, might be a literary invention. The only information about the author can be found in the main manuscript of the full version of the *Tale* (Troitsa 773). On the last folio of the text, the author claims to be a traveler who was captured by the Turks and forced to serve in the Ottoman army during the siege of Constantinople. Some time later he was able to escape to Christian lands to tell his story. For the sake of clarity, this *persona auctoris*, referred to as Nestor-Iskender, will be considered the author of the tale throughout this article.

The very designation of the *Tale* is problematic, since the narrative begins *in medias res*, without a title, on folio 217^r of the manuscript⁵. The narrative about the siege and fall of Constantinople (1453) is the only text of this genre in the literary tradition of north-western Eurasia from this period. The author describes the foundation of the City, provides brief descriptions of some places of interest (palace, hippodrome, *megas embolos*), and talks about the prophecies that had predicted the Fall of Constantinople at the beginning of its history. The rest of the *Tale* is devoted to the events of 1453 with a strong sympathy for the Byzantines and a negative, biased view of the Turks⁶. The description of 1453 begins with military details and the preparations on both sides. The description of the siege generally corresponds to the widely accepted consensus regarding the military events, with the addition of epic components missing from other accounts, and details that allow modern scholars to conclude that the author had first-hand knowledge of the siege⁷. The full version of the *Tale* ends with a description of Constantine XI's heroic death, Mehmed II's entry into the city, his contract with the Orthodox Patriarch, and a brief description of the prophecy that attributes the return of the city to red-haired people from the north. This last passage has attracted much atten-

1 For the digital version of the manuscript see scan made at the Russian State Library at the official site of the monastery of St. Sergius <https://lib-fond.ru/lib-rgb/304-i/f-304i-773/#image-1> (10.04.2025). This article uses the electronic critical edition of the text prepared and commented by Oleg Tvorogov. Nestor Iskender, *Povest'*.

2 For the rest of the corpus, see Speranskiy, *Povesti i skazaniya* 136.

3 For the role of the text, see Florya, Nestor Iskender.

4 For differences in the manuscript tradition see Tvorogov, *Vstuplenie*.

5 The authors of the nineteenth-century catalog of the manuscripts noted the absence of the title. See Illarij/Arsenij, *Opisanie* 172.

6 For a short analysis of the image of the Turks in Nestor-Iskender see Öksüz – Yapıcı, Nestor Iskender 43-45.

7 See Hanak, Nestor-Iskender.

tion among scholars of late Renaissance apocalypticism⁸. The attempts to connect it with the problematic »Moscow – Third Rome« theory did not gain much traction as well.

The authenticity of the *Tale* has long been the subject of debate among scholars. Historical inaccuracies, primarily concerning the role of the Orthodox Patriarch in the siege and the presence of the Empress in the city (Constantine XI was officially a widower), led some scholars (mainly Soviet and Russian) to view the *Tale* as a later compilation⁹. The patchy knowledge of the city was also cited as evidence for the later origin of the text. A series of studies by Hanak and Philippides, however, argue otherwise¹⁰. Explaining the author's uneven knowledge, they suggest that he may have been a defector from the Ottoman army who changed sides during the siege and was kept under some form of surveillance. According to this interpretation, Nestor was not allowed into the center of the city but fought among the defenders on the walls and managed to survive the final onslaught. This makes the *Tale* unique, as its author may have witnessed the events of 1453 probably from *both sides*¹¹. This position is cautiously supported by other scholars who use certain details from Nestor's *Tale* in connection with other works about the events of 1453¹².

The present article takes a different perspective, focusing not on Nestor-Iskender's text but on a set of marginal notes in the Troitsa 773 manuscript of the *Tale*. The notes, written in two different hands, can be found on almost every page of the manuscript. As we shall see, three experts date the main hand to the first half of the sixteenth century. The notes thus reflect a unique »readers' experience« of the *Tale* and provide an insight into how sixteenth-century Muscovite readers' perceived the siege of 1453.

The Manuscript

The manuscript belongs to the so-called Troitsa Collection, which was originally kept in the treasury of the Trinity Monastery some seventy kilometers north of Moscow. The monastery was an important center of learning and archiving of written materials, some of which were later transferred to be preserved elsewhere. Troitsa 773, for example, was first moved to the Historical Museum in Moscow, and during the Soviet era it was moved again to the collection of the Russian National Library, where it is currently held. The manuscript has recently been digitized, making it easily accessible for in-depth study.

8 As Nina Sinitsina has noted, the apocalyptic motifs vary in different versions of the *Tale*. Sinitsina, *Tretiy Rim* 192-193. For the recent analysis and summary of the secondary literature on the questions of the Third Rome and (dis)connection between the theory and the text in question see Yeruslimsky, *Imperator Svyatoy Rusi 490-492*. On the projection of the »Third Rome« see Ostrowski, *Moscow The Third Rome 173-175*. I thank professor Konstantin Yeruslimsky for the possibility to work with the book before the official launch.

9 See Tvorogov, *Vstuplenie*.

The dating of Troitsa 773 is debated. The nineteenth-century catalogue entry dates it to the sixteenth century. In his comparative study, Speransky suggests 1530 as the date of the creation of the main version of the *Tale*¹³. I have consulted Adrian Selin (Higher School of Economics in St Petersburg) and two other experts, who have confirmed that the main text of the *Tale* was written in an early sixteenth-century hand, and dated the hand of the main annotator to the second quarter of the sixteenth century.

The possible dating of the manuscript can be supported by internal evidence; for example, an inscription on folio 273 reads »So Great Prince Vasily Ivanovich gave to Peter Vasilyev...«. The handwriting of this inscription seems to be identical to that of the annotator and it seems highly likely that »Great Prince Vasily Ivanovich« refers to Vasily III, Grand Prince of Muscovy (r. 1505-1533). This suggests not only a *terminus ante quem* for the leaves that were later used for the book, but also the circles in which the manuscript was conceived, namely those of the intelligentsia around the Grand Princes' Chancellery. The location of the manuscript in contemporary Muscovy is not clear, but there are a number of enticing options. Was this manuscript part of the famous library of Ivan the Terrible or was it part of a boyar's library, that was later donated to the monastery? While these questions remain open for paleographers and philologists, the present study moves on to a close description of the notes.

Inscriptions on the Margins

The series of notes sheds light on both the context of the text's production and the experience of a contemporary reader. The following list is an incomplete and provisional translation of the anonymous commentator's notes, which follow the numbering of the folios written in a nineteenth-century hand. According to my reading, there were two annotators of the manuscript. The notes of the second annotator are marked in the list below with »+«.

fol. 219^v above the main text »About the sign of the eagle and the snake«

fol. 220^r above the main text »About the construction of the City«

fol. 221^v On the margin next to the description of the prominent people settling Constantinople »and so«

fol. 222^r above the main text »About the advance of the godless Magoma and darkness«

fol. 225^v above the main text, damaged »First assault«

10 Hanak considers him to be an Ottoman defector, whom Byzantines consciously kept away from sensitive locations. »In all probability, he was then within the city, but not in close proximity to the walls«. See Hanak, Nestor-Iskender.

11 See Hanak and Philippides, *The Siege 137*.

12 See Necipoğlu, *Byzantium between Ottomans and Latins* 211.

13 See Speranskiy, *Povesti i skazaniya*.

- + fol. 225^v below the main text »A« (First assault – RS)
fol. 227^v above the main text »Coming of Zustuneia (Giustiniani Longo – R.S.)«
- + fol. 227^v. Text in the lower part of the parchment damaged and restored by different later hand. It seems likely that the letter »Б« (denoting the second assault in numbering of the second annotator) could be present below this text.
fol. 227^r above the main text »Second assault«
fol. 230^r above the main text »The Council of the Tzar« (Emperor Constantine XI – R.S.)
fol. 231^r above the main text »Third assault«
fol. 232^r above the main text »About the prophecy«
fol. 232^v on the right margin, next to the description of the sins »do not walk in his way«
- + fol. 233^v below the main text »B« (Third assault – RS)
fol. 234^r above the main text »Fourth assault«
fol. 235^r above the main text »About the cannons built«
fol. 235^v above the main text »About the glory of the Tzar«
fol. 236^r above the main text »How the Tzar attacked the Turks«
fol. 237^r above the main text »About the descent of ineffable Light«
fol. 240^v above the main text, damaged note »Defeat (?) [...] of the Godless One. City [...] assault«
- + fol. 240^r below the main text »Г« (Third assault – RS)
fol. 242^v above the main text »Assault from the Godless One and the attack of the Tzar against the Turks«
fol. 243^v above the main text to the left »About striking Zustuneia with a cannon«
fol. 243^r On the left margin »And so came that day«
fol. 244^r above the main text »About the death of Zustuneia«
fol. 245^v, above the main text »About the battle of the Tzar«
fol. 245^r, above the main text »About the council of the Godless One«
fol. 246^v, above the main text »About the great darkness«
fol. 247^v, above the main text »About the death of Begliar-bey of the East from the Tzar«
fol. 248^v, above the main text »About the (unclear) of the Tzar«
- + fol. 248^v, below the main text »Д« (Fourth assault – RS)
fol. 248^r, above the main text »About the farewell of Tzar in the Great Church«
- + fol. 248^r below the main text »E« (Fifth assault – RS)
fol. 249^r above the main text »About the Capture of the City«
fol. 250^r above the main text »About the entrance of the Godless One into the City«
fol. 252^v above the main text »About the predictions about the same City«

It is notable that, with the exception of folios 227-230 (according to the nineteenth-century pagination), every folio of the text of the *Tale* is furnished with notes of some content.

According to one of the experts consulted, this is found only in a few manuscripts before the seventeenth century. The original purpose of this annotation, also absent from other works in the same manuscript, is an open question.

Equally interesting is the fact that there are several layers of annotation. The first annotator (who on the basis of palaeographical evidence probably preceded the main one) numbered only the assaults, from the first to the fifth. The second annotator (whom I call the Main one) is probably the author of both the main set of comments and the inscription stating that the book was donated by Vasily III. Sometimes annotators were in disagreements with one another. Some assaults were numbered twice – both at the top of the page and below the text. This suggests two readers, one of whom was interested exclusively in military matters, while the other annotated every folio of the *Tale*. In the list above, the annotations of the second annotator are marked with a »+«. The present study focuses on the first annotator and his comments, which form a sufficiently coherent corpus that allows observations about the annotator's perception of the events.

The Notes to the *Tale* In terms of topics, assaults and military matters seem to be the most important to the main annotator. More than half of the notes pertain to military subjects, some receiving a special note, for example, the one about the construction of cannons. Others deal with military leaders, the most prominent of whom are »the Tzar« (Constantine XI), »Zustuneia« (Giustiniani Longo), and Mehmed II Fatih (first referred to as »Magoma« then the »Godless One«). Their actions are the subject of more than half of the notes and mark out the positions of the two protagonists and one antagonist in the tale of Nestor Iskender.

The text also contains apocryphal material, starting with the prophecy of the snake and the eagle, continuing with the descent of light (fol. 237^r), the great darkness (fol. 246^v), and concluding with an annotation of the thing »predicted about the same City« (fol. 252). The phenomena associated with the Church are absent from the notes. Geography is similarly underrepresented: the only spatial marker found in the notes is the Hagia Sophia, referred to as »the Great Church« at the top of fol. 248^v. Although apocryphal material appears in fewer notes than military topics, it is instructive. The Annotator either had a personal interest in the prophecies and/or was familiar with this aspect of the Constantinopolitan grand narrative.

The Annotator's main interest was no doubt the drama of the Fall of Constantinople. He clearly understood his subject and paid special attention to the destruction of Byzantium as an empire. Some of the remarks particularly highlight the author's emotional reaction. First and foremost, the »day had come« note marks the culmination of the narrative, while elsewhere the same hand writes »do not follow his way« above the description of the sins of the citizens of Constantinople before the Fall of the city. It is, therefore, safe to say that the Annotator was interested in spiritual welfare and regarded the Fall as a spiritual catastrophe. His note on »his« mistakes may be commenting upon Emperor Constantine XI's

decision to accept the help of the Latins. However, this remains uncertain, given that the whole issue of pro-papal politics is absent from Nestor Iskender's text.

The author has little sympathy for Sultan Mehmed Fatih, who is mentioned by name only once and in an abbreviated form. The rest of the notes refer to him as the »Godless One«, a sign that the annotator tries to avoid the enemy's name, demonstrating his desire to distance himself from the sultan. Besides this *damnatio memoriae* regarding the sultan, references to other members of the Ottoman army are notably absent. On fol. 238, the author describes »how the Tzar attacked the Turks«, where the term »the Turks« is correctly spelled, emphasized by a capital initial »T« rising well above the line. The only note commemorating members of the Ottoman command is the single reference to the Beylerbeyi of the East (fol. 247^v), and the number of officers mentioned by Nestor summarized as »many«.

In conclusion, the notes provide an interesting insight into the experience of a reader and give some, albeit limited, information about the readers of the manuscript in sixteenth-century Muscovy. Some readers, such as the author of notes 1 and 2, were primarily interested in military matters, especially in the Ottoman assaults against the fortified city. This is hardly surprising, since the military history of the Duchy of Muscovy in the first half of the sixteenth century is known to have recorded many assaults and conquests. Secondly, the main Annotator paid special attention to the prophecies about the city. He was interested in divine omens, in the darkness and light, and in the future destiny of Constantinople. The Annotator perceived the Turks as a religious, hostile Other and avoided their names in the text. The notes reveal his obvious sympathy towards »the Tzar« Constantine XI, while references to the topography of Constantinople are markedly absent in the notes. The city and its rich topography described in some detail by Nestor in the first part of his work does not attract the attention of the Annotator. This is in stark contrast with the previous Rus' tradition of the description of holy places by pilgrims, which reached its peak in the time of Palaiologoi¹⁴. The Annotator was either unfamiliar with this tradition or, more plausibly, disregarded it for the sake of the details more relevant for sixteenth-century readers of the manuscript, some of whom have been associated with the Grand Prince Vasily III.

The Context of the Notes: Vasily III and his Many Sieges

The other works contained in the manuscript suggest that the person who commissioned it was interested in both formulat-

ing a negative view on Islam and in the technical description of how to take a fortified city with the help of firearms.

The time of the appearance of the manuscript coincides with the aftermath of the first official contacts between Muscovites and the Ottomans during the Plescheev embassy. While no data is available about the contacts in the first decades of the sixteenth century, the manuscript likely emerged against the backdrop of the discussions of the aftermath of the embassy which Ivan III sent to Bayezid II, which was problematic in many ways (1496-1498).

During the embassy, protocol differences resulted in significant misunderstandings, if not in an open fiasco of the mission, which was concluded with the exchange of letters between the two sovereigns¹⁵. The reign of Vasily III saw another set of mostly unsuccessful attempts to establish amicable relations, providing the context for the circulation of the Troitsa manuscript. In addition to this, the time of the circulation of the Troitsa manuscript also chronologically coincides with the very start of Vasily III's reign and his repeated sieges of Smolensk. Smolensk, an ancient city on a fortified hill high above the Dnieper River, was the scene of intense military confrontation between the Grand Duchy of Muscovy and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Vasily III made recurrent attempts to organize its capture, using the force of mercenaries and modern cannons. Despite all his efforts, Smolensk fell only in 1514. What had been planned as a short siege to fortify the position of a new grand duke on the throne ended up as a drawn-out campaign, during which the Muscovite forces were soundly defeated by the Grand Duchy at Orsha (1514)¹⁶.

The defeat led the Muscovites to change their artillery tactics: instead of targeting the walls, their artillerymen switched to using their cannons to start fires inside Smolensk day and night, using tactics similar to those of the Ottomans during the Siege of 1453. Smolensk capitulated and became a major center in a network of defenses that the Grand Duchy constructed on the western border. The second siege that took some time to complete was that of Kazan'. The forces of Grand Dukes Vasily and Ivan, and later the forces of Tzar Ivan, struggled to control the khanate on the Volga. After many failed attempts, Kazan' became the site of a major siege in 1552 that finished with the fall of the city and the subjugation of the local population to the new Tzar of Muscovy. In both sieges, artillery pieces and divisions made up by loyal Muslims played a role that is difficult to overestimate. Importantly, the conquest of Kazan' connected Moscow to a web of connections with the other Muslim polities of wider Eurasia¹⁷.

Surviving written sources suggest that the reactions to these events varied. On the one hand, there was a heated debate about the apocalyptic expectations both in the Grand

14 For example, the pilgrim's account by Zosimas the Deacon. For more on Zosimas, see Majeska, *Russian Travelers* 167-173.

15 For the story of the first embassy from the Grand Prince of Moscow to Bayezid II, see: Taki, *Tzar and Sultan* 24.

16 On the siege of Smolensk and its context, see Kazakou, *Gunpowder Revolution* 87-88. For new trends in the external politics of Vasily III see Yerusalmitsky, *Imperators Svyatoy Rusi* 225.

17 For a recent bibliography on »new Muslim connections« see: Moiseev, *Musul'manskaya Politika*.

Duchy and in other states of North-Western Eurasia¹⁸. On the other hand, the Fall of Constantinople and the rise of the Ottomans were part of the discourse, especially with regard to the Muscovite respect for Ottoman military technology. Both the widely known texts by Ivan Peresvetov¹⁹ and the letters of the monk Philotheos, some of which addressed Prince Vasily III, are part of this discourse. This is the historical and literary context for the *Notes* that the anonymous author wrote in the margins of the Troitsa manuscript. The Annotator was not only interested in military matters but also in the ideal of a »just Tzar« or »good Tzar«²⁰. The hostility towards the Ottomans was very much present in the Muscovite discourse in this period, fueled by various factors, including the problematic first contact of the Plescheev embassy, the successful contacts with the Habsburg Empire, and considerations about the destiny of Byzantium. Thus, it is no surprise that the Annotator took a clear anti-Ottoman stance, his antipathies even more pronounced than Nestor-Iskender's.

All this leaves much room for hypothesis. It is tempting to suggest that the Annotator was an educated courtier

of Vasily III, probably associated with Maxim the Greek and other scholars of the time. As such, he might have known Metropolitan Makarios and other people who influenced the future Tzar Ivan. Although this cannot be verified, it is safe to assume that the Annotator (and the reader, who marked the assaults with the capital letters) used Nestor's account to study military matters. This distinguishes the Annotator from many of his contemporaries, since much of the contemporary literary tradition in north-west Eurasia focused either on righteous rulership or on various apocalyptic motifs. The latter were more popular, since in northwestern Eurasia the end of the world was expected at the end of the seventh millennium. In contrast to this type of discourse, which was popular both at the court of the Great Prince and among the formally independent literati, the Annotator looked beyond the prophecies and the fate of Constantinople and focused also on military matters. Not a single note refers to the hopes of reconquering Constantinople, even speculatively, which suggests that the Annotator chose to sideline the apocalyptic optimism present in Nestor Iskender's original account.

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Summary / Zusammenfassung / Résumé

Interpreting the Fall of Constantinople in Sixteenth-Century Muscovy: Marginal Notes in the Troitsa Manuscript of Nestor Iskender's «Tale of the Capture of Tsargrad»

The *Tale of the Capture of Tsargrad* by Nestor-Iskender is an important text that recounted the Fall of Constantinople to the literati of Northwestern Eurasia. The main manuscript of the *Tale* is found in Troitsa 773. This article presents the sixteenth-century notes found in the margins of the manuscript. The analysis of the handwriting and intratextual evidence demonstrates that the multiple marginalia of the manuscript can be regarded as an interpretation of the events of 1453 and also connects the annotations with the reign of the Grand Prince Vasily III (r. 1505-1533).

Deutungen des Falls von Konstantinopel im Moskau des 16. Jahrhunderts: Randbemerkungen im Troitsa-Manuskript von Nestor Iskender »Geschichte der Eroberung von Zargrad«

Die »Geschichte der Eroberung von Zargrad« von Nestor Iskender ist ein wichtiger Text, der den Gebildeten im Nordwesten Eurasiens den Fall von Konstantinopel erzählt. Das Hauptmanuskript der Erzählung befindet sich in Troitsa 773. Dieser Artikel präsentiert die Notizen aus dem 16. Jahrhundert, die am Rand des Manuskripts gefunden wurden. Die Analyse der Handschrift und der intratextuellen Evidenz zeigt, dass die zahlreichen Marginalien des Manuskripts als Deutung der Ereignisse von 1453 angesehen werden können, sie verbindet die Anmerkungen ferner mit der Regierungszeit des Großfürsten Wassili III. (reg. 1505-1533).

Interprétation de la chute de Constantinople dans la Moscovie du XVI^e siècle: notes marginales dans le manuscrit de Troïtsa du «Conte de la prise de Tsargrad» de Nestor Iskender

Le Conte de la prise de Tsargrad de Nestor-Iskender est un texte important qui a raconté la chute de Constantinople aux érudits de l'Eurasie du Nord-Ouest. Le manuscrit principal se trouve à Troitsa 773. Cet article présente les notes du XVI^e siècle trouvées dans les marges du manuscrit. L'analyse de l'écriture manuscrite et des preuves intratextuelles démontre que les multiples notes marginales du manuscrit peuvent être considérées comme une interprétation des événements de 1453 et relie également les annotations au règne du grand-prince Vassili III (r. 1505-1533).