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Change and Continuity of the Masculine Ideal in the Byzantine and Slavic Epic

This paper examines how the acculturation of civil and military conventions in later Byzantium and other Orthodox lands led to diverse normalized concepts of the ideal male figure. The material for our study is found in the Greek and Slavic versions of the Byzantine romantic epic *Digenis Akritis*, composed in the twelfth to the fifteenth century.¹ The poem’s eponymous hero, whose name means “of two origins,” is the son of a Muslim Arab Emir;² his mother is the daughter of a Greek Christian general. This romantic epic, devoted to its hero’s “warlike and amorous exploits”³ such as war games, hunting, raiding, and bride-stealing, created models for masculinity that would satisfy the socio-cultural and ideological needs of Byzantium and its neighbors. Each of its extant versions, composed in a different place and time, offers a different model.

Our study is inspired by the work of our colleagues Ravital Goldgof and Lily Shelton, whose research focused on the roles and agency of women in *Digenis*. Although gender studies in Byzantium have drawn considerable attention in recent years, masculinity studies have been scarce. One recent major contribution by Myrto Hatzaki, *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium*, has informed our work but has no direct bearing on our particular data, which consists of military and pedagogical conventions—including horsemanship, armed combat and looting, book learning, and rearing—and the expectations associated with them.

¹ Following the conventions of Goldgof and Shelton, verses from G are cited by book and line number (1.135 refers to book 1, line 135), while verses from E, which has no book divisions, are cited by line number alone. Passages from RI and RII are cited by folio number. Therefore, 31v in connection with RI refers to folio 31 verso.
³ Ibid.
Digenis is set in Anatolia before the Battle of Manzikert against the Turks in 1071. After the Byzantine loss at Manzikert, “the [Turks] met no resistance, advanced farther and farther, and began to think not just of plundering but of outright conquest.” Scholars connect the composition of Digenis in twelfth-century Constantinople, the capital of Byzantium, to the aftermath of this battle. “Noble families driven out of Central and Eastern Anatolia by the results of the Battle of Manzikert in 1071 [...] need[ed] to come to terms with the loss of their homes and the way of life which Digenis portrays so graphically.” Although the twelfth-century protograph of the romantic epic is lost, three early versions of the text are extant: the Grottaferrata, or G, the Escorial, or E, and the Slavic version.

The G version of Digenis was copied by monks at the Grottaferrata monastery south of Rome no later than the early fourteenth century. Catia Galatariotou notes that “G’s emphasis on Digenes as a scion of aristocratic families [is] crucial to the understanding of the social position and ambitions of the milieu out of which G came and which it addresses.” More precisely, according to Elizabeth Jeffreys, this version originates in thirteenth-century Terra d’Otranto in South Italy. The culture of Terra d’Otranto during this time was feudal and hierarchical, a mixture of Byzantine, Norman, and Arab cultures. The G version of Digenis, which depicts the hero’s military-aristocratic upbringing and chivalrous behavior, may reflect this mix of cultures.

Stylianos Alexiou observes that the E version’s ethos is that of “the soldier-peasant, whose abduction of and marriage to the strategos’ [general’s] daughter is symbolic of the wish of the soldier-peasant to equate himself with the military aristocracy and the powerful

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4 Beaton, 46.
5 Treadgold, 170.
6 Jeffreys, xvii.
7 Ibid., xviii.
8 Galatariotou, 51.
9 Jeffreys, xix.
landowners.” Two linguistic layers detected in this version of *Digenis* may tell us about its background and origin. Traces of Pontic Greek dialect suggest that this version took shape in the so-called Empire of Trebizond, a Byzantine successor state centered on the southern coast of the Black Sea. The Pontic background of E may help to explain some of its “Eastern” content, since Trebizond had links to Persia. Meanwhile, the scribe’s dialect appears to be Cretan, which suggests that E itself was copied in fifteenth-century Crete or, more precisely, the Venetian Duchy of Candia. The path of this version took it from Constantinople to the Black Sea fringes of the Byzantine Empire and then to the Latin Kingdom on its southern periphery, where E was copied. After a stay in Venice, it found its way to the Escorial Library in Madrid, Spain.

The Slavic version of *Digenis* most likely originated in bilingual Slavic Macedonia or Southern Serbia, which comprised the heart of Stefan Dušan’s empire. The culture of this empire emphasized the importance and authority of the church, and the region boasts a strong oral-epic tradition. According to Ihor Ševčenko, the Serbs at the time of Stefan Dušan’s reign actively imitated Byzantine culture. Dušan himself wished to usurp the Byzantine throne, assuming the title “Emperor of the Serbs and Romans” and even establishing his own patriarchate. References to such a court culture, as well as overarching themes of intense piety and oral-epic brutality, are present throughout the Slavic version of *Digenis*.

Masculinity as Presented in the Grottaferrata Text

The model of masculinity presented in the G version of *Digenis* is a military officer who possesses specific knowledge of weaponry and the ability to command troops effectively. This

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10 Galatariotou, 51.
11 See Beaton, 35.
12 See Vaillant, 228.
13 See Fine, 316.
14 See Lord, 34.
version was written in a quasi-learned milieu and probably preserves the protograph’s concern with military rank, hierarchy, and combat tactics. Descriptions of the Emir’s exploits also contain specific references to troops, tactics, locations, and former adversaries. The scene of single combat between the Emir and his future bride’s youngest brother, for instance, begins with a detailed description of the two men arming themselves and continues with a Dilemite frontiersman stating that the brother’s techniques display “experience and bravery” (G 1.159). The actual combat between the two is described vividly: “Exchanging spear-thrusts, both their weapons were broken, neither being able to overthrow the other; and drawing their swords and fighting hand to hand they hacked at each other for many hours” (G 1.176–179). Scenes in which the Emir’s son Digenis engages in armed combat evoke the same manner of description and cataloguing.

In the oral-epic context, C. M. Bowra attributes detail of this sort to the fact that “the audience knows about weapons and will listen attentively to any mention of them.” We cannot assume that the audience of the G version was predominantly male, since it contains many characteristics of the romance, a form traditionally gendered as feminine. One may argue, however, that this detailed and hierarchical system of military conventions could well condition an audience to accept it as normative and therefore construct a model of masculinity based on a military-aristocratic ethos.

Digenis’ character in G resembles that of a Victorian-era military officer: fearless, confident, well-spoken, honorable, and skilled in all aspects of warfare. The enravishment

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16 See Alexiou, 19.
17 Bowra, 191.
18 See Goldgof and Shelton, 3.
19 See James, 335.
episode is characteristic of this military-aristocratic ethos. Digenis skillfully woos the girl by playing a kithara for her and speaking to her kindly:

And tuning it and plucking it with the plectrum, he performed this very sweet tune, murmuring: “How, my most delightful girl, could you forget our new love and sleep sweetly without a care and contentedly? Rise up, my most delightful rose and perfumed apple. The morning star has risen, come, let us stroll a while” (4.430–35).

Before eloping with his bride, Digenis beseeches her father: “Give me your blessing, my lord father-in-law, and your daughter too, and give thanks to God for having such a son-in-law” (4.594–95). Believing his daughter has been kidnapped, the general and his forces attack Digenis. The hero slaughters countless soldiers but, obeying his beloved’s wishes, spares her father and brothers. Digenis’ actions are ultimately presented as chivalrous, respectful to his betrothed and her family.

In the G version, the hero’s urbane behavior can be attributed to his aristocratic upbringing, which consisted of both academic and physical education. Digenis’ education is summarized as thoroughly classical and conventional:

And so this marvelous Basil the Frontiersman from childhood was given by his father to a teacher: and after he had devoted three whole years to his lessons, through the sharpness of his mind he had acquired a mass of learning. Then on to horsemanship, and as he wanted to hunt he devoted himself with his father every day to these matters (G4.66–73).

Digenis’ three years of book learning presumably conform to the primary and early secondary curricula of Late Antiquity and Byzantium, where contracts often dictated that, for a tidy sum, a teacher would tutor an adolescent student for two or more years. Primary school developed basic literacy and numeracy, whereas the secondary grammar curriculum focused on the formal grammar of high-style writings, historical and mythological “facts,” and the basics of composition. Horsemanship and hunting are also presented as skills that every nobleman should

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20 See Marrou, 62.
acquire. When told by his father that he is too young to hunt, Digenis complains, “If I do valiant deeds after I have reached manhood, father, what benefit do I gain from that? This is what everyone does” (G4.95). Embodying the ideal of an aristocratic military officer, the chivalrous and well-educated Digenis was a model of masculinity well-suited to the multicultural, feudal society of the Terra d’Otranto.

**Masculinity as Presented in the Escorial Text**

The model of masculinity presented in the E version is a semi-divine hero whose wrath and strength recall the Old Testament God and whose power is manifest in nature. Despite its significantly shorter length, the E text shares G’s attention to military conventions, and the combat scenes in both versions are strikingly similar. References to military hierarchy and tactics are rarer in E, but it does contain detailed descriptions of weaponry and armed combat.

In the aforementioned scene of the Emir fighting his lover’s youngest brother, the G version’s descriptions of arming and skillful combat are replaced by a focus on the pathetic fallacy of nature: “From the great clashing and the cut and thrust the plains grew fearful and the mountains re-echoed, trees were uprooted and the sun was darkened” (E37–39). Such descriptions, characteristic of Eastern (i.e., Persian) romances, suggest a nearly-divine hero and may reflect cultural contacts between Trebizond and Persia. This version is, moreover, less literary than G, and likely was composed for a church-going audience familiar with Old Testament heroes such as Samson and Jonah. Its godlike model of masculinity may have been based on these Biblical figures.

In E’s enravishment scene, Digenis uses parts of a dead snake to construct a lute and (as in G) begins to sing to the girl:

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21 See Rustaveli, xix–xx.
He tightened the strings firmly and the lute sounded loudly while he sang out yet more softly: “Any one who has his love at a distance and cannot make swift journeys to her, does not travel by night, does not lose his sleep and does not long for Paradise with its sweet odours. I have my love at a distance but I make a swift journey and I cannot sleep at all because of the most beautiful girl” (E837–44).

Digenis takes the girl away after asking for her father’s blessing. The father angrily pursues him, and he responds by brutally slaying the opposing army before once again asking for a blessing. Though this sequence of events closely resembles the one in G, the question of whether Digenis’ actions constitute an elopement or an abduction is more ambiguous here. Moreover, the description of Digenis single-handedly defeating his adversaries is more graphic: “He pulled the reins and went for them and separated out one of them and struck him a blow with his sword, and split him and his horse down the middle; when the survivors saw this, they turned back” (E962–65).

Formal education (both book learning and practical learning) is less important in E. Whereas in G Digenis “devoted a whole three years to his lessons,” in E he was “brought up sweetly as is proper and fit” (E612). This line is vague: it mentions nothing specific about education, and it is not a formulaic, folkloric description of a hero’s upbringing. Following this line, however, the narrator intervenes: “Now let me tell you about his infancy. God gave him good fortune in his acts of great bravery and wherever he went he achieved feats of valour” (E619). The E version emphasizes the hero’s youthful exploits, absent of any educational context.

In lieu of passages dedicated to Digenis’ formal education, E contains a highly formulaic episode relating a series of tasks that he must carry out in order to prove his manhood. He first seeks out the Guerrillas, wishing to join them: “I am seeking them out and asking about them so
as to become a guerrilla myself, so that I too can be enrolled among the guerrillas” (E643–44).

Digenis is challenged by their leader Philopappous:

Can you take your stick to go out on guard, go without food, young man, for about fifteen days, and eat nothing, drink nothing, go without your sleep, and then roar like a lion to bring out the lions and get their hides and bring them back to me here? (E660–64).

When dared to steal a newly-wedded bride, he retorts that he could have done so as a child. Among these peasant-soldiers, endurance, might, and the ability to physically and verbally fend for oneself are valued above all else. When one is not physically fighting, he is exchanging insults:

They ate well, they drank well, they were well away with their high spirits. And then one of them said: “I can fight against fifty.” And another said in turn: “I can fight against seventy.” And another said in turn: “I can fight against two hundred” (E682–684).

Digenis refrains from joining this display of machismo but proceeds to knock down every guerrilla with his stick. Embodying the ideal traits of a hardy frontiersman, he is neither urbane nor entirely brutish. Divine aspects of the hero’s image, such as Nature’s response to his deeds, may be products of the Trapezuntine milieu, with its connections to Persian culture and literary forms, but the hero’s education in the “school of life” is likely a feature of the Cretan milieu in which E was produced.

**Masculinity as Presented in the Slavic Text**

The model of masculinity presented in the Slavic version of the epic is a hero blessed by God and capable of defeating armies without receiving a single scratch. Although Digenis is never harmed in G or E, in the Slavic version his survival is explicitly ascribed to divine protection: “No wounds will be on my body from the hand of man,” he tells his mother, “since I put my trust in the strength of God” (RII 182v). The Slavic version replaces much of the attention to hierarchy and the detailed scenes of armed combat in G (and even the abbreviated
ones in E) with oral-formulaic descriptions of fighting. The act of knocking enemies off their horses with a mace, for example, appears frequently throughout this version:

And mounting his horse he began to chase them as a good mower to mow grass: in the first mowing a thousand, in the second another thousand he conquered; in the third mowing he overtook Filipap and smote him between the shoulders with his mace and knocked him off his horse (RII 182v).

Furthermore, the Greek words for stick (rhabdos) and spear (kontarion) used in G and E are technical infantry terms. The words used in the Slavic version to describe the same weapons, rogvica and kopije are less precise (the former can be translated as “stick, club, staff, or mace”) and are not known to have referred to military arms.\(^22\)

The enravishment episode in the Slavic version significantly differs from its appearances in G and E. After wooing the girl, Digenis—accompanied by soldiers in this text, unlike in others—breaks down her castle’s gate, belligerently shouts at her father, and takes her away. Later, he returns to the castle, breaches its gates a second time, and challenges the father to battle. He then wipes out the entire army with ease, sparing only the girl’s family. This sequence inarguably depicts an abduction.\(^23\) Digenis makes no attempt at a customary elopement; he simply takes what he want and fights anyone who stands in his way.

In the Slavic version, descriptions of the hero’s education follow neither the aristocratic nor the experience-based models presented in G and E, respectively; instead, they adhere to the conventions of folk-songs. There is no mention of formalized education. The scene begins: “Glorious Devgenij began playing with a sword at the age of twelve, and at thirteen with a lance, and at fourteen he wished to take on all the beasts” (RI 32f). This passage follows a formula used to describe the infant heroes of Greek folk-songs, as in “Andronikos and His Two Sons”: “When one year old [the son] grasped a sword; when two, a lance he wielded: And ere his third year he

\(^{22}\) We thank our advisor Dr. Robert Romanchuk for providing these translations.

\(^{23}\) See Laiou.
had passed was held to be a hero.”\footnote{Garnett, 231.} Moreover, if in G the hero complains that he has no opportunity to put his aristocratic education to use, in the Slavic he possesses no sense of elite privilege but, rather, the certainty of divine protection. When Digenis begs to go hunting, his father responds, “I’m afraid of wearing you, a mere youth, out!” The hero retorts, “You can’t frighten me with that, father, as I put my hopes in God the Creator that hunting would be no labor but a great enjoyment” (RI 31f).

On his first hunt, Digenis kills every beast he encounters with superhuman strength, ripping them apart with his bare hands. This Digenis transcends the world of law and contract yet is excessively pious. The motif of divine protection associated with this hero reflects the prominent role that the church played in late medieval Serbia, while other aspects of his character, such as his physical strength and brutality, can be attributed to the living oral-epic Slavic tradition of the Balkans.\footnote{See Fine, 316.}

**Conclusion**

Each of the extant versions of *Digenis* provides a different ideal model of heroic masculinity. These models vary based on the regions and cultures from which each version originates. In the G version, the hero is presented as an urbane military officer who received a formal, military-aristocratic education and upbringing. The E version presents a rugged frontiersman who may have received some formal education but who acquired most of his learning in the “school of life” by joining the guerrillas. The Slavic version depicts a brutish yet pious hero whose education, which consisted of wielding weapons and slaying beasts, is presented formulaically. Any or none of these features may originate in the non-extant
protograph, but we cannot know for certain. What we can say, though, is that each version created a unique model of masculinity appropriate for its milieu.

Further research through comparative studies of other regional writings and folk songs could verify our findings. For now, we can hope that our findings open new avenues of Byzantine masculinity studies. In her groundbreaking book, Myrto Hatzaki concludes that the beautiful ideal of a Byzantine soldier is a wounded soldier. Yet Digenis is never wounded—a detail made explicit in the Slavic version. The beautiful unwounded body might be connected to icons of Orthodox saints in Byzantium, whose bodies are portrayed as models of true perfection in their artistic representations.
Works Cited


