

# Byzantium and Asia. An Attempt at Reconceptualisation

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**Abstract** Thanks to the contribution of many generations of scholars, Byzantium is now considered as one of the major pivots of Western medieval civilisation. Yet, Archaic and Classical Antiquity, as well as the Hellenistic and Roman epochs absorbed a great deal of 'Asian' traditions, which established an indissoluble bond between Byzantium and the Perso-Semitic East and Scythian North. The Byzantines accumulated in themselves much of the 'Asian' in the modern sense of the term. My aim in this paper is to outline and to reappraise those multifaceted connections that continued to link medieval Hellenism with the Persian, Arabic, and Turkic East.

**Keywords** Byzantium. Asia. Byzantine identity. Persian. Arabic. Turkish.

**Summary** 1 A Glance at Historiography. – 2 On New Conceptualising Trends. – 3 The Byzantine Knowledge of Asia. – 4 Some Enigmatic Phenomena. – 5 Byzantine Cultural Memory. – 6 Persia in Cultural Memory. – 7 Persia in Byzantine Religiosity. – 8 The Holy Persians. – 9 Conclusion.




Edizioni  
Ca' Foscari

**The 24th International Congress of Byzantine Studies 1 | 1**

ISBN [ebook] 978-88-6969-590-2

**Peer review | Open access**

Submitted 2021-11-02 | Accepted 2022-05-12 | Published 2022-08-22

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DOI 10.30687/978-88-6969-590-2/026

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## 1 A Glance at Historiography

I would like to begin with some historiographic and even historiographic considerations and briefly outline how the idea of the Asian identity of Byzantine civilisation developed in Western European thought.

The beginning of the typological conceptualisation of Byzantium in the context of world history has to be sought in the Middle Ages. Basically, initially there were two aspects in the typological appraisal of Byzantium: a confessional one with social implications, and a political one with social and cultural implications. The western religious discourse regarded Byzantium as a realm of 'Eastern Christianity', which was different from and even hostile to the true Christianity of the Roman Church. This confessional typology of Byzantium is found not only in intra-Christian polemics, but also in Renaissance humanist thought as, for instance, in Francesco Petrarca's (1304-74) *Rerum senilium libri* (Petrarca, *Rerum Senilium libri* 7.1 [ed. Fracasetti 1892, 1: 423-5]).

The second aspect of political, social and cultural otherness of Byzantium as an Asian phenomenon was actualised by Enlightenment thinkers, whose ideas were embodied in particular in the influential studies of Edward Gibbon (1737-94) in his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and especially of Marquis de Condorcet (1743-94) in his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique* (Gibbon 1776-88; de Condorcet 1794). Gibbon and de Condorcet problematised, conceptualised and detailed the ideas expressed in the Enlightenment tradition, first of all in Voltaire's and Montesquieu's writings. The Enlightenment, rethinking the traditional religious thesis in sociological terms, formulated the following important points: Byzantium represented an exceedingly religious society with a despotic political system; religiosity and despotism resulted in the formation of a theocratic Caesaropapist regime of an Asian type, which lacked civil liberties and a clear division between the spiritual and the secular. In the West, the struggle between secularism and theocracy led to the victory of secular forces, and consequently, to the flourishing of urban life and cultural and moral revival. Contrarily, in Byzantium, Oriental despotism and Caesaropapism prevented the success of secular forces and challenged the ideas of freedom, equality, and social justice, thus excluding Byzantium from human progress. The quest for social progress is inherent to the West, stagnation and gradual decay are inherent to the East.

These two fundamental ideas of specific Byzantine theocracy and despotism of an Asian type were in the core of subsequent attempts

at a conceptual and typological definition of the Byzantine phenomenon throughout the nineteenth century and even later. Some scholars of the nineteenth century sought for additional arguments to substantiate the Asian identity of Byzantium. It is sufficient here to refer to probably the most notorious conception, belonging to Jacob Philipp Fallmerayer (1790-1861), who elaborated upon demographic and ethnic aspects. According to Fallmerayer, the migration and settling of the Slavs and others in the Balkans led to racial discontinuity in the former Greek lands and, therefore, Byzantium had no direct historical link with the Greco-Roman world. The traditions of Greece and Rome were preserved only in the West, while barbarised Byzantium became a part of the East, the realm of stagnation and despotism (Fallmerayer 1830; 1845). In this way, Fallmerayer tried to solve the logical paradox of the previous tradition: although formally the ethnical background of Byzantium was allegedly Greek, it was alien to the sense of freedom of the ancient Greeks.

The highest point in the evolution of the traditional typology of Byzantium was Marxism. In particular, in July 1853 Karl Marx argued that Constantinople was the Rome of the East; under the emperors of Constantinople, Western civilisation amalgamated with Eastern barbarism; the empire of Constantinople was a theocratic state and was alien to European progress; Byzantinism was opposed to Western civilisation; and finally, Byzantium was a demonic Eastern power (Marx 1975-2004, 12: 231).

Later on, Marxism put forward the idea of the “asiatische Produktionsweise”, a specific economic and social regime characterised by tributary economy, by an utterly centralised state (that is, ‘Asian despotism’), by the emperor’s absolute economic and political power, and the like (cf. Krader 1975). Such a mode of production was inherent to Asian societies, including Byzantium, and was alien to the European West. The evolution of the Marxist interpretation of Byzantium was quite complex, involved many authors and publications, and deserves a separate lengthy study. Here I limit myself to the reference to Alexander Kazhdan (1922-97), who was the first who formulated a holistic Marxist conception of Byzantium based on original sources, which became a standard one in Soviet Byzantine studies. Kazhdan developed it in the course of the 1950s in his two books and in a series of articles (Kazhdan 1952; 1960).

## **2 On New Conceptualising Trends**

The traditional Western European ideas of Asian despotism, theocracy, and unfreedom as the key features of Byzantine civilisation still circulate in the public mind. However, after World War II, the dominant trend in postwar Byzantine studies was different and it was

not Marxist at all. Due to the contribution of several generations of scholars in the West and in the former Socialist East, Byzantium has gradually shifted from the marginal status of an extremely 'Orientalised' space to a central position as one of the major pivots in the evolution of Western European civilisation. Byzantine theology, science, state and church organisation and symbolism, art and material culture, economic and trade techniques, standards of life and habits, in this or that measure, influenced the West and had an important role in shaping its future. One may also mention the now commonly acknowledged role of Byzantium as a transmitter of the pre-Christian Greek and Roman cultural legacy to the modern world (see, for instance Kolovou 2012). This new image of Byzantium as a major *Kulturträger* for Europe, which has fully formed during the last decades, is commonly accepted among professional historians of Byzantium and is successfully making its way into the community of professional Medievalists. As a result, the thesis of the 'Asian' identity of Byzantium withdraws into the shadows and now seems to be quite dubious and even misleading and untrue.

### 3 The Byzantine Knowledge of Asia

However, having thus dismissed traditional Western accusations of despotism, total unfreedom and stagnation as irrelevant, if we reflect on the relationship between the 'Byzantine' and the 'Asian' in modern scholarly contexts, the results may seem quite ambiguous and even surprising. It may seem that the Byzantines held in themselves much of the 'Asian', although not in the sense formulated in the earlier Western European tradition, including social Marxism.

The study of Asian elements in Greco-Roman Late Antiquity has an extremely rich tradition starting at least with the seminal works of Franz Cumont (1868-1947; see, for instance, Cumont 1906; Bidez, Cumont 1938). Archaic and classical Antiquity, the Hellenistic and Roman epochs absorbed a great deal of 'Asian' traditions, which established an indissoluble bond between Greco-Roman culture and Egyptian, Persian and Semitic Orient. It is a commonplace today to talk about a Late Antique 'Orientalism'. As Rolf Michael Schneider uncompromisingly put it:

The preoccupation of Rome with the Orient was obsessive - and as such - a powerful element in the cultural process of shaping and re-shaping Roman identity throughout imperial times. (Schneider 2006, 241)

However, one may wonder: What about Byzantium? Did Byzantium inherit this 'obsession' from imperial Rome? These questions are es-

pecially appropriate for post-seventh-century Byzantium, after the Muslim conquests that drastically changed the territorial and demographic configurations of the empire and triggered profound changes in all spheres of Byzantine life. What do we know about the presence of Asia in the intellectual and social life of Byzantium? I do not mean the external political and economic interrelations between Byzantium and Asian powers, but rather the presence of the Asian inside Byzantine culture and society. In fact, we know quite a lot, so much so that it is not easy to summarise it in a concise way.

Firstly, Byzantine intellectuals, since early times, knew surprisingly much about the religion of neighbouring Asians, that is Islam (cf. Shukurov 2015). An impressive corpus of Byzantine polemical literature concerning Islam developed over the centuries. Starting with John of Damascus (d. 749) or even earlier, the Byzantines expounded on the Islamic conceptions of God, the Holy Scripture, Christology, Mariology, Islamic attitudes toward the Christian doctrine of Trinity, as well as Islamic notions of prophetology and eschatology, and Muslim ritual and habits. The Byzantine knowledge about Islam, in particular, relied on the direct access to Islamic sources: a Greek translation of the Koran, for instance, circulated from the ninth century at the latest.

The Byzantines were well aware of the cultural achievements of their Asian neighbours. The most impressive contribution to Byzantine culture was made by the Asian – that is, Arabic and Persian – scientific tradition. The massive corpus of Byzantine scientific and occult works, from the tenth century onwards, made extensive use of information derived from the Orient. Byzantine treatises on mathematical astronomy, medicine, and mathematics included original compilations drawing on Islamic scientific knowledge through the intermediary of Syriac or Latin, or directly from Arabic and Persian works. Works on the occult sciences, such as dream interpretation, predictive astrology, alchemy, and geomancy likewise drew on the Arabic and Persian tradition translated into Greek. The number of translations from Arabic and Persian increased in the course of time from the tenth to the fifteenth century.

Byzantine fiction literature adopted relatively little from the Orient: solely *Stephanites and Ichneutes* was in all probability translated into Greek directly from Arabic by the famous Symeon Seth at the request of Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1118). Two other important fiction works of Oriental origin – *Barlaam and Josaphat* and *The Book of Syntipas* – were borrowed from Georgian and Syriac traditions respectively (Georgian by Euthymios Hagioreites; Syriac by Michael Andreopoulos from Melitene). Nonetheless, in both *Barlaam and Josaphat* and *The Book of Syntipas*, the Oriental flavour is consciously preserved in the key characters of the narration and in the spatial localisation.

The range of knowledge of the Byzantines about non-Christian Asian neighbours was exceptionally wide. The textual tradition (historiography, political geography, hagiography etc.) of the Byzantines accumulated profound factual information on their Muslim adversaries.

This knowledge about the Asian world is reflected in the dozens of technical terms from the social and political life of the Muslim world, such as ἀμῆρᾶς (amīr) and ἀμῆρεύω (to rule as amīr), μασγίδιον (masjid, mosque), σουλτάν (sulṭān), μουσούριον (manshūr, royal diploma), χαράτζιον (kharāj, land-tax), χότζιας (kh<sup>w</sup>āja/hoca, lord, teacher), χαζηνᾶς (khazīna, treasury) etc., as well as hundreds of names of Muslim historical figures: religious leaders, rulers, commanders, administrators etc.

The influx of knowledge about Asia was facilitated by some Byzantine political and social features. Traditionally, Byzantium was open and accessible for foreigners and one may speak of the 'Byzantine Arabs', 'Byzantine Syrians', 'Byzantine Armenians', 'Byzantine Turks', who migrated to the empire for different reasons throughout Byzantine history. These foreigners, being easily naturalised in Byzantium, often acted as transmitters of Asian information and information about Asia to the Byzantine cultural space.

#### 4 Some Enigmatic Phenomena

Asian elements in the cultural history of Byzantium are many and diverse and most of them can be satisfactorily understood and interpreted from what we know about how Byzantine society and culture did function (see, for instance, Shukurov 2016). However, there are some enigmatic phenomena in Byzantine-Asian relations, which evade simple explanation and puzzle modern scholars, thus reflecting the insufficiency of our knowledge about Byzantine civilisation. I will limit myself with two instances of such enigmatic phenomena from different times and different milieus of Byzantine life.

My first example concerns the rules for hiring officials in the Byzantine administration. In the eleventh-century seal of *vestarches* Muḥammad Abū al-Naṣr al-Ṣāliḥī, the first name of its owner - Muḥammad -vis quite unprecedented, because it could only belong to a Muslim (Dumbarton Oaks, no. BZS.1955.1.4570; Jordanov 2003-09, no. 515). It is impossible to imagine that an Arabic-speaking Christian would have had the name of the Muslim prophet, and that a Muslim who converted to Christianity would have not changed the name 'Muḥammad' to any Christian name at baptism.

Consequently, Muḥammad Abū al-Naṣr al-Ṣāliḥī, while remaining Muslim, received a position in the Byzantine administration and the rank of *vestarches*. Consequently, Muḥammad became a Byzan-

tine subject, continuing to profess Islam. However, this contradicts the Byzantine legal principle, according to which only Christians could be subjects of the empire and hold any public office. This also gives rise to the following puzzling questions: What was the model of swearing allegiance to the emperor when the Muslim Muḥammad al-Sāliḥī took office? What were the legal models for Muḥammad's entering into 'horizontal' legal relations with others such as purchase and sale, rent, his own possible marriage and marriages of his Muslim relatives, his will, his testimony at court etc.? I do not have any definite answer to these questions, which would be substantiated by the extant Byzantine sources.

Another example concerns Byzantine religious piety and is suggested by an inexplicable tolerance of Islamic ritual practices, which were performed inside the imperial palace and in which Christians were even involved. The story is told by Nikephoros Gregoras who criticised the corruption of the Christian morality of John Kantakouzenos. The described events happened around 1352. The historian complains about the habits of the imperial court, where some barbarians (that is, Anatolian Muslims) were constantly arranging noisy processions whenever they wanted. During the palace church services,

the barbarians sing and dance in a ring in the palace halls, shouting down the liturgy by singing and dancing intricate dances, with unintelligible yells they cried out odes and hymns to Muḥammad thus attracting more listeners than the reading of the Holy Gospel, sometimes all the Christians and sometimes only some are gathered there [at these dances].

Moreover, the barbarians did the same "at the emperor's table, often with cymbals and stage musical instruments and songs" (Nikephoros Gregoras, *Byzantina Historia* [ed. Schopen, Bekker 1829-55, 3: 202.12-203.4]).

It is almost certain that some Anatolian Sufi mystics or dervishes are implied here. The reference to "ring-dances" (χορούς) and "intricate dances" (γυμνικήν ὄρχησιν) most likely points to the followers of the Mavlavi Sufi Order of whirling dervishes. The singing and use of musical instruments indicate the Mawlavi *samā'* (a kind of ritualistic ceremony of Muslim mystics). The presence of Mavlavi Sufis at the imperial palace may have been somehow connected with the 'pro-Hesychast' mystical preferences of John Kantakouzenos. It nevertheless remains a mystery why the dervishes were present at the Byzantine emperor's palace.

The important point is that religiously active groups of Muslims were present inside Constantinople and even inside the Palace. Christians in the Palace openly neglected the sacred liturgy preferring the dervishes' rituals, and did this without fear of one another, thus

violating generally accepted rules of Christian piety. The story also raises puzzling questions about Kantakouzenos' actual attitude towards Islam. The event described by Gregoras cannot be explained through our modern vision of the Byzantine models of everyday pious behaviour in general, and our knowledge about the personality and deeds of John Kantakouzenos in particular.

## 5 Byzantine Cultural Memory

The above-discussed puzzling examples may indicate that the presence of the Asian in the existential models of the Byzantines was even more extensive and deeper than we can now imagine. However, is there any possibility to trace and outline these existential models, these deep layers of mentality that predetermine people's everyday behaviour and their reaction to new events? In other words, what were the specific features of the contextual awareness of the Byzantines, and what place did Asia occupy in it? I propose to search for an answer to these questions by means of a set of ideas and analytical techniques associated with the concept of cultural memory. In the last few decades, the subject of cultural memory has become increasingly popular in all branches of the humanities. Especially relevant to the subsequent discussion are the studies of Jan Assmann, who has provided a firm theoretical basis for applying the concept of cultural memory to ancient and medieval civilisations (Assmann 1992; 1995; 2011).

The specific feature of Byzantine cultural memory consisted of its unprecedentedly vast temporal horizon, which stretched back into a very distant past and differentiated the Byzantines from all the neighbouring cultures in the medieval Mediterranean: Europeans, Muslims and Slavs. The perceived early origins of Byzantine cultural memory go back to the Homeric epics and the Biblical quasi-historical past, while the Byzantine historical past, in the modern sense of the term, starts approximately at the time of Greco-Persian Wars. Cultural memory was embodied in language, written texts, rituals, visual tradition, practical techniques, oral tradition, habits etc. Language in its classicised variant was of crucial importance as a binding agent that provided continuity and integrity of memory. It was cultural memory that predefined Byzantine contextual awareness and, therefore, self-identity patterns, that is, the Byzantine notion of who they were, their axiological patterns, their hierarchy of cultural values.



## 6 Persia in Cultural Memory

Even a preliminary analysis of Byzantine textual heritage from the standpoint of the cultural memory approach surprises with the presence in it of a prominent Asian layer. And what it is even more curious, this Asian layer was not Arabic or Turkic, but Persian. Information on Persia and Persians was inherited by the middle and late Byzantines from the preceding Greco-Roman tradition and was faithfully preserved and transmitted through generations and centuries. I have already discussed the topic in detail in a special study (Shukurov 2019). I will just refer here to a few key points. From the viewpoint of cultural memory, the famous *Souda*, the tenth century encyclopedia, is quite telling (cf. *Suidae Lexicon* [ed. Adler 1928-38]).

On the one hand, the *Souda* was the richest Byzantine repository of diverse information, focusing almost entirely on old information relating to cultural memory. On the other hand, as an encyclopedia and thesaurus in terms of genre, the *Souda* represented a part of the culture's mnemonic mechanism, containing the must-know information for well-educated Byzantines. The *Souda* consists of about 31,000 entries, in which Persia and Persians are mentioned more than three hundred times. The "Persian" references covered the period from the earliest history of Greco-Persian relations, all the way to the time of emperor Heraclius I. I have divided the *Souda*'s Persian information into several rubrics:

- Politics and social life;
- Everyday life;
- Names of prominent Persian figures;
- Personages of the Greco-Roman past;
- Greek terms and notions associated with Persians.

Interestingly enough, these rubrics in the *Souda* reflect the standard nomenclature of Persian elements in other Byzantine texts of different genres. Of course, the *Souda* belonged to the learned literature and was intended for intellectuals. However, it would be a mistake to suggest that the circulation of such ancient Persian notions was limited to the narrow circle of highbrow men of letters and science. I will refer to a few instances demonstrating that the Persian segment of cultural memory was in use also in the middle and low strata of the society.

This can be especially exemplified through the popularity of vernacular epical texts directly relating to Persian affairs in middle and late Byzantine times. The numerous Byzantine recensions of the *Alexander Romance* and the *Belisarios Romance* deal with the Greco-Persian wars of the past, and what is truly remarkable is that popular interest in Alexander and Belisarios apparently persisted as late as the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The audiences of vernacular

romances were still interested in Ancient Persia and, consequently, they had access to sufficient factual information that would allow them to understand Persian references and allusions correctly (see, for instance, *Der griechische Alexanderroman* [ed. Bergson 1965]; *Ἱστορία τοῦ Βελισσαρίου* [ed. Van Gemert, Bakker 2007]).

Most intriguing is the fact that we find Persian motifs where they appear anachronistic or even out of place. In the epic *Digenes Akritas* (cf. *Digenes Akritas* [ed. Trapp 1971]), the dowry of Digenes' bride contains the famed and marvellous sword of Chosroes, which seems to imply Chosroes II; Chosroes appears again along with his general Shahrwaraz (Σάρβαρος); further on, there is a reference to a royal tomb at Pasargadae (Πασαργάδαι and Παρασογάρδαι) in connection with the erection of Digenes' tomb; Darius III is mentioned along with Alexander the Great; finally, there are repeated mentions of Persians and Persia scattered throughout the epic. The vernacular audience in middle and late Byzantium expected and was even eager to hear about Persia in epic fiction, despite the anachronism of such references, which, of course, could have been recognised as anachronism only by a learned person.

My second example concerns the revival of the term 'Achaemenid', quite a literary and again an anachronistic word when it came to designate the Ottomans. The history of this word in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is remarkable to understand how cultural memory works. There were two different interpretations justifying the sameness of the Achaemenids and the Ottomans, and both these conflicting interpretations were based on cultural memory. In the fourteenth century, the Ottomans were commonly called the 'Achaemenids' in all social layers of Byzantine society. The term 'Achaemenids' was used by highbrow authors such as Philotheos Kokkinos, Manuel II Palaiologos and Gregory Palamas. The name 'Achaemenids' in this sense was also current in spoken language, as is testified by low-style texts and Byzantine anthroponyms. Apparently, the fourteenth century Byzantines drew an analogy between the vigorous Ottoman push against the Greeks and Darius' and Xerxes' attack on ancient Greeks. One may note again that the contextual meaning of this analogy was more or less understandable for the majority of the Byzantines (cf. Shukurov 2019).

Another interpretation belonged to Michael Kritoboulos in post-Byzantine times. Kritoboulos revived the ancient legends about the Egyptian origin of the Greeks through Danaus, the Greek origin of the Persians through Perseus, and therefore the common ancestry of the Greeks and the Persians, that is the Byzantines and the Achaemenid Ottomans (Kritoboulos, *Historiae* 1.4.2 [ed. Reinsch 1983, 15.23-16.7]).

Both interpretations used common cultural memory as a chest from which one could retrieve whatever legend best fitted his inter-

pretation of current events. Indeed, the contents of cultural memory can be compared to a chest filled with old ideas and concepts that underlie and feed the current mindset; a Byzantine in his creative activity picked up images and models from the chest, which enabled him to comprehend and systematise the living reality.

## 7 Persia in Byzantine Religiosity

Most curious is the fact that Persia was well-established not only in the secular aspect of cultural memory, but also in its Christian counterpart. Since the place of the Persians in Byzantine religious mentality is a rather large subject, I will briefly outline here some of its key points.

Christianity added some important new features to the traditional Greco-Roman image of Persia. The Persians were believed to have been literally present at the cradle of Christianity, that is, at the cradle of Christ himself. I mean here the famous pericope of the Magi from Matthew's Gospel. Although Matthew did not indicate the ethnic origin of the Magi, however, major theological schools of the Greek-speaking Orthodox East - in Alexandria, Cappadocia, Antioch, Nisibis, and Edessa - all agreed that the Magi were Persians. One may refer here to the authority of Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, the Cappadocian fathers, John Chrysostom, and others. The Orthodox East was unanimous that the Magi were Persian wise men and astrologers. The identification of the Magi as kings, common for the Western tradition, was not commonly accepted in Byzantium. Instead, the Byzantines usually saw in the Magi Zoroastrian philosophers and righteous men or Persian priests. John of Damascus referred to them as the Persian "astronomer-kings" and "magi-kings", in the sense of 'chief' astronomers and 'chief' magi under the sway of the Persian king (John of Damascus, *Homilia in Nativitatem Domini* VI and X [ed. Kotter 1988, 332.10-11: 'Περσῶν βασιλεῖς ἀστρονόμοι'; and 338.4: 'βασιλεῖς μάγους']).

The Persian identity of the Magi was adopted both in exegetical tradition and in liturgy, which was intended also for commoners, thus becoming a basic element of the religious consciousness of both intellectuals and simple believers. It is not surprising, therefore, that the idea received an important and long-lasting elaboration in which Persian motifs were emphasised and detailed. Matthew's account of the Magi is very brief, so that later on there appeared a series of texts that detailed the events leading up to the arrival of the Magi to Jerusalem. In particular, in the Orthodox East, most likely before the time of Constantine, there appeared a story describing the prehistory of the Magi. This story was later incorporated into an extensive narration which we now call *De Gestis in Perside*, an apocryphal story providing 'missing links' for Matthew's account.

*De Gestis in Perside* tells about a miracle in the temple of the Persian king. One night, the idols of the temple began speaking, singing, and dancing. Further on, a star appeared over the temple. The Persian sages interpreted the miracle as an indication of the birth of the King, the Son of the Pantokrator in Judaea. The Persian king sent his Magi to Judaea with gifts, and the star showed the way. The main idea of the story was to prove that Jesus Christ had first become known for the world from Persia (Ἐκ Περσίδος ἐγνώσθη Χριστὸς ἀπ' ἀρχῆς). The Magi returned to Persia with the image of the Mother and Child which was placed in the Persian royal temple with the caption: "In the God-sent temple, the Imperial authority of Persia dedicated [this] to God Zeus Helios, the Great King Jesus". Accordingly, the Persians were the first who created an icon of Jesus and Mary (cf. *De gestis in Perside* [ed. Heyden 2019, XX]).

Later Byzantine tradition faithfully preserved this knowledge about the Persians' special role in spreading Christianity. The Persian Magi were the first who learned about the Nativity; moreover, they were the first who brought news about the Messiah and incarnated God and his mother Mary from Bethlehem to the gentiles, thus anticipating the subsequent Christianisation of Parthia. In the tenth century, Symeon the Logothete argues that the Magi, prostrating themselves before Christ, were the first among pagans who "glorified the name of gentiles", implying, as it seems, that the Magi embraced Christianity (Symeon Logotheta, *Chronicon* 51 [ed. Wahlgren 2006, 83.9-11\*]). Symeon means here that the Magi embraced Christianity *before* the first gentile converts: Kandake, converted by the Apostle Philip, and Cornelius, converted by the Apostle Peter.

## 8 The Holy Persians

One further aspect of the Persian presence in Byzantine religious memory was represented by the subsequent history of Christianity in the Sasanian Empire. The Christians were persecuted by the Sasanians over almost three hundred years. The dramatic destiny of Sasanian Christianity abounded with the heroic deeds of religious piety and fidelity, as well as with the highly traumatic experience of oppression and massacres. In the context of my paper, of primary importance are the reflections of the double-edged history of Sasanian Christianity in the religious memory of the Byzantines. The most telling information for an appraisal of the significance of the Sasanian Christian experience can be found in liturgical practice. The Persian Christian martyrs were well remembered in the Byzantine Church. The *Synaxarion of the Great Church of Constantinople*, a collection of liturgical texts of different genres and dates, referred to forty-two days when believers commemorated Persian saints. At Matins (ὄρθρος), more or

less brief notices on the saints of the day were read after the sixth ode of the canon; among the saints referred to in the Byzantine church service, there was a considerable number of holy Persians (by blood or by political allegiance) and also people from other nations martyred by the Sasanians (see: *Synaxarium* [ed. Delehay 1902]). It is important to visualise this: almost every week or fortnight throughout the liturgical year, the Byzantines in the churches commemorated and chanted odes to Persians. These could have been the Magi, or the Persian saints of Sasanian times, or the Old Testament events happened under the Persian kings.

By mentioning the Old Testament events, we approached the last but not the least point: the Byzantines inherited the idea of the pious Persian kings from the Old Testament. The Old Testament's ample evidence on Persia can be summarised in the following way. The Persian Empire succeeded the Babylonian Empire, and it was Cyrus the Great who issued his famous decree for the Jews to return to their homeland to rebuild their Temple. Under Darius I, the second Temple of Zerubbabel was completed. The well-known story of Esther, which is commemorated through the Jewish feast of Purim, took place in the reign of Xerxes. Under Artaxerxes, the Jewish state was reformed by Ezra, and the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt by Nehemiah (cf. Yamauchi 1990). The Old Testament's history of the Persian empire is extremely important to bring together two traditions: the Ancient Greek historical tradition concerning the Achaemenids and Christian sacred history. As a result, they formed a sort of stereoscopic vision of the past in which different lines in cultural memory supplemented and enriched each other.

The Byzantine perception of Persian motifs in Christianity, to all probability, drastically differed from that of the Western Christians and Slavs. The latter perceived the above-mentioned Persian motifs of Christianity in a somewhat decontextualised way. The Persians are viewed as some aliens who appeared in the Scriptures as an additional proof of the omnipotence of God. In this sense, in the eyes of the modern Christians of the West and East, the Old and New Testament Persians are akin to the Kynokephaloi and Anthropophagi of the Christian hagiographical tradition: strange creatures from the distant margins of the universe. In contrast, the Byzantines remembered Persia and the Persians and valued them highly as an indispensable part of their past and contemporary worlds. For the Byzantine mentality, Persian motifs in the sacred tradition had solid factual background, creating rich and well-elaborated cultural contexts, which were packed with meaningful associations and indissolubly linked Persia with the Byzantine own national past.

## 9 Conclusion

Byzantine memory of ancient Persia, both in secular and religious traditions, was not an assemblage of antiquarian odds and ends, but part of the Byzantine historical and cultural self, a Byzantine *alter ego*. The Byzantines could hardly have imagined their present intellectual being without Ancient Persia, which was always present in the actuality of Byzantine mentality as a source of wisdom and experience, of paradigmatic and explanatory allusions; it was always somewhere nearby and at hand. Persian elements in the Byzantine mental space of course may be considered as an Asian element in the Byzantine self-identity model. Byzantines were Asian exactly to the extent to which they perceived Persia as a part of their own self.

I suggest that Persian elements in Byzantine self-identity played the role of a portal or a channel, through which the information from the Arabic and Turkic Orient reached middle and late Byzantium. The Persian elements present inside Byzantium kept the Byzantines open and sensitive to the new information coming from the Orient. Persian heritage provided the Byzantines with a common ground with their Arabian and Turkic neighbours. The Persian heritage enabled the Byzantines to place easily the phenomena coming from the Orient into their own network of associations and analogies, which was present in their cultural memory. From this standpoint, of course, Byzantium was Asian.

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