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TRABZON'DA DİNİ HAYAT SEMPOZYUMU

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RELIGIOUS LIFE IN FOURTEENTH-CENTURY TRABZON

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The city of Trabzon has a glorious past: between the years 1204-1461, it was the capital of a political entity conventionally known as the Empire of Trebizond. It was founded in 1204 in conjunction with the Fourth crusade, which led to the occupation of Constantinople and the foundation of the short-lived Latin empire. The Byzantine empire's temporary loss of Constantinople and the absence of a sole Byzantine emperor led to the foundation of three 'successor states': Nicaea (Iznik), Epirus in Greece, and Trebizond, today's Trabzon. Eventually, it was the Nicaean emperor, Michael VIII Palaiologos, who conquered Constantinople in 1261 and initiated the Palaiologan period, the last centuries of the Byzantine empire. In terms of autonomy, the empire of Trebizond remained in an unusual position: it was not fully integrated in the Byzantine empire, yet it ceased to be a threat to it in 1282, when its emperor John II Komnenos married the daughter of the Byzantine emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos.

The empire of Trebizond existed until 1461, when it was conquered by Fatih Sultan Mehmet II and incorporated in the Ottoman empire. Prior to the Komnenian rule, Trebizond had belonged to the Byzantine empire, with periods of autonomous rule under the family of the Gabrades. The Trapezuntine ruling family of the Komnenoi were descendants of the Byzantine emperor Andronikos I Komnenos (r. 1183-5). Thus, the emperors were predominantly Greek-speaking, Orthodox and shared the Byzantine cultural heritage. The founding members of the family, Alexios I and David Komnenos, came to Trebizond from the court of their paternal aunt Georgian Queen Tamar. Thus, the empire also held firm connections with Georgia. However, the population was mixed: in addition to Greek-speakers, its territories hosted Laz, Latin, Armenian and Turkic inhabitants.¹ The geographical and political context of the Trapezuntine empire differed significantly from the Byzantine empire. For most of its existence, Georgia was the only Christian neighbour of Trebizond, the rest being Muslim emirates. Thus, the importance of religion to the Trapezuntine emperors merits attention. The first part of this presentation will provide an overview of religious practices in sources related to the Trapezuntine emperors. The second part of the paper will address the relations between the Trapezuntine emperor and neighbouring Muslim rulers. From my initial title, I have changed

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1 A note on terminology. In scholarship in Byzantine studies, often the words Turkish, Turkmen/Turkoman and Turkic are used almost interchangeably. Moreover, in many contexts, the terms Greek-Christian and Turkic-Muslim can be used to refer to the same entity, although evidently with different connotations. None of these terms suits the context of the Trapezuntine empire comfortably. As a compromise, in this presentation, the term Turkmen will be used for the Turkic neighbouring rulers of Trebizond, whilst acknowledging the diverse nature of the populations they ruled over. The word 'Greek' will be avoided and mainly used to refer to the language. Instead, the term Trapezuntine will be used to denote the rulers of the Trapezuntine empire and its subjects, equally diverse as the population elsewhere in the region. The terms Christian and Muslim will be used to refer to the rulers, not the entire populations.

the emphasis on the fourteenth century, which was a time of transformation in religious and diplomatic practices. Moreover, a recently completed and soon forthcoming doctoral thesis may revise some arguments that have been presented for the thirteenth century, which is why I currently advance the topic with caution.

Religious Practices in Trebizond

The empire of Trebizond belonged under the Orthodox patriarch in Constantinople, as opposed to e.g. the Bulgarian and Serbian churches that were autocephalous, that is, ruled by autonomous patriarchs independent from Constantinople. Between 1260 and 1370, the patriarchs were elected locally, whereas before and after, they were sent from Constantinople. Thus, the emperors were involved in the election process.

The metropolitan was a political as well as religious authority. The metropolitans were part of receiving foreign ambassadors, conducting coronations and imperial weddings. They also partook in plots against the emperor or supported the emperor against rebels. The relations between the metropolitan and the patriarch were sometimes strained by the Trapezuntine emperor's involvement in religious affairs, as exemplified by the bigamy of Basil I Komnenos (r. 1332-1340). The Orthodox church did not allow bigamy, and remarrying was allowed only after the death of the first spouse. Yet, in 1335, Basil I married the daughter of the Byzantine emperor Andronikos III Palaiologos and in 1339, he wed another woman, who bore him at least two sons. In a letter to the metropolitan from the late 1330s, the patriarch mentioned that during a visit to Constantinople, between 1335-9, the metropolitan had been asked about the emperor's alleged adultery and denied the claims. The patriarch expressed his indignation upon discovering that the allegations were true and the metropolitan had not only concealed the state of affairs but also failed to check it. He urged the metropolitan to immediately reinstate the emperor's first wife, under the threat of the Trapezuntine church being removed from the Constantinopolitan church through excommunication. The patriarch also wrote that he had approached the emperor Basil I directly through letters, to no avail. Thus, the metropolitan found himself under the threat of excommunication, yet powerless against the emperor's choices.

Local Religious Practices

Although the Trapezuntine church was dependent on the Constantinopolitan patriarch, its dependence on the emperor was no less significant. The local cult of St Eugenios was strongly sponsored by the imperial family. Eugenios, with his three companions Valerianos, Kanidios, and Akylas, was a martyr saint from the late Roman period.² During the early and middle Byzantine periods, his cult absorbed elements from the cults of other local and regional saints.³ From the early thirteenth century, St Eugenios featured on Trapezuntine coins along with the emperor. The monastery of St Eugenios, today's Yeni Cuma Camii, was closely associated with the ruling family. In 1340, it was used as a military base by one of the two factions of a civil war. A richly illuminated *typikon* (a liturgical calendar) from 1346 describes in detail the celebration of the feast of St Eugenios. A speech from the early fourteenth century describes that the heads of the martyrs, adorned with gold and precious stones, were kept in the monastery. During the feast of the saint, the relics were carried around the city in a solemn procession attended by the imperial family and the entire population of the city. The early fourteenth-century emperor Alexios II gained a special role in the cult of the saint, for according to a tale of the saint's miracles, the emperor discovered the saint's forgotten birthday and restored its celebration on 24 June.⁴

2 Rosenqvist, *The Hagiographic Dossier of St Eugenios of Trebizond in Codex Athous Dionysiou 154: A Critical Edition with Introduction, Translation, Commentary and Indexes*, p. 64–81.

3 See e.g. Rosenqvist, 'Local Worshipers, Imperial Patrons', p. 201.

4 Rosenqvist, *The Hagiographic Dossier of St Eugenios of Trebizond in Codex Athous Dionysiou 154: A Critical Edition with Introduction, Translation, Commentary and Indexes*, 224–6, also see discussion on p. 75–81.

The account of the miracles of St Eugenios describes the birthday vividly:

to be celebrated for the martyr. Who could give an adequate description of the magnificence of the celebration and the worship it involved, the standing service and hymn-singing throughout the night, the songs, the hymns, the resplendent lights, the manifold perfumes, the torchbearers, the vessels used as lamps, the initiators and expounders of the holy mysteries, the glass lamps and, in one Word, that whole rite of mystical initiation; further the varied table and the varieties of drink and food, the banquet guests, the golden plates, the fish dishes, the saucers, the various kinds of bottles and a cup of wine, the sweet drinks – in short, a complete spiritual dinner and a full corporeal banquet – and all the royal and lavish things that the emperor with the utmost readiness of mind had arranged to the glory of Eugenios, famous for his miracles; and those gifts that the munificent emperor generously presented to the banqueters after the spiritual feasting and psalmsinging and usual thanksgiving to God?

Yes, this great soldier and martyr of Christ who left everything on earth – parents, family, relatives, friends, wealth, glory, earthly fame, objects of silk cloth, the rich tables that wealthy people on earth enjoy, bread baked in pans and strewn with sesame, delicious pastries, honey-cakes, flesh of hares, kids, cocks and all other kinds of both poultry and cattle, as well as fish and pulse and pickles – who left all this and instead of it all chose the poverty for Christ's sake, and lived in his cave and preferred to...⁵

Of course, other religious festivals were also celebrated in Trebizond. The monastery of the Hagia Sophia, today's Ayasofia Camii, was a popular location for celebrations, such as the Feast of Transfiguration at the end of August. A fourteenth-century author recorded how he enjoyed – and had a food poisoning – at a banquet at the Hagia Sophia during the feast:

of the radiance of the divine light. Everybody assembled at the monastery of the Wisdom of the Divine Word, and as the festival was already at hand, I too joined them. After finishing the hymns which were sung throughout the night and performing the mystical and holy liturgy, we turned to banqueting.

...

able in deeds and words, and his equals. They placed a table before us on which they put luxurious heaps of food, wines with a fine bouquet and culinary delicacies – an artistry of cooks, one might have said, which made people eat willy-nilly, filling ourselves with food we became traitors of our own health. The man who was the crowning glory of our banquet was

...

Since it was fast at the time and stormy weather at sea, it was impossible to obtain sea-fish. However, any kind of salt fish imported from the land of Chazars was available. As I was eating abundantly, as I said, I was

Thus, the Trapezuntine emperors actively promoted religious festivals, those related to St Eugenios and the main festivals from the church calendar. However, the saint's support for the emperors went even deeper. During the second half of the fourteenth century, the Trapezuntine emperor Alexios III commissioned a collection of miracles by the saint. A miracle from 1223 celebrates the saint's assistance in the victory of the Trapezuntines against the attack of Melik Sultan, mentioning how the emperor prayed at the monastery of St Eugenios. Later, the author records a first-hand experience, where he was asked to participate in bringing the emperor Alexios III to the Trapezuntine throne and to overthrow his predecessor. After he hesitated, the saint appeared to him and assured him that Alexios III had his support and the coup would be successful.

Not only were the rules of various Trapezuntine emperors supported by the saints, but the emperors and saints were also portrayed in increasingly similar roles. During the early fourteenth century, the standing figures on silver coins were replaced with an equestrian saint and an equestrian emperor. Thus, both figures took similar roles and were portrayed as active,

⁵ Rosenqvist, *The Hagiographic Dossier of St Eugenios of Trebizond in Codex Athous Dionysiou 154: A Critical Edition with Introduction, Translation, Commentary and Indexes*, p. 226.

fighting heroes. The same can be observed from one of the miracle tales, which tells how the emperor Alexios II killed a dragon with his bare hands with the assistance of the saint.

Relations Between the Main Religious Communities

Religious Communities

In addition to the Orthodox majority, the empire of Trebizond hosted a number of religious communities. There was a notable Catholic presence in the city. The city of Trebizond had trading stations for both Venetian and Genoese traders. Bryer and Winfield have suggested that the house of a wealthy family was built on the site of the Venetian fortress.⁶ The Genoese fortress was the Leontokastron, the Ottoman Güzelhisar, today's Kalepark. The city also had Catholic churches near the harbour for traders.

The Trapezuntine emperors also had to consider the Catholic church in their policies. They received embassies from the pope, requesting co-operation. During the late medieval period, the Byzantine empire approached the Catholic west for practical reasons, and the theme of a church union between the Catholic and Orthodox church was under discussion on several occasions. Finally, the union was signed after the Florence council in 1437-8. Thereafter, the Catholic and Orthodox churches were technically the same, although in practice, the union was strongly resisted.

There was also an Armenian community in the city, evidenced still today by the ruins of the Kaymakli monastery. It grew after significant numbers of Armenians moved to the coast from central Anatolia. This topic has not received much scholarly attention and hence cannot be discussed further at present. There is no evidence as such of Georgian or Laz churches specifically, and most probably the Laz-speaking population frequented the main churches. There is little evidence of a Jewish community in Trebizond, but it certainly existed. This is another topic for further study. As for other religions, it is probable that representatives of other religious communities were present through trade and travel.

However, the most relevant intercommunal relations were those between Christians and Muslims. There is little evidence of mosques in the city during the Komnenian period, but they must have existed for the Turkmen population. The borders of the empire of Trebizond were fluid and the state was marked by a coexistence between its mainly Greek and Laz, Christian, settled subjects and the increasing numbers of Turkmen nomadic and settled population. Whilst the nomadic populations spent the summers on the *yayla*, upper pastures, the wintertime pasture, *kışla*, became a shared space between settled agricultural and nomadic pastoral populations. We shall next examine the coexistence of the Trapezuntine emperors and different neighbouring Muslim rulers through trade, conflict and diplomacy.

Trade

One of the main reasons behind Trapezuntine empire's accumulated wealth was its location on the commercial highway from Tabriz. The Genoese and Venetian traders flourished in the harbours of the Black Sea. Trebizond was a meeting point of these two commercial spheres and its emperors collected taxes from all the trade that took place. In return, they were charged with providing security to the traders crossing their territories. Thus, they were not only in charge of security of their own subjects, but also of the trading caravans that were a key source of their tax income.

During the Il-khanate, the trade route flourished. The weakening and gradual disintegration of the Il-khanate by the 1330s affected trade volumes but the established

⁶ Bryer suggests that there is a local tradition that the Kahyaoğlu house is located on the Venetian castle. Bryer and Winfield, *The Byzantine Monuments and Topography of the Pontos*, 1: 203.

networks stayed in place. Tabriz retained its significance as a major centre in the region until the fifteenth century.⁷

Conflict

The Trapezuntine emperors were to some extent vassals of the Il-khans, who granted them peace and protection from incursions of raiders. The weakening and disintegration of the Il-khanate brought new threats, as the protection it had provided disappeared and the Trapezuntine emperors had to answer alone for safeguarding their territories against an increasing number of neighbouring nomadic tribes that had much to gain in terms of wealth and loot by attacking Trebizond. During the early fourteenth century, Alexios II Komnenos allied with the Georgian (Samtskhe-Saatabago) ruler Beka Jaqeli and was able to push back a major incursion by Cepni Turkmen, who had killed his father. During the second quarter of the century, Trebizond faced its gravest threat from the increase in the number of external attacks and from its lack of internal organisation to resist those attacks owing to civil war.

Diplomacy

The first evidence of organised co-operation between the ruling echelon in Trebizond and neighbouring Turkmen was seen in the middle of the fourteenth century. The early Ak Koyonlu, known as the Amitiotai in a Trapezuntine source, attacked Trebizond a number of times during the second quarter of the fourteenth century. A severe attack occurred in 1340, when they burned the city. However, the attacks may not simply have been caused by enmity towards the Trapezuntine empire, but by an alliance between the Ak Koyonlu and the Scholarioi, the most influential family in Trebizond in the middle of the fourteenth century.⁸ In 1355, the Scholarioi staged a major rebellion against the Trapezuntine emperor. It is highly possible that they had support from Muslim forces, for one of their bases, Kechrina,⁹ was a small city on top of a mountain, where a Christian and Muslim population shared a common water source and co-operated in defending the location. During the same rebellion, however, the Trapezuntine emperor defeated the troops of the rebels by also using Turkmen mercenaries. Thus, both sides recruited military support from neighbouring Muslim populations.

Alliances between the Trapezuntine emperors and their neighbours were officially formed through marriages. Although it is possible that such marriages were conducted earlier, the earliest evidence of a marriage is from the rule of Alexios II, who married off his daughter to the ruler of Sinope in the early fourteenth century. In the second half of the fourteenth century, Alexios III actively practiced this policy. Even before he had marriageable daughters, he married off his sisters.¹⁰ The remaining marriage alliances were conducted between Turkmen emirs and Alexios' daughters. These alliances entailed mutual military assistance. In 1363, two of Alexios' officials, who had travelled to Constantinople, were recalled to assist the emperor's brother-in-law Kutlu Beg in a campaign. In the event of his sons-in-law entering into conflict amongst themselves, the Trapezuntine emperor did not take sides.

The Trapezuntine war tactics were similar to those of their neighbours, which enabled successful co-operation. During his rule, Alexios III campaigned – sometimes, with the support of his sons-in-law – on the yaylas, looting and killing. Especially, the co-operation between Alexios III and Kutlu Beg was successful. It is highly possible that they shared a

7 Pfeiffer and Preiser-kapeller, *Politics, Patronage, and the Transmission of Knowledge in 13th-15th Century Tabriz*.

8 Shukurov, 'Between Peace and Hostility: Trebizond and the Pontic Turkish Periphery in the Fourteenth Century.'

9 Bryer places it at today's Kalecik-Hisarüstü. Bryer and Winfield, *The Byzantine Monuments and Topography of the Pontos*, 1: 136.

10 In 1352, his sister Maria Kutlu Beg, emir of the Amitiotai, and in 1358, Theodora, the other sister of Alexios, married Haji emir, son of Bayram.

common language. Then, how different were the Trapezuntine Komnenians culturally from their neighbours?

Culture

Bearing in mind the limitations of using the term “cultural differences” in the medieval context, the coexistence in a close geographical sphere certainly brought cultural interaction on many levels. On the courtly level, habits and customs were transferred both ways through the emperor’s family and his Turkmen sons-in-law. The children of these marriages were multilingual and fully conversant with both religions. The sons-in-law with their families did state visits to the Trapezuntine emperor, such as the visit of Kutlu Beg in 1365.

Certain literary and artistic themes transcended religious and linguistic boundaries during the medieval period. The theme of dragon-killing is repeated in both Christian and Muslim lore in the middle ages.¹¹ The Hagia Sophia is an eclectic mix of styles, some typically found in mosques, such as *muqarnas*.

Science transcended religious barriers with relative ease. During the end of the thirteenth/ the beginning of the fourteenth century, the Constantinopolitan doctor Gregory Chioniadēs travelled to Tabriz via Trebizond, with the support of the Trapezuntine emperor. In Tabriz, he found out that the Persian astronomical method was more advanced than the Byzantine one, but it was only taught to Muslims. After spending a long time in Tabriz, he finally managed to get an opportunity to learn astronomy. It is possible that he converted to Islam: upon his return to Constantinople a few years later, he was accused of apostasy, to which he responded with a profession of his Christian faith. Chioniadēs translated and thus introduced the Persian astronomical method to the Byzantine empire. It was also practised in Trebizond, which was known as a prominent centre in astronomy in the early fourteenth century, according to one author, more advanced than Constantinople.

It is possible that some of the members of the Trapezuntine emperors’ court were of Turkic origin. The influential family of the Kabazitai can be seen as a Greek version of Qawasid. In 1330, a member of the emperor’s elite was called Hoca Lulu – not a typical Greek Christian name. It is even possible that Alexios III’s mother was of Turkmen origin.¹²

Conclusion

I have presented some aspects of religious life in Trabzon during the period of Komnenian rule between 1204-1461. Emphasis has been placed on the fourteenth century, which was a period of change in the practices adopted by the ruling house. We have seen that the religious administration was not separated from the emperors. Especially between 1260 and 1370 they appointed the metropolitan and his authority could be overruled by the emperor. In contrast, the metropolitans participated in political plots for or against the current ruler. The cult of

11 It should be noted how the story of the dragon-killing fits into an Eastern Anatolian literary space of dragon-slayers. Oya Pancaroglu has written about the Islamic composite saint Hizir-Ilyas, whose attributes were during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries sometimes posthumously attributed on prominent figures. For example, Melik Danishmend, Baba Ilyas and certain spiritual leaders, such as the sufi leader Elvan Celebi, were accredited with dragon-slaying. The narrative about Alexios II slaying a dragon fits into this literary world in a territory increasingly populated by Turkomans. Pancaroglu has shown that the legends of dragon-slaying are reflected through numerous objects depicting scenes of dragon-slaying in the Anatolian Islamic world. It should be remembered that in a material culture of objects from Muslim-ruled territories circulating widely in Trebizond, especially through the trade that took place through its territories, had as much of an effect on literary narratives as vice versa. The transposition of the legend from a Turkish to a Greek literary sphere testifies of the bilingual nature of the oral traditions of legends. Pancaroglu, ‘The Itinerant Dragon-Slayer : Forging Paths of Image and Identity in Medieval Anatolia.’

12 During the early years of Alexios III’s rule, she practically ruled the empire and during that time, actively promoted marriage alliances and always accompanied her son to any meetings with Turkmen leaders.

St Eugenios was actively promoted especially during the rules of Alexios II and Alexios III. Alexios III tied in the memory of his ancestors in the cult, which presented past and present emperors as heroic and supported by the saint. On the other hand, the same emperor practiced a policy of marriage alliances across religious boundaries in order to retain peaceful relations with his neighbours, which proved far more successful than any attempts to militarily fend off any incoming raids. The close co-operation between the Komnenian rulers and their Turkmen neighbours, especially with the Ak Koyonlu Turks, continued in the fifteenth century, when the Trapezuntine emperors were allies of Uzun Hasan in the events that led to the Ottoman conquest. It has been shown that the Komnenian rulers shared with their neighbours in many aspects, such as coins, architecture, literature, arts and movement of people.

To take full advantage of this opportunity to share with such a large number of specialists in religion in this region, I wanted to address some questions for future research:

- Is there any evidence of legislation between different religious communities during the period?
- Do Sufi texts from the period mention anything about Christianity and coexistence with the Trapezuntine rulers?
- Is there any evidence of continuity between local cults and later Trapezuntine religious practices, for instance, with respect to religious feasts?

Thank you for your attention.