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Paradigms of Frontier Interaction: A New Use for Digenes Akrites

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT
This article argues that the Byzantine romance known as Digenes Akrites has more to offer historians than is often recognized. Regardless of the fictional nature of the story or of the exact date of its composition, the Digenes tale can serve as an exemplar of the kinds of interactions which regularly took place in the frontier regions between the Byzantine and Muslim worlds and the social values and cultural mores that guided such interactions. If taken as a paradigm of otherwise invisible conditions along the frontier regions of southeastern Anatolia, Digenes can shed new light on an otherwise dark and incomplete picture. It is, in fact, a frontier world in and of itself, in which outside powers, both Muslim and Byzantine, are distant images and only occasional players.
Keywords: Digenes Akrites, Byzantine Literature, Frontier History, Byzantium and the Islamic World

Sınırdaki Etkileşimin Örnekleri: Digenes Akrites İçin Yeni Bir Kullanım

Araştırma Makalesi

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ÖZ
Bu makale, Digenes Akrites olarak bilinen Bizans destanının tarihçilere sanıldığından daha fazlasını sunabileceğini öne sürmektedir. Digenes hikayesi, kesin tarihinin bilinmemesi ve kurgusal doğasına rağmen, Bizans ve İslam dünyaları arasındaki sınır bölgelerinde düzenli olarak meydana gelen farklı etkileşimlerle, bu etkileşimleri şekillendiren toplumsal değerler ve kültürel ilişkilerin bir yansıması olarak değerlendirilebilir. Digenes, Güneydoğu Anadolu'nun sınır bölgelerindeki aslında görünmeyen koşulların bir örneği olarak ele alınırsa, karanlık ve eksik bir tabloya yeni bir ışık tutabilir. Aslında bu tablo hem Müslüman hem de Bizanslıların uzak görüntüler olarak dışarda kaldığı ve ara sıra oyuncuları olduğu sınır dünyası olarak tarif edilebilir.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Digenes Akrites, Bizans Edebiyatı, Sınır Tarihi, Bizans ve İslam Dünyası

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Introduction

The story (or collection of stories) known generally as *Digenes Akrites* has been a source of scholarly contention and has even defied exact classification. Still today, after decades of academic work, there is no general consensus among scholars regarding how to define the work (e.g. is it an epic or a romance?), much less concerning the possible uses to which it can be put in expanding our understanding of the Byzantine and medieval Near Eastern world. Since it is undoubtedly a work of fiction and cannot be precisely dated, and especially because no single manuscript can be considered the "original," few historians have seriously studied the text.[1] Nicolas Oikonomidès put it aptly when he said, "Il est entendu que l'auteur de Digénis n'est pas – et ne prétend pas être – un historien."[2] In general, the tale of Digenes Akrites, the "frontiersman of double descent," has been relegated to studies of Byzantine literature. Still, there have been those who have dared to search for historical figures or at least historically accurate themes within the story's pages, and they have met with some, albeit rather modest, success.

Amongst scholars of the *Digenes* text, Henri Grégoire is widely regarded as the founder and originator of the historical investigation of the work.[3] In a series of articles published in the 1930s and 1940s, Grégoire noted several instances of what he regarded as historical references in the text, and it was he who first tried to systematically identify the story's many people and places with real, historical counterparts.[4] In his wake, several other scholars began to seek out similar historical figures or terms seemingly afloat in the 'epic's' otherwise fictional milieu.[5] More recently, as a kind of backlash against this type of investigation, those such as Anthony Bryer and Paul Lemerle have spoken out harshly against such use of the *Digenes* legend.[6] The majority of the criticism stems from the contention that the story cannot be securely dated, its unknown author may not even have been familiar with the narrative's setting, and that, simply put, it is a work of fiction. The various manuscripts in which the *Digenes* epic survives are significantly varied in their style, content, and date, making historical studies of the legend's contents even more complicated. Some versions also draw heavily on earlier literary topoi common to the so-called "Alexander romances" and even the works of Homer.[7] It is thus clear that one cannot use *Digenes* in the same manner as an historical chronicle or even hagiography. As a result of the kinds of studies carried out on the work, a kind of dichotomy has been formed in the academic discussion concerning the Byzantine epic. Scholars tend to either insist that certain characters in the work can be identified with certain historical figures, or they study it as nothing more than another work of literature in a long history of Greek fiction. This dichotomy, however, has eliminated a third option, which, could open new doors in our

[1] This is in contrast to literary theorists, whose work on Byzantine romances especially has expanded exponentially in the past two decades. For an overview of recent scholarship, see esp. Corinne Jouanno, "Shared Spaces 1: Digenis Akritis, the Two-Blooded Border Lord," in C. Cupane and B. Krönung, eds., *Fictional Storytelling in Medieval Eastern Mediterranean and Beyond* (Leiden: Brill, 2016) 260-84.

[2] Nicolas Oikonomidès, "L'épopée de Digénis et la frontière orientale de Byzance aux Xe et XIe siècles," *Travaux et Mémoires* 7 (1979): 381. "It is understood that the author of Digenis is not – and does not pretend to be – a historian."

[3] Elizabeth Jeffreys, ed. and trans., *Digenis Akritis: The Grottaferrata and Escorial Versions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) xxx.

[4] See, for example: Henri Grégoire, "Le tombeau et la date de Digénis Akritas," *Byzantion 6*, (1931): 481-508, and "Études sur l'épopée byzantine," *Revue des Études Grecques 46*, (1933): 26-69.

[5] See, for example, George Huxley, "Antecedents and Context of Digenes Akrites," *Greek Roman and Byzantine Studies 15*, (1974): 317-38.

[6] Anthony Bryer, "The Historian's *Digenes Akrites*," in Beaton and Ricks, eds., *Digenes Akrites: New Approaches to Byzantine Heroic Poetry*, ed. Beaton and Ricks, Ashgate, Aldershot 1993, p.93-102; Paul Lemerle, "L'histoire des Pauliciens d'Asie Mineure d'après les sources grecques," *Travaux et Mémoires 5*, 1973, p.1-145.

[7] Roderick Beaton, *The Medieval Greek Romance*, 2nd edition, (New York: Routledge, 1996) 31.

understanding of the medieval frontiers of eastern Anatolia and northern Syria, an important area poorly attested in surviving historical records. Regardless of the fictional nature of the story or of the inexact date of its composition, the *Digenes* tale can serve as an exemplar of the kinds of interactions which regularly took place in the frontier regions between the Byzantine and Muslim worlds and the social values and cultural mores that guided such interactions. We can catch a glimpse of the world in which people of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds coexisted. A study such as this is not without its problems or complications, and there are many historians who would certainly disagree with its methodology, but, as this work will attempt to show, there is reason to believe that the *Digenes* legend can serve our historical understanding more than simply as a compendium of names in an otherwise useless narrative. If taken as a paradigm of otherwise invisible conditions along the frontier regions of southeastern Anatolia, *Digenes* can indeed shed new light on an otherwise dark and incomplete picture.

1. *Digenes Akrites* and History

Before beginning a discussion of the text itself, it is important to establish the grounds upon which we can claim that *Digenes* is, in fact, a viable candidate to render any clues to actual, historical conditions. As stated by Oikonomidès, the author(s) of *Digenes* was not a historian, nor did he pretend to be. More important for this study, however, is establishing whether or not the author was attempting historical *plausibility* in his work.[8] As Oikonomidès argued, *Digenes'* author may not have been a historian per se, "mais il fallait bien aussi qu'il place son histoire dans un certain milieu, un milieu qui serait quelque peu réaliste afin d'ajouter à la crédibilité du récit."[9] The author himself stresses this, in fact, in several places throughout the story, more than once insisting that his account is not to be included among mere fables or fairy tales.[10] In other words, the author of *Digenes* was placing his characters in a setting and ascribing to them attributes and actions which would have been recognizable to his readers and which were themselves representative of real situations on the ground.[11] The obvious question that follows, then, is one of chronology.

If *Digenes* is representative of frontier conditions between the Byzantine and Muslim worlds, for which time period is this true? The answer to this question cannot be exact or precise, but, in this author's opinion, it does not need to be. In the words of Anthony Bryer, "Grégoire was looking for a specific time, place, and people: we should be looking instead for a more essential background of politics, geography, and economy."[12] Still, this "essential background" is insufficient. The setting of *Digenes* is, strictly speaking, appropriate neither for the sixth century nor the twelfth, and it would be a mistake to imagine that its characters and interactions represent an unchanging or static world. There are indeed many features of life in frontier regions which are identifiable in *Digenes* and can also be described as generally universal characteristics of any marginal location, wherever or whenever they may be. In the case of the *Digenes* legend, however, we can and should be slightly more specific. Based on several

[8] Similar claims have been at the foundation of hagiographical studies for decades. For an overview, see Stephanos Efthymiadis, ed., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography, Vol. II: Genres and Context*, Ashgate, Burlington, VT 2014.
[9] Oikonomidès, "L'épopée de Digenis et la frontière," 381.
[10] G 4.19-20; E 718-22. "And we are not repeating the boasts or fictions and stories which Homer and other Hellenes falsely invented. For these events are not stories that are told nor boasting that is repeated, but they are all completely true [ἀληθεύουν ἐκ παντός]: let no one disbelieve that I am telling the truth about Akritis, the marvelous Frontiersman." (Jeffreys' translation, *Digenis Akritis*, 293).
[11] This conclusion can be made in large part thanks to the work of historians which I have criticized above. While simply searching for historical names or places within the Byzantine epic has been, to a certain extent, misguided, it has nevertheless yielded several indications that the story describes situations and interactions which were generally historically accurate, if sometimes exaggerated and, of course, fictitious.
[12] Bryer, "Historian's *Digenes*," 98.

observations made by many different scholars over the years, it can be said with some certainty that the world of *Digenes* is more or less the Byzantine-Arab frontiers of the ninth and tenth centuries.[13] While the various versions of the story which exist today certainly contain additions and interpolations from later times, the "essential background" of the *Digenes* narrative falls within this time period. The common complaint by historians that a work which does not describe a specific time and place cannot yield accurate information is here inapplicable, since this study seeks to identify *paradigms* of interaction, not historical interactions themselves. When searching for such paradigms, assigning *Digenes'* milieu to a period of even two centuries is specific enough to generate viable models and to make a few general conclusions.

Finally, a word should be said concerning the methodology of this study. The majority of material will be taken from the Grottaferrata and Escorial versions of the text (henceforth referred to as G and E) as they appear in Elizabeth Jeffreys' 1998 edition, with occasional references to other manuscripts. This is, first and foremost, a result of the generally accepted view that these two manuscripts represent the earliest and most complete versions of the story which remain extant.[14] In addition, the first three books of the G version, identified by Oikonomidès and others as the so-called "Chant de l'Émir," will receive preferential treatment, as it has been argued that it was once independent of the rest of the *Digenes* tale and may even have come from a non-Byzantine source.[15] Oikonomidès has also convincingly argued that this portion of the text is slightly more historically accurate (or historically plausible) than others, making it especially useful for study such as this.[16]

Strictly speaking, this is not the first time a scholar has attempted to find in *Digenes* examples of Byzantine or frontier attitudes and social values. George Huxley demonstrated several instances of historical figures and events that lay behind parts of the *Digenes* tale.[17] In addition, it has long been noted that there are many similarities between the *Digenes* text and the aristocratic values described in the *Strategikon* of Kekaumenos. In his study of these similarities, Paul Magdalino has shown that the social values, particularly ties of kinship (συγγένεια) and the aristocratic household (οἶκος), which are described by Kekaumenos are also present in *Digenes*.[18] In other words, the *Digenes* text presents a realistic set of loyalties and social mores which guide many of the actions of the main characters of the epic. The problem, however, is that, while many scholars have lauded Magdalino and cited it as a useful work both for historians and literary scholars, few have followed in his footsteps to conduct studies of their own. Oikonomidès' article on the relationship between *Digenes* and the historical Arabo-Byzantine frontiers, which was written ten years before Magdalino's article, also purported to be a study similar to this one, but, in reality, was more simply a comparison of administrative titles and their functions in *Digenes* and other, more historical documents.[19] Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that the *Digenes* story can legitimately be studied as generally representative of the world of the Arabo-Byzantine frontiers of the ninth and tenth centuries. The characters and storyline may be invented, but the world in which they act and the ways in which they interact with one another was real. It is from this assumption that this paper proceeds.

[13] Beaton, *Medieval Greek Romance*, 32; Jeffreys, *Digenis Akritis*, xxx-xxxii.
[14] Jeffreys, *Digenis Akritis,* xiii-xiv.
[15] Oikonomidès, "L'épopée de Digenis et la frontière," 379, 383.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Huxley, "Antecedents and Context of Digenes Akrites."
[18] Paul Magdalino, "Honour among Romaioi: the Framework of Social Values in the World of Digenes Akrites and Kekaumenos," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies 13*, (1989): 183-218.
[19] Oikonomidès, "L'épopée de Digenis et la frontière," 375-77.

2. Religious Syncretism

One of the first things one notices upon reading *Digenes* is the general lack of homogeneity in all spheres. The story's characters represent diverse ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds.[20] This diversity extends to even individual characters, who often represent the convergence of multiple backgrounds within a single person. Basil Digenes Akrites, the main protagonist of the story, is the perfect example of this, being of "double descent," that is Arab and Roman. Even Digenes' father, the so-called Emir, was of mixed descent. According the Grottaferrata version (and others), the Emir's parents had been "Chrysovergis" and "Panthia," and it was only upon their deaths that he, still a young child, was handed over to his Arab/Muslim mother for his upbringing.[21] In the same version, the Emir's grandfather is named "Ambron," and his uncle "Karoïs."[22] These names, while their importance as mere names should not be overemphasized, present an interesting genealogy. The Chrysovergis of G is usually identified with the famous Paulician Chrysocheir (died c.878/9), and Panthia, the Emir's biological mother, is a common name in traditional Greek epics and romances.[23] His grandfather, "Ambron," is often identified as 'Umar, emir of Melitene and "intermittent supporter of the Paulician heretics," and "Karoïs" is almost universally accepted as Karbeas, another infamous Paulician leader.[24] In the Escorial version, the Emir's father is called "Aaron" and his grandfather "Mouselom."[25] In this case, "Aaron" is sometimes thought to be the caliph Harun al-Rashid, and "Mouselom" could be a Hellenized form of Maslamah, like the leader of the siege of Constantinople in 717.[26] There are, of course, other possibilities. For instance, "Aaron" could simply be a corruption of G's "Ambron," or possibly even the well-known Jewish name. "Mouselom" could equally be nothing more than "Muslim." Identifying each of these members of the Emir's family with a single historical figure is not important here. The point is that, based on these names alone, we can tell that Digenes' father was himself of an incredibly diverse family, both religiously and ethnically. His ancestors seem to have been of Paulician (or more vaguely, Christian heterodox), Arab/Muslim, Greek, and even Armenian descent. He eventually takes a daughter of a Roman/Byzantine general (στρατηγός) as his wife, converting to Christianity (he had been raised a Muslim) and moving into Byzantine-controlled territory to legitimize his marriage.[27] His armies are described as consisting of Turks, Dilemites, Arabs, "Troglodytes" (lit. "cave-dwellers"), and *ghulāms*.[28] He speaks both Greek and Arabic fluently.[29] We read on more than one occasion how both the Emir and Digenes dress and arm themselves like Arabs or in an Arab/Byzantine mix.[30] This is the cultural milieu, then, which produces the hero of the *Digenes* epic. It is described many times as "aristocratic" and "noble," but it is certainly not ethnically or religiously homogeneous, much less an idealized, purely Byzantine environment.

Digenes' frontier setting is one in which various ethnic and religious groups constantly interact, creating a syncretistic culture which is defined more by its multiculturalism than by

[20] The last statement should be qualified. Nearly all of the characters come from aristocratic, "noble" (εὐγενικός) families. However, we are less informed about the backgrounds of the so-called brigands (ἀπελάται), and there is still considerable variation in the social upbringings of the many characters.
[21] G 1.284-8. The Arabs to whom he was given are called his "kinsmen" (συγγενεῖς).
[22] G 1.284-5.
[23] Jeffreys, *Digenis Akritis*, 390, 395.
[24] Jeffreys, *Digenis Akritis*, 387, 392.
[25] E 145-7.
[26] Jeffreys, *Digenis Akritis*, 387, 395.
[27] G 1.306-7.
[28] G 1.45-7.
[29] G 1.115; E30.
[30] G 3.258-60: The Emir dons a purple silk surcoat with a gold and white turban, a kind of blend of Byzantine and Muslim garb. E 1462-3: Digenes wears a garment "of pure Baghdad fabric, of Arab green over the breastplate."

strictly antagonistic relationships between the Byzantines and Muslims. This is not only reflected in the genealogies of the heroes, but also in religion as it is expressed in the story. The Emir has no qualms about converting to Christianity for his beautiful wife-to-be.[31] This is done in the same sentence in which he evokes "the great prophet [Muhammad]."[32] The five brothers who confront the Emir early in the story greet him by calling him an ambiguous "servant of God" (δοῦλος τοῦ θεοῦ), and they then display a great knowledge and respect for Islam, expressing hope that the Emir will reach "Panormes" (Jeddah), see the mosque and the hanging rock, kiss the Prophet's tomb and hear "the sacred prayer."[33] There are several instances in which it becomes obvious that the author of *Digenes* wishes to stress the heroes' Christian belief, but religious difference is seldom, if ever, an automatic reason for enmity between individuals.[34] The "brigands" with whom Digenes fights in G, and whom he joins in E, are described in religiously ambiguous terms. At one point Philopappous, one of their leaders, is shown invoking Christ, but based on their description, they are most likely heterodox (Paulician or Armenian?) Christians.[35] The girl whom Digenes encounters at an oasis in the desert (with whom he commits his first of two adulterous acts) is another Arab of mixed descent who had been baptized a Christian for the sake of her former lover.[36] Individuals in the world of *Digenes* are certainly religious/spiritual, but they cannot be described as zealous warriors for their faith. There is no hint of any crusader-like ideals. One's particular religion is quite malleable, and there is little hesitation when political or, more often in *Digenes,* love dictates conversion. Even without this conversion, we can see presumably Muslim troops fighting for the Christian Emir or Digenes.[37] And when the Christian brothers confront the (then Muslim) Emir in an effort to retrieve their sister, both sides seem conversant with the other's religious and cultural practices. The text gives the impression that "Romania" (Byzantine land) is Christian and lower Syria and Mesopotamia are Muslim, but the majority of interactions take place in the frontiers, where no such monolithic religious descriptions are possible and the religious/cultural lines become blurred.

Perhaps the most telling example of the religious syncretism of the *Digenes* frontier comes from the prominence of the sun in the minds of the characters. Early in the story, when the five 'Roman' brothers believe that their sister (the Emir's future wife) has been killed, they begin their prayer of lament with an address to the sun. "Sun," they say, "why did you envy our lovely sister and kill her unjustly because she outshone you?"[38] Later, both the Emir's wife and Digenes' love interest are several times called "sun-born" (ἡλιογέννημα or related forms).[39] When the brothers do find their lost sister (in E), she is described as glowing "like the sun, the most beautiful girl was like a ray of sunshine."[40] One must be careful in his interpretation of this, as sun-imagery has often, and in many diverse cultures, been used as a literary device to

[31] G 1.306-7; E 175-7.
[32] G 1.308; E 165.
[33] G 1.100-104. For the identification of Panormes as Jeddah, see: Jeffreys, *Digenis Akritis,* 395.
[34] G 3.170-90: the Emir recites the Nicene Creed, almost in its entirety. G2.53: the Emir's mother reproaches him for renouncing his "faith and fatherland." Nevertheless, she herself later converts to Christianity (along with her entire household) in order to facilitate a union of the two families (that of the Emir and his wife).
[35] G 6.336; E 625-40. Many of them, including the so-called Amazon Maximou, bear names reminiscent of historical heterodox individuals, and Hratch Bartikian has noted that Melimitzes, Maximou, Karoïs, and others are obviously Armenian names. See: Hratch Bartikian, "Armenia and Armenians in the Byzantine Epic," in *Digenes Akrites: New Approaches to Byzantine Heroic Poetry,* ed. Beaton and Ricks, Ashgate, Aldershot 1993, 86-92.
[36] G 5.66: She is apparently from "Meferke," which Jeffreys and others identify as Martyropolis/Mayyafariqin, which was to seat of a Muslim emir who in 976 "acknowledged dependence on Byzantium" (Jeffreys, *Digenis Akritis*, p.394).
[37] E.g. G 1.45.
[38] G 1.253-4. In E (91-6), they address the "Lord Sun," asking why it has allowed this to happen. In this case, they could be referring to the sun itself, or possibly even using it as an allegorical reference to Christ.
[39] G 4.479, 4.635, passim.
[40] E 183-4.

describe beauty and radiance. Still, it is noted by many scholars that some form of sun worship or veneration often accompanied the more syncretistic, heterodox belief systems (Christian and others) that characterized the frontier regions in eastern Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia.[41] Images of the sun can be found throughout the *Digenes* narrative, and the direct address of the sun as a kind of prayer is quite striking. It is possible that this is a leftover reference from an earlier version of the story in which the main characters were less orthodox in their belief.[42] Even if this is not the case, it is relevant to point out the less than orthodox character of many actions in the story, despite the fact that the versions which we now possess were certainly compiled (if not outright written) within an orthodox Byzantine milieu and intended for an orthodox audience.[43] A further reference to less than orthodox practice may be found in Book 3 of the G version, when the Emir becomes "the father of them all [his newly-converted family members] in the Holy Spirit."[44] Spiritual fatherhood was a practice common to Byzantine custom in the ninth and tenth century (and much earlier), but the practice almost certainly dates to pre-Christian times. It was also known to be especially common among heterodox sects in eastern Anatolia.[45]

3. Martial Prowess, Family, and Authority

In addition to ethnic and religious diversity/syncretism, one of the most pervasive themes found throughout the *Digenes* narrative is that of militancy. The frontiers described in the epic are violent, and men are expected to display the bravery and machismo (Greek ἀνδρεῖα) which such a society naturally values. Raids are frequently discussed, both in positive and negative lights, and both Digenes and his father, the Emir, are renowned for their strength and military prowess. One of the very first adjectives ascribed to Digenes in the opening lines of the G version is "most brave" (ἀνδρειοτάτου).[46] Even stealing one's future wife from her family by means of a raid appears as a perfectly legitimate method of finding one's mate in the epic, and it becomes praiseworthy if this individual is then able to fight off his fiancée's family's soldiers.[47] One would expect combat to play a central role in any fictional epic describing masculine heroism, but it is clear that not only the hero but the entire society of the frontiers is a particularly bellicose one. This is not incredibly significant in itself, but it becomes so when we take a closer look at the face of this violence, how it is organized, and what are its goals.

Aside from a few distinct passages, it is rather difficult to find any sort of authority in the *Digenes* story that extends beyond a group of powerful, aristocratic families. These families apparently control incredible wealth and land, and thereby have the means to employ private armies. When a dispute arises between these groups, they do not go to a local, imperially appointed magistrate or judge. Instead, they simply muster their forces and seek justice with their own hands. We do hear occasionally of *strategoi*, the Byzantine heads of the various administrative districts, known as a *themata* or themes, but even these men generally appear as little more than local strongmen, who just happen to have an imperially granted title.[48] In fact, this image may not be far from historical truth. As several scholars have pointed out, from the mid-eighth to the tenth century, between Byzantium and the Muslims "the real conflict was

[41] Seta Dadoyan, *Islam and the Armenians: Paradigms of Medieval Interactions, vol. 1: The Arab Period in Armīnyah – Seventh to Eleventh Centuries,* Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ 2011, 284.
[42] This possibility is strengthened by the fact that the most striking references to the sun come from the early portion of both G and E, which is well within the so-called "Chant de l'Émir."
[43] Jeffreys, *Digenis Akritis,* xix-xxi.
[44] G 3.333.
[45] Dadoyan, *Islam and the Armenians*, 119.
[46] G 1.3.
[47] G 4.695-700.
[48] See especially G1.59-65, 2.63, 4.858-936.

fought out at a much more local level, between the border lords and their forces on both sides."[49] Over time, these military leaders became more and more important to local inhabitants, who were faced with ever growing difficulties due to raiding and general unrest. Eventually, it was from within this class of frontier strongmen, with their dependent peasantry, that the military aristocracy of later Byzantium arose.[50] It was these families, such as the Doukai, who became the emperors and leading aristocracy of the eleventh century on.[51] Traditionally, the problem for Byzantine historians has been the lack of good sources for the rise of the military aristocracy in the borderlands with the Muslims, and their appearance and growth has been continuously shrouded in mystery. This is exactly where *Digenes* can shed some light.

In Book 2 of the G text, the Emir's mother recounts how her husband, that is Digenes' grandfather, had once been defeated by a Byzantine army. When the fight was over and he, standing alone, was surrounded by the Byzantines, he was given an ultimatum. The Byzantine *strategos,* acting on behalf of the emperor, was impressed by his bravery and offered to grant him the title of *patrikios* (an honorary title, essentially granting one the position of a noble) and the position of *protostrator* (a kind of honorary groomsman) if he would only lay down his arms and recognize Byzantine rule.[52] The Emir's father had refused this honor, preferring instead to become a martyr, but nevertheless, the offer had been made. This kind of offer was not unique either in historical Byzantium or the *Digenes* text. At the end of Book 4 in the same version (G), the Byzantine emperor,[53] who happens to be on campaign in the East, meets with Digenes after hearing of the young man's incredible exploits. During this meeting, the emperor turns to the young man and says,

"*Marvelous and loveliest of youths, my Majesty ranks you as a patrikios, bestowing on you all your grandfather's possessions and I grant you authority to administer the frontiers. I shall ratify this securely in a chrysobull, and I shall provide you with precious imperial robes*."[54]

Aside from the curiously high level of honor and respect shown to Digenes by the emperor (historically, emperors tended to be rather contemptuous of their inferiors), this episode has the feel of a real event. The titles granted to Digenes, that of *patrikios* (noble) and administrator of the frontiers (this corresponds to the title of *doux* or even *strategos*), are entirely believable. As Catherine Holmes has shown, especially in the tenth century, Byzantine military leaders along the eastern frontiers were often appointed ad hoc, and, when the situation called for it, supreme military command would be given to locals, including Arabs.[55] For example, in 976 a certain Christian Arab named Kulayb was given control of Antioch when the current *doux* Michael Boutzes withdrew into Anatolia to deal with Skleros' rebellion.[56] Famously, in the year 1000, Basil II granted Hasan ibn Marwān the dual titles of *doux* and *magistros*.[57] In an age of eastward expansion, the Byzantine Empire did not consolidate tight control over the eastern frontiers or

[49] J.F. Haldon and H. Kennedy, "The Arab-Byzantine Frontier in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries: Military Organization and Society in the Borderlands," in Michael Bonner,ed., *Arab-Byzantine Relations in Early Islamic Times*, ed. M. Bonner, Ashgate, Burlington, VT 2004, 144.
[50] Haldon and Kennedy, "Arab-Byzantine Frontier," p.160-61; Jean-Claude Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963-1210)*, (Paris: Centre de recherche d'histoire et civilisation byzantines, 1990).
[51] Singular Doukas. These included such prominent figures as Empress Theodora "the Armenian" (r.842-55) and Andronikos and Constantine Doukas, both generals under Emperor Leo VI (r. 886-912). Later, the family married into the Komnenoi and thus became one of the most powerful families in the Byzantine Empire. See Demetrios I. Polemis, *The Doukai: A Contribution to Byzantine Prosopography*, (London: Athlone Press, 1968).
[52] G 2.65-72.
[53] The emperor is named Basil. There have been several attempts to identify him with either Basil I (reigned 867-86) or Basil II (976-1025), but neither has been convincingly argued.
[54] G 4.1048-53. (Jeffreys' translation).
[55] Catherine Holmes, "Byzantium's Eastern Frontier in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries," in *Medieval Frontiers: Concepts and Practices,* ed. D. Abulafia and N. Berend, Ashgate, Burlington, VT 2002, 91, 94.
[56] Holmes, "Byzantium's Eastern Frontier," 94.
[57] Holmes, "Byzantium's Eastern Frontier," 95-6.

newly conquered areas, preferring instead to use client kingdoms and semi-independent warlords to exert their authority over these liminal areas. This is exactly what we see in *Digenes*.

As stated above, it was exactly in this way and in the same region described in *Digenes*, that is southeastern Anatolia, where the Doukas family rose to prominence.[58] They were a wealthy, military aristocratic family, whose success in various campaigns against their Muslim neighbors and simultaneous ties to the imperial government in Constantinople granted them fame, fortune, and in several cases, imperial power. It is very interesting to note, then, that in *Digenes*, both Digenes and his wife are said to be related to the Doukas family.[59] Regardless of the specific relationship between the main characters and the Doukas family in the various versions of the story, the important family name is always present. This should give us an additional reason to use the *Digenes* text as a kind of paradigm case for what the Doukas family or other, similar aristocratic families may have looked like during its earlier (or even later) years along the Byzantine-Muslim frontier. So, what can we say about the aristocratic families in the *Digenes* legend?

Throughout the various versions of the text, and in relation to several different characters, two traits (in addition to bravery) are nearly always praised: quality of birth/pedigree and wealth. It does not matter if one is talking about Digenes himself, or simply someone's horse, adjectives such as "high-born" or "noble" are some of the most prominent of any single expression in the *Digenes* text.[60] As Magdalino pointed out in his important comparison of *Digenes* with the work by Kekaumenos, the family as a social group takes top priority within these aristocratic circles, and this includes both valuing and protecting one's current relatives (as we see throughout the *Digenes* narrative), as well as honoring the family name by maintaining the nobility which was imagined to be intrinsic to one's blood through birth.[61] One can read in the *Digenes* story interactions between Muslim and Byzantine elites in which the two groups deal with one another as relative equals, recognizing in each other those common traits of nobility regardless of race or religion.[62] In point of fact, the Doukas family was of mixed Armenian/Greek heritage, just as many other aristocratic families within Byzantium were also of mixed descent, indicating that these powerful families must have maintained cross-border relationships.[63] In terms of wealth, both based on the *Digenes* narrative and historical sources, the picture is slightly more vague.

There can be little doubt that both historical families like Doukas and those of Digenes and the Emir in the *Digenes* legend controlled considerable wealth. While we have little documentation, much or most of this wealth must have been in the form of land, as was the case in most pre-modern societies. Byzantium did have a separate group of powerful individuals and families who were almost solely dependent upon payment from the imperial treasury for their wealth, but these men were almost exclusively confined to Constantinople or its immediate

[58] For a general introduction to the family, see: Demetrios I. Polemis, *The Doukai: A Contribution to Byzantine Prosopography* (London: Althone Press, 1968).
[59] G 1.267, 4.325, 6.14, 6.414; E 137.
[60] See, for example, G 1.30-44, 2.294.
[61] Magdalino, "Honour among Romaioi," 184-87. See also Nathan Leidholm, *Elite Byzantine Kinship, c. 950-1204: Blood, Reputation, and the Genos,* Arc Humanities Press, Leeds 2019.
[62] This is true, for instance, in the interactions between the Emir and the five Byzantine brothers in Book 1 of the Grottaferrata version (G 1.100-309).
[63] Emperor Leo III (, the first Iconoclast emperor, was from a military (aristocratic?) background and of mixed Arab and Greek blood. Later (eleventh- and twelfth-century) Anatolian aristocratic families often intermarried with Turkish noble families from the interior of then Turkish-controlled Anatolia.

surroundings.[64] For those like the Doukas family, their only source of income would have been from their own lands and the occasional raid into enemy territory. The lands which these families controlled were typically centered around a fortress, which often appear in the sources as "cities" or "*kastra*," from which the family could protect both itself and its dependent peasantry. It is never explicit, but one certainly gets the impression that the Emir's family, as well as his wife's, controls just such an area.[65] There are indications of significant numbers of people living on the (presumably very large) estates belonging to either family in the *Digenes* story, and their display of prestige items and frequent comments about their movable wealth leaves no doubt as to their financial capabilities.[66] And while the *Digenes* text gives us little information regarding the specifics of the exploitation or ownership of land, there is ample evidence for the practice of raiding.

4. Border Raids and Young Men: *'Ayyārūn* and *Agouroi*

Among the many exploits of several characters in the *Digenes* legend, perhaps no other act is represented as often or in as much detail as cross-border raiding.[67] Near the very beginning of the epic, we are told of the Emir's successful raids in several Byzantine cities, including the estate of a wealthy *strategos*.[68] His father and uncles had also raided and plundered extensively, often taking important captives who could then be ransomed for considerable pay.[69] Historically, too, such raiding in Cilicia, Anatolia, and northern Syria was extremely prevalent. A late tenth-century military treatise, in fact, is completely dedicated to just this kind of combat.[70] *Digenes'* author's familiarity with local toponyms and the realistic descriptions of the importance and inherent danger of the many mountain passes (κλεισούραι) which defined the eastern frontiers of the Byzantine Empire increase the historical plausibility of the *Digenes* tale.[71] Such raids, however, require soldiers of some kind, even if only in relatively small numbers. Thus, a further question arises: who were these warlords using in their raids, where did they come from, and how were they paid? The composition of the forces accompanying these powerful aristocrats is seldom made explicit in *Digenes*, and they are usually referred to in vague terminology such as "youths" or "young men." There is little within the text itself to suggest whether these bands were made up of young men who were resident on lands owned by the families or if they are instead local mercenaries and one can do little more than speculate as to their origins or methods of payment. A closer examination of the exact terminology used, however, based on outside sources and compared to their uses in other Byzantine documents, may give us additional clues.

Although no version is entirely consistent, one of the most common terms used to refer to the groups of young men serving as troops for the various leaders in *Digenes* is ἄγουρος (pl. ἄγουροι).[72] As a Greek word, it is not particularly well-attested in other sources. According to the Liddell-Scott Greek-English Lexicon, the term means simply "youth" or "young man," though they give only one author as attesting to its use: Eustathios, Bishop of Thessaloniki.

[64] Jean-Claude Cheynet, "Bureaucracy and Aristocracies," in Elizabeth Jeffreys, ed., with John Haldon and Robin Cormack, *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 518-26.
[65] G 2.30, 3.116-26; E 600-609.
[66] For example: G 3.705-22 (a fairly detailed description of the dowry intended to go to Digenes for his marriage to the daughter of a *strategos*).
[67] Digenes shares this motif with a large number of other, medieval folk tales, particularly in Arabic. For a good overview, see Claudia Ott, "Shared Spaces: 2 Cross-border Warriors in the Arabian Folk Epic," in *Fictional Story-telling in the Eastern Mediterranean and Beyond*, ed. Caroline Cupane and Bettina Krönung, (Leiden: Brill, 2016) 285-310.
[68] G 1.50-4, 1.293-7.
[69] G 2.62-3; E150-2.
[70] George T. Dennis, ed. and trans., *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1985) 137-240.
[71] G 1.90, 4.16. There are historically accurate cities and regions named throughout most versions of *Digenes*.
[72] This is true of both the G and E versions.

This bishop, writing in the twelfth century, included the word ἄγουρος only a single time in his commentary on the works of Homer. He says that the word is analogous to the much more common word with the same meaning, ὁ κούρος. Ἄγουρος, he argues, is simply a Thracian variant.[73] Upon further examination of Byzantine texts, I have found three other instances of the word: in Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*, Constantine VII's *De Ceremoniis Aulae Byzantinae*, and the chronicle known as *Theophanes Continuatus*. In *De Ceremoniis,* we read about "βασιλικοὶ ἄγουροι" (something like "the emperor's young men"), who have a special part to play in one of the imperial ceremonies and are included alongside other groups of imperial guards.[74] In the *Chronicle*, it is used more generically to refer to an otherwise unnamed "young man."[75] Komnene uses the term in the plural to discuss "certain very brave young men" whom Alexios had with him among his other troops.[76] From these instances, we can gather that the term was indeed used rather loosely to mean, just as in the *Digenes* text and in the LSJ, a young man.[77] It is significant that there is not a single use of the word in any source (to my knowledge at least) prior to the late tenth century. Even then, its use appears to have been rather scarce. In *Digenes,* on the contrary, it is extremely common, being used dozens of times throughout, usually to refer to the men in one of the aristocrats' employ. This requires some explanation. While only a vague possibility, it is possible to propose an alternate origin to the word instead of Eustathios' Thracians. It may, in fact, be borrowed from the Arabic *'ayyār* (pl. *'ayyarūn*).

According to Claude Cahen, early Islamic authors often described groups of *fityān* ("youths") who were less peaceful and who exhibited certain characteristics "suggestive of a mob or rabble" as *'ayyārūn*.[78] These groups, which later became much more ritualized and were known among more religious circles as hotbeds of impious or immoral behavior, generally gathered in small communities and were made up of young men from various social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. They were usually quite militant and were often known to render their services as mercenaries for wealthy individuals. According to Claude Cahen, "In Baghdad, we see the *'ayyārūn* emerging in the periods when [central] authority was relaxed."[79] All of these characteristics would be quite at home in the setting in which we find the ἄγουροι in *Digenes*. One particular passage in the E version may help support this idea. Upon arriving home from a long journey, the Emir's "youngsters," described this time as "Persians and Arabs," are granted "rewards from his [the Emir's] parents-in-law" and are then "sent back to Syria."[80] Presumably, based on the context of this passage, returning to Syria meant that they were returning to the Emir's own estate. Still, since we are told here that this group of young men is both multiethnic and comes from Syria, where the brotherhoods of *'ayyārūn* eventually materialized, it is tempting to see a parallel. This is further supported by the linguistic similarity between the term *'ayyār* and ἄγουρος. It is impossible to argue that every instance of the term ἄγουρος in the *Digenes* legend is referring to these specific groups within the Arabic world, but it is not without merit to suggest some kind of connection. By the tenth century, Byzantium and

[73] Eustathios of Thessaloniki, *Commentarii ad Homeri Odysseam*, ed. G. Stallbaum, Olms, Hildesheim 1970, vol. 2, 108, line 22: Ἀχαιοὶ δὲ κούρους, Θρᾷκες δὲ ἀγούρους.
[74] Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, *De Ceremoniis*, ed. J. J. Reiske, *De ceremoniis aulae Byzantinae, Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus*, CSHB 9-11, E. Weber, Bonn 1829, 471.13.
[75] *Theophanes Continuatus,* ed. I. Bekker, *Theophanes continuatus, Ioannes Caminiata, Symeon Magister, Georgius Monachus continuatus*, CSHB 33, E. Weber, Bonn 1838, 821.11.
[76] Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, ed. D.R. Reinsch and A. Kambylis, *Annae Comnenae Alexias*, CFHB 40, W. de Gruyter, Berlin and New York 2001, I.360.12.
[77] Jeffreys translates it as "youngster" to distinguish it from νέος/νεανίας, which she then (correctly) translates as "young man."
[78] Claude Cahen, "Futuwwa," *The Encyclopedia of Islam: New Edition*, ed. Lewis, Pellat, and Schacht, (Leiden: Brill, 1965): 961. Alternate names include *ahdāth* and simply *fityān*.
[79] Cahen, "Futuwwa," p.963.
[80] E 603-5.

Islam had had centuries of contact, and in the multiethnic world of the eastern frontiers, where we can see incredible levels of cultural contact and intermingling, it would be quite easy for such a term to come into use. After all, several other Arabic terms and proper names have also made it into the *Digenes* text.[81]

Finally, as an additional piece of evidence, it is worth recalling that many of the major themes celebrated throughout the *Digenes* story are the same as those celebrated within the circles of *'ayyārūn*. Themes of love and manliness/bravery (Greek ἀνδρεῖα covers both concepts), and a passion for music, poetry, feasts, and physical beauty are strong within the *Digenes* text. These are identical to the virtues (and vices) celebrated by the brotherhoods of *'ayyārūn*.[82] Of course, the comparison is not perfect, and there are many reasons to reject a simple one to one equation of the two groups.[83] There may, however, be more than enough evidence to suggest at least some kind of relationship between the "youngsters" in *Digenes* and the *'ayyārūn* of historical Syria. If nothing else, the kind of world envisioned within *Digenes* would have been conducive to the exchange of ideas (and vocabulary) between the Byzantine and Muslim lands. This one example should be taken as just that, a single paradigm of a much more complex and colorful cosmos.

Conclusion

This study has been little more than an introduction to new methods of studying the widely read, though still only partially understood, story of *Digenes Akrites*. In fact, the methodology suggested here is beginning to make its way into recent studies of similar texts. Buket Kitapçı Bayrı has moved the field in this direction, offering a comparative perspective between the medieval Turkish *Battalname*, *Danishmendname*, and *Saltukname*, and late Byzantine *matyria*.[84] But the *Digenes* tale has largely remained outside of such conversations. The *Danishmendname* especially holds great promise if approached using the suggested methodology, though it has scarcely been approached in such a way by scholars of Byzantium. Pınar Kayaalp is an exception, as her work has focused on the similarities in each text's depiction of the "border warrior," and phenomena like legitimization of each epic's hero.[85] This article's contention, however, is that such comparisons could be both broader and deeper. Byzantine scholarship could benefit greatly from the light it may shed on the process by which central Anatolia was lost to Byzantine control in the later eleventh century or the dynamics of social and intercultural contact in otherwise poorly documented regions, especially in a comparative study with *Digenes*.

At its heart, *Digenes Akrites* is a work of fiction, but to write it off completely as a possible source for the equally enigmatic frontier region of the East is a mistake. We see in *Digenes* a frontier filled with syncretism and cultural mixing. Religion, ethnicity, or language are not immovable barriers to interactions, and, on the contrary, tend to be very fluid. It is a world in which individual valor and strategic intermarrying could lead to massive fortunes, and a tiny misstep could take it all away. It is, in fact, a frontier world in and of itself, in which the outside powers, both Muslim and Byzantine, are distant images and only occasional players. In fact, this fits the prevailing consensus among scholars of "frontiers" more broadly, who generally view such regions as important agents themselves in the creation of unique social and cultural

[81] In addition to several proper names, we see, for instance, the words *ghulām* and *amīr* used several times (G 1.32, 1.47, and elsewhere).
[82] Cahen, "Futuwwa," 961-9.
[83] For example, the fact that Digenes himself is referred to as an ἄγουρος on more than one occasion, and that the *'ayyārūn* were a largely urban phenomenon are just two of many contradictions.
[84] Buket Kitapçı Bayrı, *Warriors, Martyrs, and Dervishes: Moving Frontiers, Shifting Identities in the Land of Rome (13th-15th Centuries)*, (Leiden: Brill 2020).
[85] Pinar Kayaalp, "Frontier Warriors as Cultural Mediators: Shifting Identities of Byzantine and Turkish March Fighters as Elicited from Anatolian Epic Literature," *Mediaevistik 25*, (2012): 119-30.

conditions.[86] Modern scholars, and historians in particular, should now begin searching within *Digenes* for more than single names or historical figures, looking beneath the surface of the text for clues into the social world of the Arab-Byzantine frontiers. If we look hard enough and ask the right questions, I believe we can find within this fascinating text a veritable treasure trove of paradigms of frontier interactions.

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[86] Border and frontier studies have seen a strong growth in interest across the fields of history and literary studies. For a good introduction and description of the state of the field, see esp. Eric van der Vleuten and Torsten Feys, " Borders and Frontiers in Global and Transnational History Introduction," *Journal of Modern European History / Zeitschrift für moderne europäische Geschichte / Revue d'histoire européenne contemporaine*, Vol. 14, No. 1, (2016), 29-34, esp. 31.

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