The Byzantines and the „others“. Between transculturality and discrimination

Modern scholarship was always enormously interested in the relations of Byzantium to other states and peoples. In the last years, though, the focus moved to the attitudes and the perception of the “other” in relation to the Byzantine identity. In this process it became clear that the “others” were not only the foreigners, but also elements of the Byzantine society such as social and religious “marginal groups”.

Furthermore, concepts of confrontation, acculturation or “cultural hydraulics” have given their place to questions of the complexity of inter-or transcultural exchanges. For the Middle Ages, M. Borgolte and B. Schneidmüller have recently described this very accurately: “Today we understand these cultures (that is the cultures of the Middle Ages) not as immutable entities but we understand much more clearly the oscillating processes of infiltration, exchange, adaptation, copy, influence, rejection, symbiosis as well as discrimination.”

Abbreviations:

Urbs Captas=Urbs Capta. The Fourth Crusade and its Consequences. La IVe croisade et ses conséquences, ed. by A. Laiou (Réalités Byzantines 10), Paris 2005.


4. The concept of “cultural hydraulics” was used by P. Brown, Eastern and Western Christendom in Antiquity: a parting of the ways, in: The orthodox churches and the West, ed. D. Baker (Studies in Church History 13). Edinburgh 1976, 1–24, esp. 5: “The east tends to be treated as a distinct and enclosed reservoir of superior culture, from which the occasional stream is released, to pour down hill—by some obscure law of cultural hydraulics—to water the lower reaches of the West.”; K. N. Ciggaar, Western Travellers to Constantinople. The West and Byzantium, 962–1204: Cultural and Political Relations (The Medieval Mediterranean 10). Leiden – New York – Cologne 1996, 8.
osmosis as historical basic patterns. Without denying differences, we distinguish no longer in paratactic tidying manner between medieval Romans, Germans or Slavs, not between the unmediated world of the Jews, Christians, Muslims, or pagans. We distinguish no longer between civilized and barbarian in the sens of previous acculturation models. 6

This opinion offers useful ideas for interaction models between Byzantines and “strangers”, as well as about their depiction in the Byzantine sources. For my approach, a particularly useful concept is that of transculturality, which was coined by Fernando Ortiz in his book “Cuban Counterpoint. Tobacco and Sugar” (1940) and foremost by Wolfgang Welsch, 5 and found especially in recent years wide spread. Welsch spoke about the “external networking” of cultures, which replaces older homogenizing separatist concepts of cultures, as those formed by Hegel. „Transculturality“ for him the blurring or lifting of barriers when different cultures meet. On a macro- and micro-level the dichotomies self – foreign or internal – external do not exist anymore, since all cultures and individuals are transcultural formations. Such a cross-cultural mindset is represented by the famous mystic of the thirteenth century Mawlana Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi-e in a poem: „What is to be done, O Moslems? For I do not recognize myself/ I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Gabr, nor Moslem.../ My place is the Placeless, my trace is the Traceless.”

From the perspective of the theory applied here, there are transcultural personalities, “individuals who find ways to transcend their native cultures, in order to explore, examine and infiltrate a new, seemingly alien culture”. They undergo a process of learning new cultural behaviours. 8 If we look for such cross-cultural individuals in a Byzantine context, then we could mention Manuel Maurozomes, who after 1205 fled to his son-in-law, the Sultan of Iconium Kay-Khusraw I. Niketas Choniates argued that “he was connected with us (=the Byzantines) by birth, however by his attitude he was foreigner. Furthermore he was and showed himself to be an unrestrained enemy of his own fatherland”. 9

The concept of transculturality will enable us in the following to present some aspects of the relations between the Byzantines and the “others”–in this case the Westerners– in the Late Byzantine period (1204–1453). 10 It is a period marked by greater openness, but also attempts of clear delineations and sig-


significant social, economic and political changes. Within the study of the interaction between Westerners and Byzantines in the Late Middle Ages we concentrate on the similarities and on the transcultural personalities rather than on the separative elements. Nevertheless, the differences in the form of discrimination should not be left out since they demonstrate cultural barriers (imaginary or real).

**DISCRIMINATION**

Most people perceive their “own” culture much more clearly when they are at their limits, that means when they come into contact with other cultures and learn about other behaviours. The identity of each community is generally related to its living space. Shall those perceived as “outsiders” try to infiltrate into this space, then the community’s members may feel threatened.

In the case of Byzantines and Latins, the animosity escalated after the Schism of the two Churches (1054). In the West, Byzantium was characterised by some as “Grecia mendax”, while a group of people existed who utterly rejected Byzantium. Nevertheless, it is actually in the twelfth century that the anti-latin sentiments become stronger due to the presence of Western merchants in the Eastern Mediterranean and foremost due to the military and the ideological confrontations on the background of the Crusades. A good example for this are the so-called “Lists of the errors of the Latins”. They illuminate the efforts of the Byzantines to define not only their religious but also their cultural borders.

Religious and economic tension was followed by a military confrontation. The capture of Constantinople by the crusaders (1204) set a milestone in the history of cultural encounters between East and West. In this case the “others” intruded into a cultural space by force. They created a number of separate political and cultural entities such as the Latin empire of Constantinople and the Frankish state in Peloponnese. The memories of this Byzantine trauma were still vivid during the Union negotiations in the fourteenth century. Pope Benedikt XII (1332–1342) demanded that a Church Union had to be concluded in advance of any military support for Byzantium. Barlaam the Calabrian, the ambassador of Emperor Andronikos III Palaiologos in 1339 to Avignon, replied that:

“It is not so much difference in dogma that alienates the hearts of the Greeks from you, as the hatred that has entered their souls against the Latins, because of the many great evils that at different times the Greeks have suffered at the hands of Latins and are still suffering every day. Until this hatred has been removed from them, there cannot be union. In truth, until you have done them some very great benefit, neither will that hatred be dispelled nor will anyone dare to breathe a word to them about union. . . . Know this too, that it was not the people of Greece that sent me to seek your help and union, but the Emp-

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peror alone and secretly. Until help is sent to these parts, he cannot let his people see that he wants union with you”.16

Very soon after the capture of Constantinople in 1204, the Byzantines spoke on defensive terms for their opponents. They perceived themselves as victims, as targets of an attack against their value system and lives.17 Additionally to victimization the picture of the encirclement by the enemies was used. Theodore II (1254–1258) praised his father, the emperor John III Vatatzes, on the following grounds:

“...You have indeed with zeal and heartfelt courage wiped away the Latin injustice, the Persian oppression, the Scythian wilderness, the Bulgarian rawness and uprising, the Serbian defection, the Tartar pride, the partly Roman aversion and in a nutshell any damage which has insulted the country of Ausones [= Byzantium]. With the sword and with a heavier hand you cut off their heads, with which the tribes of Albanians, Italians, Venetians, Genoese and Longibards, Lampards, Pisans and all Latin nations together as a single (nation) have suppressed us.”18

Theodore II enlisted first the enemies of Byzantium, ascribing to them certain negative characteristics. The Muslims (=Persians) are agressiv and arrogant, the Slavic people rebellious, wild and raw. He selected for each enemy stereotypes which the Byzantines had formed on the background of their older or more recent military and political relations. Interesting is the division of the „unfair“ Latins in various „nations“. Theodore II Laskaris offers here a very impressive example of the barriers between different cultures on the base of stereotypes.19

Injustice, aggression, arrogance and avarice were typical accusations against the Latins especially since the time of the crusades.20 Anna Komnena described them as ambitious, greedy, hot headed and untrustworthy.21 Niketas Choniates22 and Eustathios of Thessaloniki23 concentrated on their character (robust, swarthy, fierce, quick to anger), their appearance (they have short hair but no beard24) and on language aspects (they do not understand Greek).

Prejudice and discrimination are not, however, one-sided. Westerners were just as active and polemical. To a large extent their stereotypes derived from ancient prejudices which considered the Byzantines,


24 MESSIS, Lectures sexuées 164–170.
the “Greek”, as perfidious, untrustworthy, not warlike enough and treacherous, but also “effeminate”. The degree of negativeness connected with Byzantium is demonstrated even in modern Western parlance, where the word “Byzantine” is connected with treachery and perfidy. Even modern technological jargon is not excluded, since with regard to multiprocessor systems one speaks of a “Byzantine fault” to define different and incorrect results, which one component delivers to others. This use of the adjective “Byzantine” is attributed to the alleged treasonous behaviour of Byzantine generals, who had submitted misleading information to the other generals of their army.

In the focus of the mutual prejudices stood above all, as mentioned, religion and language. The Byzantines considered the Latin language as not of the same quality as Greek, as it could not adequately represent the subtle ideas of philosophy and theology. But it is certain that since the seventh century the skills of the Byzantines in Latin had subsided and were limited only to individuals, who acted as interpreters. Furthermore, before the thirteenth century the group of Byzantines who were willing to accept Western features was rather small. Western influence was at that time rather rare and superficial according to A. Kazhdan. But at the end of the thirteenth and particularly in the fourteenth century the interest of Byzantine scholars for Latin rose again. With the help of teachers they learned Latin and translated texts into Greek. On the other hand, many of these scholars converted from conviction to Catholicism.

Language barriers were lifted also in the areas of Latin states but the carriers here were different. In the Frankish states many of the Westerners learned Greek since their childhood and were bilingual. Transmitters were women who took an important part in this language acquisition either as mothers or as wet-nurses.

**TOWARDS TRANSCULTURALITY?**

The aforementioned cultural boundaries are also very clear in a quotation in the historical work of Niketas Choniates. He argued that “between us and them the greatest gulf of disagreement has been fixed and we are separated in purpose and diametrically opposed, even though we are closely associated and frequently share the same dwelling”. Choniates draws a line between “them” and “us” but he admits that they interact and both may live really close to one another. With “them” he refers especially to those Westerners, who lived permanently in Constantinople and other major cities and were active in trade.

From their part, the Byzantines had not a monolithic notion of the Western nations and they distinguished between them. They differentiated between the “Frankish” warriors and the Italian “traders”.

For the warlike Franks we find positive attributes in the historiography. Rhetorical works were adressed

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27 N. Oikonomides, Diplomacy. ODB 1, 634–635 and A. Kazhdan, Interpreter. ODB 2, 1004; CIGGAAR, Western travellers 34–35.
30 S. Lock, Franks 299 on bilingualism in the Frankish states.
31 Lock, Franks 298–299.
32 Niketas Choniates, Historia (301 van Diessen); Magoulias, Annals of Niketas Choniates 97–98 and 140–141.
to Western rulers, among others, Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen in the 13th Century, the Cypriot King Hugo IV of Lusignan in the 14th century and Emperor Sigismund in the 15th century. While Latin bravery and military capabilities were judged positively up to the 12th century, from the 13th century onwards also other Western achievements became known to the Byzantine world such as the advances in science and technology. Negotiations on a Union of Churches also offered an opportunity to identify the advantages and strengths of their opponents and their own disadvantages. Theodore II noticed that in the West the philosophy, which belonged to the Greeks, had made progress and he was worried of a possible translatio studii: "I cannot exclude in any case that philosophy will leave us, because even though she belongs to the Greeks, she is disregarded by them today. She (the philosophy) will be loyal to the barbarians and bring them fame."

In the middle of the 14th century the scholar and statesman Demetrius Kydones learned Latin probably with the help of Philipp of Pera and studied Thomas Aquinas and other theologians. He rejected typical Byzantine stereotypes, which could not be sustained anymore, since the Latins were now capable of the highest intellectual achievements. His compatriots were for too long content to stick to the traditional old notion that mankind was divided into two groups: Greeks and barbarians, while the Latins were described as incapable of decent action, capable only of trade and war. It is clear that prejudice and lack of language skills had contributed to a general rejection of the Latins as barbarians. The presence of Dominicans and other orders in Byzantium, the growing interest in Latin in since Maximos Planudes and his translations of Augustine and Boethius, as well as the increasing


37 Theodoros II. Laskaris, epist. 5 (8.13–16 ed. N. FESTA, Theodori Ducae Lascaris epistulae CCXVII. Florence 1898); CIGGAAR, Western travellers 94–95; cf. the frustration of Manuel Holobolos regarding the complexity of the Latin syllogisms, BÜDEN, Strangle Them 133–157, esp. 146. Humbert of Romans argued in the 13th century that the decline of learning and science was one of the causes of the continuation of the schism, B. ROBERG, Die Union zwischen der griechischen und der lateinischen Kirche auf dem II. Konzil von Lyon (1274). Bonn 1964, 85–95 and BÜDEN, Strangle Them 136.


interaction between the two groups, particularly in the Genoese colony of Pera, initiated an intensification of cultural exchange. This interest is also connected with the so-called Palaiologan Renaissance and literate circles in Constantinople. We have to acknowledge the importance of the Union of Lyons (1274) for these cultural developments, since some more examples of transcultural personalities such as John Bekkos, Konstantinos Meliteniotes and George Metochites are attested for this period. Their openmindedness to accept another dogma implicated a confrontation with their former cultural environment. Western influences were therefore not only focused on science and language skills, but also reached the most conservative areas of Byzantine life such as faith.

The influential power of the Union can be explained due to the fact that openness often began with the division: in order to obtain arguments in a dispute with an opponent, one had to learn more about him. This was possible due to people from both sides, who were fluent in both Latin and Greek (those we have called transcultural personalities). The Dominicans learned Greek as part of their missionary work in the East and for the discussion of a Union; they translated in the thirteenth century Latin works into Greek. One of them was Guillaume Bernard de Gaillac, founder of the Dominican convent in Pera and translator of works of Thomas of Aquin in Greek. Latin knowledge brought many Byzantine scholars in the fourteenth century to the decision to convert, including Demetrios Kydones, who translated among other the “Summa Theologica”, Manuel Kalekas and Andreas Chrysoborges.

However, there are examples of Latins, especially from the second half of the 14th century, who converted to Orthodoxy. The so-called Register of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which covers the time for the 1315 to 1402, records about thirty creeds of men and women including many Latins. Some of them demonstrate knowledge of Greek, even if it is not profound.


One of the main reasons of their conversions was the marriage with an Orthodox, for which it was a necessary prerequisite according to the Byzantine canon law. Actually, many children came from legitimate or illegitimate relations between Latins (usually Venetians) and Byzantine women and were referred to as “gasmouloi”.\textsuperscript{50} Given their engagement as marines and rowers in the imperial fleet, the Byzantines commented on them mostly positive. According to George Pachyméres the gasmouloi had “the discretion and caution spirit of the Greeks combined with the ardour and pride of the Franks”.\textsuperscript{51} They combined the “positive characteristics” of both peoples.\textsuperscript{52} Diametrically different in some cases was the opinion of Western commentators, for whom the bad Byzantine qualities dominated in the gasmouloi. This negative attitude reminds us of the statements of Latin sources of that time against the “poulaines” or “pulani”, Western Europeans, who lived in the East and accepted the oriental customs.\textsuperscript{53}

A second motivation for such conversions was a material one, that is trade.\textsuperscript{54} As a Genoese merchant named John in Philadelpheia (Alasehir today in Turkey) converted, he received from the emperor tax privileges. His countrymen, however, tried repeatedly to persuade him with financial offers to return to his old faith.\textsuperscript{55}

Trading activities provided usually space for peaceful contacts,\textsuperscript{56} although they did not belong to the sphere of “high culture”.\textsuperscript{57} Niketas Choniates noticed that the Venetians who settled in Byzantium after 1082 as lodgers with Greek families and married Greek women,\textsuperscript{58} “retained only their family names and were looked upon as natives and genuine Romans”.\textsuperscript{59} As we have seen, the same author spoke in another context elsewhere about the insurmountable gap between the nations. Similar to many other Byzantines he had an ambivalent attitude towards the Latins. It is significant that whenever personal experiences are present, then we read also positive remarks about the “others”.\textsuperscript{60}

Cultural exchange and transmission of know-how was not limited to language and science such as in the cases of scholastic thought in theology, but it took place also in the economic sphere. In the field of


\textsuperscript{52} LOCK, Franks 308.


\textsuperscript{57} LOCK, Franks 273 takes this expression from Bryer’s remarks that “the contacts (before the 13th c.) were local and individual involving little of high culture. The emphasis has been placed on military, political and commercial relations, s. A. BRYER, Cultural relations between east and west in the twelfth century, in: Relations Between East and West in the Middle Ages, ed. by D. BAKER. Edinburgh 1973, 71–94.

\textsuperscript{58} LOCK, Franks 276.


\textsuperscript{60} LOCK, Franks 268.
trade both parties were very often competitors. Documents of the 14th century and the early 15th century demonstrate, however, that the Byzantines operated in synthropiai and commenda or colleganza. The changes in economic attitudes brought also social changes with it. In the second half of the 14th century an increasing engagement of the Byzantine aristocracy in trade is traceable. The aristocrats, who previously owed their power and social status to their landen property and regarded trade and commerce rather condescending for them, took part more and more in commercial and financial activities. The importance of economic interaction for cultural exchange can be seen in the formed networks. A visualization of the trade network of the Venetian Giacomo Badoer (s. fig. 1), who was active in Constantinople in the period 1436–1440, illustrates clearly the connectivity and cooperation between Byzantine and Western as well as Turkish merchants. This and all the other economic networks had without a doubt a greater social and cultural impact than we may imagine, if we take into consideration that Badoer did not belong to the biggest traders of the period.

CONCLUSION

Since the 12th century, the cultural contacts of the Byzantines to the Latins were close and intense. The greater presence of Western Europeans in the Byzantine cultural area strengthened the cultural differences, but it allowed at the same time individuals to adopt elements of a foreign culture through conversion or marriages. These individuals experienced an identity change and carried different cultural elements from two groups with themselves, thus establishing a trans-cultural existence. This phenomenon continued after the end of the Byzantine Empire in the multi-religious and multi-cultural empire of the Ottomans (see, for example, the group of “Levantines”) before the ideology of nationalism caused a sharper demarcation between ethnic groups and denominations with more drastic effects, as we ever have seen in the Middle Ages.


