

Introduction

In Constantinople during the reign of the emperor Constantine IX Monomachos (r. 1042-1055), indeed sometime in 1044/1045, the Armenian nobleman Gregory Magistros chanced to have met a Muslim Arab, the courtier, theologian and poet Abū Naṣr al-Manāzī¹. Though a scion of the princely Pahlavuni clan, Gregory had entered Byzantine service shortly before the final annexation of his native Ani, and, following the quintessentially Byzantine method of assimilating foreign elites, exchanged his ancestral estates for lands and castles near Edessa, in the empire's borderland between southeastern Asia Minor and northern Mesopotamia. Gregory claimed that al-Manāzī engaged him over several days with all manner of complex and thought-provoking questions. Eventually, al-Manāzī proceeded to criticize the Christian scriptures, stating that they were a rough miscellany of different texts rather than a unitary document like the Qur'an. Moreover, according to al-Manāzī, the Scriptures lacked the poetic qualities of the Islamic holy book.

Being eager to refute the assertion of his heady interlocutor and seeking inspiration from the Holy Spirit to do so, Gregory stated that he could write an account of Christian history in four days, as opposed to the forty years over which Muhammad had recorded his revelation. Moreover, he would compose it in the rhyming meter (*qāfiyā*) of Arabic poetry. By Gregory's own account, he managed to perform this feat within the span of four days, as he had promised, at the conclusion of which al-Manāzī is to have »confessed with astonishment that the God of the Christians is great«. The result of Gregory's fevered composition, variously termed in scholarship the »Mighty Acts of God« (*Magnalia Dei*), the »To Manuche« (Առ Մանուչէ) or »Of a Thousand Lines« (Հազարսորոցեան), is the first major biblical epic of medieval Armenian literature².

Gregory's encounter with al-Manāzī in the medieval metropolis on the Bosphorus encapsulates an element of Byzantine history that has yet to be fully realized either by Byzantinists or by their colleagues in related disciplines: namely, that the medieval Eastern Roman Empire, in contrast to the picture of an almost uniformly Hellenic and Orthodox polity

often painted by Byzantine writers, which it was at certain points in its history, was nonetheless an immensely diverse place. Moreover, this shift from relative homogeneity to profound diversity and vice-versa could occur within startlingly short amounts of time. A transformation of this sort certainly occurred in the seventh century. More pertinent for our period, Anthony Kaldellis has recently described the rapid shift in the ethnic composition of the empire brought about in the seventy-year period ending with the death of Basil II in 1025:

»In 955, Romania was relatively homogeneous. There were some Slavic ethnic minorities in Greece and the Peloponnese, Lombards in Apulia, and some Armenian and other foreign populations along the eastern frontier, but otherwise the population of the so-called empire consisted overwhelmingly of Greek-speaking Orthodox Romans [...]. By 1025, however, the balance had moved in the direction of multiethnic empire. The territory ruled from New Rome had expanded by a third. Crete and Cyprus were mostly Roman in population already. But most inhabitants of the Bulgarian state were not Roman, and neither were those of Armenia and Georgia. Antioch was mostly Chalcedonian Christian, albeit Arabic-speaking, mixed with Roman settlers and immigrants from Syria and Egypt. There were also Syrian Monophysites and Muslims. Many small frontier themes were settled by Romans and Armenians. Byzantium was more of a multiethnic empire now than it had ever been, even though in relative terms it still did not match the diversity of most multiethnic empires in history³«.

This cornucopia of peoples in and around Byzantium at that time could and did lead to some fascinating examples of cultural hybridization. Gregory Magistros, for instance, embodies the interaction of different, in some respects antagonistic, aspects of Byzantium and Armenia. A recent analysis of his 88 dense and profoundly erudite letters emphasizes that his entering Byzantine service, notably as *doux* of Mesopotamia, did not entail complete cultural subjugation to his Eastern Roman paymasters⁴. A proud adherent of the Armenian Orthodox church, and therefore ipso facto an opponent of Byzantine Orthodoxy, whose family would dominate the

1 The account of this meeting between Gregory and al-Manāzī is given in the former's preface to his biblical epic in verse: Gregory Magistros, *Magnalia Dei* 33-35 (English translation), 107-110 (Armenian text). On Gregory Magistros, see the literature listed in Robert Thomson's bibliographies to Armenian literature: Thomson, *Bibliography* 127f.; Thomson, *Supplement* 186f. Since the publication

of the supplement, see especially van Lint, Grigor Magistros; van Lint, *Armenische Kultur*; Weller, *Byzantinophilia*.

2 On the *Magnalia Dei*, see the overview with references to the scholarly literature in van Lint, *Af Manuč'ē*.

3 Kaldellis, *Streams of Gold* 145f.

4 Weller, *Byzantinophilia*.

office of *katholikos* over several generations, his scholarship and writings were nonetheless deeply imbued with Hellenism.

Yet, as Gregory's interaction with al-Manāzī demonstrates, the Armenian aristocrat's worldview, shaped by a life spent campaigning, administering and philosophizing in the borderlands between the Byzantine Empire and the Caliphate, was also profoundly influenced by Islamicate culture. Unique in his collection of missives are two letters addressed to a certain Emir Ibrahim, whose parents were an Armenian Christian mother and a Muslim father⁵. The first letter, Gregory's longest, answered his queries concerning the Christian faith and invited him to convert. Even in this intensely theological epistle, which sought to refute Muslim beliefs, Gregory was able to praise the caliph al-Ma'mūn as a ruler in the mold of Solomon, »who desired treasure that cannot be plundered, that is, the treasure of wisdom⁶«.

Less happy than Gregory's sojourn in the Byzantine capital was that of another poet almost a century earlier, that of Abū Firās (932-968), the cousin of the Hamdanid ruler of Aleppo, Sayf ad-Dawla. Like the emir Ibrahim or the fictional Digenes Akrites of Byzantine epic, Abū Firās was of mixed parentage: his father was Abū l-'Alā' Sa'īd, a high-ranking personage in Abbasid service, his mother was Byzantine. Though her exact origin remains unclear, it seems likely that she was captured by a raid into Byzantine territory led by Abū Firās' father in the year 931. It was his mother, a so-called *umm walad*, i.e. a slave mother usually of foreign extraction who by virtue of giving birth to the son of her master could no longer be sold and was guaranteed freedom after the death of her owner, and was often granted this earlier – who played a particularly prominent role in the »Byzantine« poems (*ar-rūmīyāt*) of Abū Firās⁷. Abū Firās composed these poems during his four-year captivity (962-966), much of which was also spent in the Byzantine capital. Throughout this period, as Sayf ad-Dawla seemed powerless to secure Abū Firās' release, his mother continued to intercede on his behalf and hope for his return.

It is the role both of Gregory Magistros and of Abū Firās as so-called cultural brokers between the Byzantine Empire and Arab Near East that serves as a useful entrée for the contents of the edited volume presented here. The contributions stem from a conference entitled »Monks, Merchants and Artists in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Relations of Byzantium to the Arab Near East (9th to 15th c.)« and held at the Leibniz Institute for European History in Mainz, Germany, on 17-18 October 2012. It was organized by Johannes Pahlitzsch and Vasiliki Tsamakda and sponsored by the Leibniz-ScienceCampus Mainz: »Byzantium between Orient and Occident«. The organizers envisaged the conference as a way of enhancing interdisciplinary cooperation, and as such invited experts from such disciplines as History, Art History and Archaeology, Theology and Islamic Studies. Thanks are

due both to the participants of the conference and for their cooperation and patience during the extended gestation period of this volume.

We have divided the fourteen articles of this volume into six thematic sections: 1) »Boundaries and Borderlands«; 2) »Coexistence and Continuity«; 3) »Diplomacy and Mediation«; 4) »Melkite Artists as Intermediaries«; 5) »Mutual Artistic Interactions«; and finally 6) »Between Philosophy and Theology«.

Gregory spent most of his life and political career in what was very much a borderland region in the eleventh century, and indeed »Boundaries and »Borderlands« figure to a lesser or greater degree in all of the contributions presented here. Asa Eger, drawing upon his profound expertise in archaeology coupled with nuanced readings of the relevant literary sources, challenges the traditional narrative of the Byzantine-Arabic/Islamic borderland as a ravaged war zone through the presentation of convincing evidence for considerable, and in many cases state-sponsored, irrigation in the Early Islamic period. In »Coexistence and Continuity« Ute Versteegen examines the diachronic sharing of sacred sites in the Holy Land. Thereafter Robert Schick attempts to reconstruct the enigmatic history of the Christian community in Jordan in the ninth and tenth centuries.

Though the articles in the section »Diplomacy and Mediation« are more traditionally grounded in the *histoire événementielle* strand of scholarship on Byzantine-Arab relations, their authors nonetheless show that much remains to be done within this venerable field of scholarly inquiry. In his essay Nicolas Drocourt examines the mechanics of diplomatic exchange with Byzantium: the characteristics of Arabic-speaking ambassadors, the journeys of diplomatic missions to Constantinople and the conditions of their stay in the imperial capital. On the basis of Arabic sources Bettina Krönung intensively examines how Christian mediators were selected by Muslim potentates and how this process converged and differed within different polities. Alexander Beihammer explores shifting court strategies and ideologies at two critical junctures, namely around the 1050s as Seljuk incursions upset the preexisting diplomatic dynamic on Byzantium's eastern frontier, as well as the last Byzantine expedition to Syria under John II Komnenos in 1138.

Mat Immerzeel in the leading essay of »Melkite Artists as Intermediaries« examines how highly-prized Byzantine artists were often employed by patrons of other Christian creeds and their effect on autochthonous artistic traditions. In her wide-ranging examination Lucy-Anne Hunt connects different artistic sites and objects under the leitmotif of the reassertion of Byzantine imperial prestige under Michael VIII.

A triad of art historical essays fill the penultimate section of the volume, »Mutual Artistic Interactions«. Elizabeth Williams

5 Gregory Magistros, Letters, nos 70 and 71. On these letters to the emir Ibrahim, see van Lint, *Af Ibrahim amirayin*.

6 Gregory Magistros, Letters 202 (no. 70).

7 On the mother of Abū Firās, see now Pahlitzsch, *Prosopographische Notizen*.

problematizes the confessional boundaries of dress and fashion postulated by older scholarship as well as the relationship between center and periphery in the dissemination of fashion trends. In her examination of the role of Pseudo-Arabic in the spectacular Church of Hosios Loukas, Alicia Walker highlights the hitherto neglected role of the church's monastic community in the creation of the foundation's iconographic program. Finally, Robert Hillenbrand offers an erudite analysis of how Byzantine artistic forms were adapted and transformed within the tradition of Islamic book painting.

Benjamin de Lee begins the volume's final section («Between Philosophy and Theology») with a contribution on the revival of Aristotelian thought in Niketas Byzantios' writings against Islam. Niketas, about whom we know far too little, is the first writer in the Byzantine tradition to have used a Greek translation of the Qur'an, which he cites extensively in

his polemic. Via the Melkite polymath 'Abdallāh ibn al-Faḍl, Alexander Treiger introduces us to the intellectual ferment of Antioch under Byzantine rule and the remarkable spate of translations from Greek into Arabic it fostered. This literary activity constitutes an undeservedly understudied translation movement which the author favorably compares with its more famous Abbasid forerunner. In the concluding essay of this volume Sidney Griffith shows us the broad sweep of the development of the »Melkite« tradition in the Islamic world.

Last but not least the editors would like to express their gratitude to Martin Dennert and Antje Bosselmann-Ruickbie for providing their art historical expertise, as well as Benjamin Fourlas, the coordinator of the Leibniz-ScienceCampus, and Stefan Albrecht of the Verlag des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums, for facilitating the publication of this edited volume.

Bibliography

Sources

Gregory Magistros, Letters: Grigor Magistrosi tǔtēre: bnagirn yarazabanov ew canōtōwtiwnnerov arāzin angam i loys ɛncayec' / K. Kostaneanc' (Aǧêkšandrapol 1910).

Gregory Magistros, Magnalia Dei: Magnalia Dei. Biblical History in Epic Verse by Grigor Magistros. Ed. and trans. Abraham Terian. Hebrew University Armenian Studies 14 (Leuven, Paris, Walpole MA 2012).

References

Kaldellis, Streams of Gold: Anthony Kaldellis, Streams of Gold, Rivers of Blood. The Rise and Fall of Byzantium, 955 A.D. to the First Crusade (New York 2017).

van Lint, Af Ibrahim amirayin: Th. M. van Lint, Af Ibrahim amirayin vasn hawatoc' Grigoroy ordoy Vasakay asac'eal, Patasxani Ibrahimimi amirayi, zor xndreac' mi vasn imastariut'ean ew mi vasn hawatoy, »Letters to Amir Ibrahim«. In: D. Thomas / A. Mallett (eds), Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History 2 (900-1050). History of Christian Muslim Relations 14 (Leiden, Boston 2010) 707-710.

Af Manuč'ē: Th. M. van Lint, Af Manuč'ē, Hazartolean. Magnalia Dei, »The Mighty Acts of God«. In: D. Thomas / A. Mallett (eds), Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History 2 (900-1050). History of Christian Muslim Relations 14 (Leiden, Boston 2010) 710-713.

Armenische Kultur: Th. M. van Lint, Grigor Magistros Pahlawuni: die armenische Kultur aus der Sicht eines gelehrten Laien des 11. Jahrhunderts. Ostkirchliche Studien 61, 2012, 66-83.

Grigor Magistros: Th. M. van Lint, Grigor Magistros. In: D. Thomas / A. Mallett (eds), Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History 2 (900-1050). History of Christian Muslim Relations 14 (Leiden, Boston 2010) 702-707.

Pahlitzsch, Prosopographische Notizen: J. Pahlitzsch, Prosopographische Notizen zur Mutter des Abū Firās al-Ḥamḍānī (320/932-357/968) unter Berücksichtigung seiner Byzantinischen Gedichte (*ar-rūmīyāt*). In: A. Beihammer / B. Krönung / C. Ludwig (eds), Prosopeion Rhomaikon: ergänzende Studien zur Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit. Millennium-Studien 68 (Berlin, Boston 2017) 181-193.

Thomson, Bibliography: R. W. Thomson, A Bibliography of Classical Armenian Literature to 1500 AD (Turnhout 1995).

Supplement: R. W. Thomson, Supplement to »A Bibliography of Classical Armenia Literature to 1500 AD«. Publications 1993-2005. Le muséeon 120, 2007, 163-233.

Weller, Byzantinophilia: A. Weller, Byzantinophilia in the Letters of Grigor Magistros. BMGS 41/2, 2017, 167-181.