When Homer met Phantasia:
Fiction, epic poetry and entertainment literature in Byzantium

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BYZANTINE READERS were keen on novels. They avidly read, copied and commented on ancient fiction, despite the chronological and ideological distance that separated them from the ancient novels. They valued both 'erotic' and 'science fiction' novels, and did not despise pseudo-historical narratives either. Heliodorus, author of the *Ethiopian Story*, an adventurous love story revolving around a white girl born to black parents, was incessantly read (and even allegorised) from the 5th to the 14th century.[1] In the 9th century the patriarch Photios, presenting and discussing a number of texts from his library, summarised a (now lost) novel by Antonius Diogenes entitled *The Wonders beyond Thule* and dating to the 1st century CE. The story, a sort of Graeco-Roman version of *Gulliver's Travels*, recounted the protagonists' incredible wanderings, which extended as far as the mythical northern island of Thule.[2] The *Alexander Romance*, moreover, narrating a mythologised and often extravagant version of the life of Alexander the Great, was immensely popular all across the Empire (Figure 1). Beside securing the survival of the genre, such an appreciative attitude nourished an awareness of the distinctive qualities defining fictional narration. In the 12th century, admiration for ancient models eventually developed into a more creative approach to reading and writing: this led to the production of a new set of novels addressing a learned audience. Authors such as Theodore Prodromos (*Rodanthe and Dosikles*), Niketas Eugenianos (*Drosilla and Charikles*), Eumathius Makrembolites (*Hysmine and Hysminias*), Constantine Manasses (*Aristander and Callithea*) re-staged old-fashioned 'boy-meets-girl' plots and pan-Mediterranean settings, depicting a long-lost classical past, complete with pagan gods and ancient mythology.

I shall not go so far as to argue that the Byzantines developed a general theory of fiction. Even today, there is no such a thing. Nonetheless, many aspects of our contemporary debate were already there. The active production of fictional love narratives in the 12th century is just the final outcome of a long-term process which began around the 9th century and reshaped the idea of cultural enjoyment, literary creation and authorial authority. After all, as has been said, 'there can hardly be a more important question about a piece of writing or speech than this: Is it fiction or nonfiction?'[3]

In what follows, I first trace a general portrait of the Byzantine fiction-reader. I then single out the definitional criteria of fiction in Byzantium, starting from the very language of our narratives. Next, I shall clarify how the Byzantines related themselves to non-actual realities, looking at how they conceptualised the fantasy world of the novels. Finally, I explore how the increasing awareness of fiction affected the construction of a literary past.

'Tell me a story and I will believe it': discovering the greedy Byzantine reader

Like any communicative act, fiction-making is designed to fulfil specific intentions. The nature of such 'fictive intentions' has been widely discussed, so I limit myself to making a few points. Fictional communication engages reader and writer in a shared game. In order to enter the game, the reader must adopt an attitude of make-believe, as if he were subscribing to a sort of preliminary contract with the writer. In ancient fiction, such a 'contract' often takes the form of a frame enclosing the main plot and suggesting, in various ways, what attitude the reader should take. Whatever the form, such frames rest on the assumption that the reader is desperately curious to know the story, no matter how incredible it may be: desire for pleasure and entertainment establish a form of complicity between reader and writer. The attitudes of Byzantine readers were subject to historical change, and yet these three key concepts remained crucial, both in a negative and in a positive way. In addressing the myths and fictions of the historian Herodotus, for instance, Photios described how their sweetness 'flowed' into the soul of the reader.[4] The same sweetness he ascribed to the unexpected twists in Heliodorus' plot. *Elpis*, 'hope', was Photios' word for what we would call 'readers' expectations'.[5] Photios, however, disapproved of literary pleasure devoid of more serious intent, and he stressed that 'sweet mythological fictions' disrupted the correct consumption of Herodotus' history.

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[1] Heliodorus' actual dates are uncertain: it has been suggested either the 3rd or the 4th century CE.
[2] Cod. 166, 109a-112a Henry.
[3] Gregory Currie, *The nature of fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 1.
[4] Cod. 60, 19b, 20 Henry.
[5] Cod. 73, 50a, 9-11 Henry. Photios' judgment relies on the rhetorical theory of Hermogenes (*On Style* II 4, pp. 330-331 Rabe).

Figure 1. *Illumination from the manuscript that contains the only fully illustrated copy of the Greek Alexander Romance (Venice Hellenic Institute Gr. 5, folio 16v). The Greek caption at the top reads: 'Philip [of Macedon] leaves for Delphi to receive an oracle concerning who will rule after him.' Delphi's sacred (pagan) space is epitomised by the architectural structure on the right, complete with naked and demon-like figures (representing statues of the gods). The production of the manuscript has been connected to Alexios III Comnenos (1349-1390). The Turkish notes on the left testify to the life of the manuscript after the fall of Constantinople.*

A clearer statement is to be found, at a later time, in Psellos' essay on Heliodorus and Achilles Tatius, dating to the 11th century. Psellos resorts to a peculiar expression to describe the romance reader, namely *lichnos*, 'greedy for food', a word poised between eagerness, desire and curiosity.[6] We may well affirm that one word says more than a thousand. Leafing through our sources, we understand that a 'greedy listener' was a person willing to be enthralled by the magic of words and enchanted by the twists of the plot.

Photios seemed to distinguish the striving for knowledge from mere greedy curiosity.[7] Psellos, by contrast, is not particularly hostile to this kind of 'greed', nor was Tzetzes, a learned intellectual and commentator living during the 12th century. Tzetzes compiled a pagan *Theogony* and dedicated it to Irene, daughter-in-law of the emperor John II (1087-1143): to be sure, hardly anything could be more fictional. In the opening lines, Tzetzes addressed his dedicatee as 'someone who cannot get enough of speeches', thus revealing the attitude he expected from Irene. Twelfth-century Byzantine romances also valorise 'greed': eagerness characterised both the heroes and the readers.[8] Take for example the novel by Makrembolites, a passionate and occasionally humorous love story featuring shipwrecks, pirates and human sacrifices: interestingly, some manuscripts come with introductory poems, and in one of them the readers are explicitly invited to 'watch' the story and share the main characters' bitter-sweet agony.[9] Empathy was indeed the main goal of Makrembolites' story-telling.[10]

Feeling the story: a matter of style

Reading a novel was thus equated to watching its story-line, as if it were developing in front of the very eyes of the reader, and vividness was achieved through a characteristic stylistic texture. In modern debates about fiction, the crucial question concerning language and fiction is formulated in very simple terms: does the verbal structure of a work determine its fictional status? For a Byzantine reader the answer would have been a very clear-cut 'Yes'.

Byzantine culture was shaped by rhetoric: as in late antique culture, 'the closest ancient category to our notion of fiction that is to be found in the surviving sources is the rhetoricians' *plasmata*'.[11] *Plasma* was the label for a particular

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[6] *Essay on Heliodorus and Achilles Tatius*, p. 93, 33 Dick.

[7] Photios, *Amphilochia* 36, 18-20 Laourdas-Westerink.

[8] *Lichnos* describes the lover's desiring gaze in Theodore Prodromos II 182; Niketas Eugenianos I 243.

[9] See vv. 20-25, p. XXIV Marcovich. The earliest manuscripts bequeathing these poems are Par. Gr. 2915 (dated to 1364) and Par. Gr. 2914 (15th century).

[10] XI 23.

[11] *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Burlington-Furnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 167.

kind of narrative part in a speech. Unlike myths or fables, *plasmata* were seen as plausible, if factually untrue, speech acts, insofar as their single components were based upon reality. However, what made a narrative 'likely' was a special stylistic quality resulting in vividness and eliciting emotional involvement from the reader. Involvement was often secured through a subjective perspective (i.e. a first person narrative), while vividness was deemed to help the reader visualise the action. Needless to say, such a style was also quintessentially 'dramatic' in nature, and *dramata* was the most common definition for fictional narrative.[12] The pathetic overtones were also enhanced by the new verse form adopted by Byzantine novelists – with the exception of Eumathius Makrembolites who remained faithful to prose. Such novels were also, most likely, orally performed during literary gatherings: a fact that fully accounts for Psellos' mention of a 'greedy audience'.

Reviewing the novel of Heliodorus and the pseudo-historical works of Ctesias (5th-4th century BCE), Photios repeatedly points to *diaskeue*, a term that could be translated as 'elaboration'.[13] The word refers both to structure (our 'plot') and style (what we would call a vibrant and pathetic elocution); in rhetorical treatises, *diaskeue* was explicitly connected to *plasmata*.[14]

Even more importantly, *diaskeue* is at the basis of Photios' distinction between fictional and non-fictional narratives. Non-fictional narrations (be they historical-chronographic or hagiographic) were seen as a snapshot of reality, whereby the written text was supposed to adhere to the underlying reality. To use modern terminology, historical texts were deemed to be descriptive rather than representative. In contrast fiction-readers were supposed to *feel* the story, to *envisage* it, thanks to an elaborated and pathetic *diaskeue*.

'Imagine there's a girl': how to visualise Byzantine fiction

The notion of representation brings in another crucial feature of Byzantine fiction, namely *phantasia*, or imagination. Here some caution is needed. Byzantine *phantasia* had very little in common with 'creative' imagination as we intend it. *Phantasia* was mainly deemed to organise visual stimuli, by storing them into memory. Accordingly, *phantasia* was understood as an evocative power, bringing emotions to life, triggering recollections and retrieving the stories associated with the represented subjects. The keyword was 'to recall', not 'to create'. Nonetheless, the relevance to fictional discourse emerges quite clearly. *Phantasia* was construed as a bridging power, operating between unrelated realities. It required difference: in order effectively to work, it called for gaps to be filled and for extremes to be balanced. *Diaskeue* was expected to create precisely this kind of gap, both in terms of arrangement (the

writer disengaged the story line from the linearity of the historical events, or even created an entirely fictional plot) and emotional content (vibrant descriptions call for a strong psychological response).

The alliance between reader and writer was built on such a psychological substratum. *Phantasia* also played a relevant role in the semantic field of desire. From Graeco-Roman times, longing and visualising were viewed as inter-connected notions. John of Damascus, in the first half of the 8th century, had provided a systematic account of the link between desire/passions and visual imagination, thus creating an anthropological model that proved very influential in Byzantium.[15]

Byzantine readers desired to be amazed. In the erotic novels, both ancient and Byzantine, the heroine was always endowed with heavenly, shining beauty. Whoever came across her was left awestruck. She – literally – embodied the visual power of novelistic writing. The reactions of the onlookers epitomised the readers' desiring gaze. Heliodorus' story circulated in Byzantium under the title of *Charikleia*, i.e. the name of the heroine. The wonder elicited by 'Charikleia' – both as a character and as a book – or by 'Hysmine' was exactly the emotion Byzantine readers sought in Heliodorus' twisted plot or Makrembolites' barely credible story. *Phantasia* enabled them to desire, visualise, and eventually feel the novel.

Hybrids and imaginary worlds

The construction of unreal worlds is slippery ground. Fictional realities are both fascinating and confusing. In modern times, Goethe resorted to the mythical image of a composite beast, the tragelaph (half goat and half stag), to describe the mixed feelings aroused by non-actual worlds. Such a metaphor expressed 'the kind of vertigo that usually overcomes someone actually confronted with something totally incongruous and naturally impossible'.[16] In-triguingly, the Byzantines were after the very same image.

In order to illustrate the problem of non-referential objects, John of Damascus resorted to hybrids such as the hippocentaur or, more typically, the tragelaph. Such monsters represented a logical challenge, insofar as their components were real. As was the case with *plasmata*, it took no effort to visualise them, although they were of course quintessentially fictional. According to the ancient (Aristotelian) tradition, such imaginary creatures were seen as a product of *phantasia*. John of Damascus, on the contrary, left the imaginative power on the background, pointing instead to discursive reason.[17] Such a choice was ideologically motivated. During the years of the iconoclastic struggle (730-787; 814-842), when the images of Christ and the saints were systematically destroyed, non-referential thoughts were a risky topic. Hippocentaurs, sirens, goat-stags could be labelled as idols, devoid of any substance. *Phantasia*

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[12] See for instance Photios, *Library* 87, 66a, 27 Henry; Eumathius Makrembolites labels his own story as a *drama* and the same term features in the title povided by ms. Par. Gr. 2915 (p. 152, 12-13).

[13] Cod. 72, 45a, 12-14 (Ctesias); 87, 66a, 25 (Achilles Tatius, 2nd century CE); 166, 109a, 12 Henry (Antonius Diogenes).

[14] Ps. Hermogenes, *Invention* III 15, pp. 166-170 Rabe.

[15] *Images* I 11, 10–21 (III 85 Kotter); II 5, 5–14 (III 72 Kotter); *Exposition of*

the Orthodox Faith II 22; 36, 9-38 (II 88–89 Kotter).

[16] Review of Anton Ritter von Klein, 'Athenor, ein Gedicht in sechzehn Gesängen', *Jenaische Allgemeine Literaturzeitung*, 38 (14 February 1805), col. 304 (translation in Annette Richards, *C.P.E. Bach Studies* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], p. 27).

[17] *Philosophical Chapters* 65, 84-97 (I 135 Kotter).

would have been undermined by an explicit connection to unsubstantial thoughts. Idol worship was the most common allegation against the supporters of holy images. The latter, however, believed that icons were a sort of window to holiness, which is why they felt the need to preserve *phantasia* as a space in-between corporeality and mental abstraction. That also explains why non-referential imagination is hardly mentioned before the 10th century. However, such theoretical concerns seemed to fade away after the end of the iconoclastic struggle. *Phantasia* loomed large in the works of philosophers discussing fictional thoughts as well as their logical and psychological nature.[18] In the same period, the Byzantines developed an increasing awareness with regard to literary fiction as well as a new kind of 'profane aesthetic' in the visual arts. Sphinxes, hippocentaurs, two-bodied lions, sirens, birds with human heads and so forth suddenly materialised on capitals, manuscripts, caskets, tapestries, vessels. They became common sights in the everyday life of Byzantine elites.

Re-imagining the past

It is time now to tackle our last question: how did the 'new fictional wave' affect the construction of the literary past? A vivid answer is provided in the 12th century – i.e. during the Byzantine 'revival' of the novel – by Eustathius, the author of an important commentary on the *Odyssey*. In the prologue, Eustathius praises Homer by stressing, among other things, his ability to describe events and arrange the plot (*diaskeuasai*).[19] Under the pretext of defending him from allegations of plagiarism, Eustathius indulges in a peculiar anecdote. According to a certain Naukrates, Eustathius reports, the true author of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was a certain Phantasia, a girl from Memphis, Egypt. Homer, later on, reshaped the plot, drawing on scrolls deposited by Phantasia in the temple of Hephaestus. This short story epitomises all the elements inherent to fictionality:[20] pleasure (arising from the *diaskeue*, Homer's rearrangement of the plot), vividness and imagination (embodied by the supposed author of the 'holy book-rolls'), preliminary alliance between reader and writer (pseudo-documentarism).

By reporting this anecdote, Eustathius *seems* to point to a first-hand account, but in fact he cunningly underscores the imaginative character of the poems, since lady Phantasia could not possibly be an actual eyewitness. As readers, we

are supposed to delve into a long commentary on the *Odyssey*, a poem that, for large portions, presents the hero himself – the archetype of the manipulative narrator – as its only witness. Eustathius tries to by-pass the problem by labelling Homer's Egyptian Muse as a 'seer of wisdom'; yet, in so doing, he ends up undermining her reliability. Eustathius wisely stresses the twisted subtlety of the poem: ostensibly a plain text, the *Odyssey* proves unexpectedly profound and complex,[21] deploying the kind of fictional strategy that came to be associated with delight and amazement. In the age of the novelistic revival even the Homeric poems could be read as fictional, entertaining literature, and not only as educational, exemplary texts.

Commentators are of course authors in their own right. By launching his commentary, Eustathius tries to create his own bond with his audience. Right at the beginning of his commentary on the *Iliad* he describes his own audience as made up of young people, eager to gain knowledge and ready to start a sort of 'textual journey'. At the same time he depicts the audience of the poems as 'greedy listeners' (*lichnos akoen*), striving both for knowledge and amazement.[22] Eustathius envisages a readership impatient to decode the narrative tricks of the poems, seeking the pleasure of both surprise and recognition.

To sum up, fiction in Byzantium was consumed by a culturally-aware readership, one that aimed at being entertained and valued the artifices of fantasy-worlds and trickster-narrators. Such an attitude partially affected the way canonical works – such as the Homeric poems – were approached and enjoyed. It also reshaped the way commentators engaged with their texts, providing a new perspective from which to look at many old lines. In the end, interpreting a poem proved to be as challenging as chasing a lovely girl, either literary or real.

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[18] See e.g. Psellos, *Opuscula* 13, p. 66, 8-16 O'Meara.
[19] *Commentary on the Odyssey* I 2, 23 Stallbaum.
[20] *Commentary on the Odyssey* I 2, 24-29 Stallbaum. The anecdote probably derives by the lost pseudo-historical work compiled by Ptolemaeus Chennos

and summarised by Photios (the tale about Homer and Phantasia in his *Library* cod. 190,151a, 38-b, 5 Henry).
[21] I 1, 38-41 Stallbaum.
[22] *Commentary on the Iliad*, I 3, 5-8; I 11, 27-31 Van der Valk.