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A *History* Dedicated to Mehmed II? Kritoboulos of Imbros and the Enshrining of a Superior's Memory after the Conquest of Constantinople in 1453

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This article examines the perception and productive acquisition of historical realities thereby questioning the imperative applicability of terms like "victory" or "defeat". This complex matter will be exemplified by an extremely controversial source: the ξυγγραΦή ἱστοίων, the History of Kritoboulos of Imbros, an author who is notorious for being a biased admirer of Mehmed II. It will be argued that his work is not a mere product of Ottoman panegyric but a productive and innovative attempt to come to terms with the historical events on a broader scope. In this respect, it offers both an alternative explanatory approach and an innovative counter concept to Christian eschatology contributing to the literary discourse on the perception, interpretation and evaluation of the outcome of events. Hence, focal passages of Kritoboulos' *History* such as the introductory letter of dedication and the general assault on Constantinople are analyzed.

KEYWORDS
Kritoboulos of Imbros, fall of Constantinople, Mehmed the Conqueror, letter of dedication

Hardly[1] any other historical event has had such a massive impact on the medieval world of Latin Christianity as the siege and capture of Constantinople led by Mehmed II in 1453.[2] At the beginning of the 15th century, the once mighty successor of the Roman Empire had lost most of its former influence due to a significant loss in population after its first capture in 1204 and an eight-year siege led by the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid I. Moreover, the Byzantine Empire had shrunk to a territory that apart from Constantinople and its hinterland comprised only few Northern Aegean islands, the Despotate of the Morea and the Empire of Trebizond.[3] Having been besieged for 53 days on land and at sea (and with guns of hitherto unknown size), the capture of Constantinople marked the end of the last ancient center of Christendom. On the one hand, the success of the Ottomans proved their military ability and political capability in the Mediterranean for the following centuries. On the other hand, for contemporary people such as the Byzantines, the capture of Constantinople evoked a deep psychological crisis that was reflected in a broad range of literary accounts.[4] In spite of this quantity and variety of accounts both in Latin and popular literature, the principal sources dealing with the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 are provided by four contemporary late Byzantine historians: the eye-witness account of George Sphrantzes,[5] the historiography of the Genoese servant Doukas,[6] the

1 This contribution is part of PhD thesis on which I am currently working on at Kiel University.

2 There is an enormous amount of references. Cf. for instance, John Melville-Jones, ed., *The siege of Constantinople 1453. Seven contemporary accounts* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1972), VII: "It has always appeared as a moment of great historical significance in the course of Western civilisation." Frank Trombley, "The fall of Constantinople in 1453 and Late Medieval Greek Culture," *Groniek* 184 (2009): 275: "It was a world-historical event for Hellenes everywhere […]." Aslıhan Akışık, "Self and Other in the Renaissance. Laonikos Chalkokondyles and Late Byzantine Intellectuals" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2013), 3: "The capture of Constantinople by the Ottoman armies of Mehmed II in 1453 was a cataclysmic event that reverberated throughout Renaissance Europe."

3 For further information on the reconstruction of the events, still cf. Steven Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople, 1453* (Cambridge *et al.*: Cambridge University Press, 1965). Franz Babinger, *Mehmed the Conqueror and His Time* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978).

4 For a detailed overview of the accounts on the fall of Constantinople, cf. still the anthologies by Agostino Pertusi, ed., *La Caduta di Costantinopoli*, 2 vols., (Milan: Mondadori, [3]1997); Melville-Jones, ed., *The Siege of Constantinople*. Recently Vincent Déroche,*et al.,* eds.,, *Constantinople 1453: des Byzantins aux Ottomans. Textes et Documents* (Toulouse: Anacharsis, 2016). For a state of the art excluding the French anthology, cf. Nevra Necipoğlu, *Byzantium between the Ottomans and the Latins. Politics and Society in the Late Empire*, (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 8–17, Marios Philippides and Walter K. Hanak, eds., *The Siege and the Fall of Constantinople in 1453. Historiography, Topography, and Military Studies* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 3–91.

5 The so-called *Chronicon minus* is a heavily revised version of Sphrantzes' original (lost) diary. There also exists a (particularly regarding to the siege and conquest of Constantinople) more detailed version known as *Chronicon maius* which was written by the 16th-century scholar Makarios Melissenos. For an introduction, cf. Gyula Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica I. Die Byzantinischen Quellen der Geschichte der Türkvölker* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, [2]1958), 282–288; Herbert Hunger, *Die hochsprachlich profane Literatur der Byzantiner. Erster Band: Philosophie – Rhetorik – Epistolographie – Geschichtsschreibung – Geographie* (München: Beck, 1978), 494–499, including further publications. The development of an annotated genetic edition conducted by Dr Sonja Schönauer is in progress at University of Cologne.

6 For an introduction, cf. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica*, 247–251; Hunger, *Literatur*, 490–494, including further publications. For an edition, cf. Immanuel Bekker, ed., *Ducae Michaelis Ducae nepotis historia Byzantina* (Bonn: Weber, 1834). For a translation, cf. Harry J.

Ἀποδείξεις ἱστορίων (*Histories*) of the Athenian Laonikos Chalkokondylas,[7] and lastly, the ξυγγραφή ἱστορίων (*History*) of Kritoboulos of Imbros.[8] Interestingly enough, these principal Greek sources do not fathom the actual experience of crisis and the dimensions of devastation and power shifts in the same way.[9]

Unlike the Latin accounts on the conquest of 1453, their contemporary Greek counterparts neither emphasize the mere decline of the Byzantine Empire,[10] nor do they only confine themselves to the description of distress, terror and faint in the aftermath of the recent events. They rather stand out due to their scope and, more relevantly, due to their narratological concepts. Thus, in constructing both a chronological and a causal connection of events, the Greek sources offer an attempt to compensate for this exceptional event in order to create a new sense of values. In order to illustrate this complex matter within this paper, the line of reasoning is restricted to giving an example of a controversial, yet essential account of the capture of Constantinople in 1453: the *History* of Kritoboulos of Imbros. Hence, few selected, yet significant passages will be cited as focal points in the following discussion.

Kritoboulos of Imbros – a Sultan's Historian?

Although Kritoboulos and his historiography have attracted increasingly more researchers during the last decades, they still receive marginal attention in current research. Hence, it seems reasonable to give a brief summary of the author's life and work since several researchers tried to gather any available information about him in concise encyclopaedia and handbook articles irrespective of their completeness or verifiability.[11]

Magoulias, ed., *Decline and Fall of Byzantium to the Ottoman Turks. An annotated Translation of, "Historia Turco-Byzantina"*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975). Due to the loss of the first and last folio, the original title of Doukas' history is not preserved. Cf. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica*, 248; Hunger, *Literatur*, 490–491.

7 For an introduction, cf. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica*, 391–397; Hunger, *Literatur*, 485–490, including further publications.

8 For an introduction, cf. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica*, 434–435; Hunger, *Literatur*, 503, including further publications. For an edition, cf. Diether Roderich Reinsch, ed., *Critobuli Imbriotae Historia* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1982). For a translation, cf. Diether Roderich Reinsch, ed., *Mehmet II. erobert Konstantinopel. Die ersten Regierungsjahre des Sultans Mehmet Fatih, des Eroberers von Konstantinopel 1453. Das Geschichtswerk des Kritobulos von Imbros* (Graz, Vienna, and Cologne: Styria, 1986); Charles T. Riggs, ed., *History of Mehmed the Conqueror* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1954).

9 Amongst other things, a detailed analysis on these observations is performed within my PhD project.

10 For this sort of storytelling, cf. for instance Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* where he describes the end of Byzantium as "the greatest [...] and most awful scene in the history of mankind." Cf. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 338. Nevertheless, these explanations fail to include at least a phase of cultural revival during the last decades of Byzantium which is commonly known as *Palaiologan Renaissance*. For further information, cf. Jan O. Rosenqvist, *Die byzantinische Literatur. Vom 6. Jahrhundert bis zum Fall Konstantinopels 1453* (Berlin *et al.:* de Gruyter, 2007); Steven Runciman, *The Last Byzantine Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

11 Apart from the references in footnote 8, for the following two paragraphs, cf. for instance Alice-Mary Talbot, "Kritobulos, Michael," *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* 2 (1991): 1159;

According to them, Kritoboulos of Imbros was a late Byzantine, 15th-century historian who, as a descendant from a distinguished family, apparently dedicated his *History* to the Ottoman sultan Mehmed II.[12] Born approximately in the period between 1400 and 1410,[13] he became a prominent figure within the administration of Imbros. In the same year as the conquest of Constantinople, he initiated the surrender of the North Aegean islands to the sultan and allegedly joined the services of the Ottomans. He was believed to be appointed Ottoman governor of Imbros at the same time and successfully negotiated with ministers of the surrounding area as well as the papal fleet in 1457. In 1466, after the Venetians had taken possession of Imbros, he supposedly fled to Constantinople. There, it is believed, Kritoboulos became a secretary of Mehmed II and allegedly later fell out of the sultan's favor due to unknown circumstances. He probably died soon thereafter, finishing his life as a monk in a monastery at Mount Athos.[14] In sum, these biographical notes might seem alluring, but most of them do not stand up to closer examination which takes into account the actual sources. Though recurring annotations exist that there is no evidence for what happened to Kritoboulos after 1466,[15] certain information such as his activity as the sultan's secretary and final days at Mount Athos belong to the realm of legends. In this respect, it is even questionable whether Kritoboulos can be regarded as a determined *Ottoman* governor of Imbros.[16]

In contrast, some publications mention other, yet important details referring to his literary *oeuvre*. This is particularly true for the publication of Kritoboulos' *History* itself which apparently has been published as late as the middle of the 19th century. Before that date, only the unedited autograph

Vasile Grecu, "Kritobulos aus Imbros. Sein wahrer Name. Die Widmungsbriefe. Die Ausgabe. Das Geschichtswerk," *Byzantinoslavica* 18 (1957): 1–17; Gerhard Emrich, "Michael Kritobulos, der byzantinische Geschichtsschreiber Mehmeds II.," *Materialia Turcica* 1 (1975): 35–43; Diether Roderich Reinsch, "Kritobulos of Imbros – learned historian, Ottoman raya and Byzantine patriot," *Recueil des travaux de l'institut d'études byzantines* 40 (2003): 297–311; Rosenqvist, *Die byzantinische Literatur*, 180–181, each including further publications.

12 The sole dedication to the Ottoman sultan Mehmed II is still emphasized in currently published articles, cf. for instance Mathieu de Bakker, "Explaining the End of an Empire. The Use of Ancient Greek Religious Views in Late Byzantine Historiography," *Histos* 4 (2015), 128; Iván Tóth, "Notes on the Letter of Dedication and the Proem of Kritobulos' Historiai," *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 54 (2014), 90–91.

13 For a convincing reconstruction, cf. Reinsch, ed., *Critobuli* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1982), 72*.

14 Cf. Hunger, *Literatur*, 499; Rosenqvist, *Byzantinische Literatur*, 180. Necipoğlu, *Byzantium*, 10; Diether Roderich Reinsch, "Mehmed der Eroberer in der Darstellung der zeitgenössischen byzantinischen Geschichtsschreiber," in *Sultan Mehmet II. – Eroberer Konstantinopels – Patron der Künste*, eds. Neslihan Asutay-Effenberger and Ulrich Rehm (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau, 2009), 17. For detailed information, cf. Reinsch, *Critobuli*, 85*–86*.

15 Cf. especially the emphasized explanation in Reinsch, *historian, raya, patriot*, 301.

16 For a detailed analysis on the self-perception of the negotiations conducted by Kritoboulos in his *History*, cf. Rike Szill, "Byzantinisches Krisenmanagement und Osmanische Expansion. Verhandlungsstrategien nach der Einnahme Konstantinopels 1453 im Geschichtswerk des Kritobulos von Imbros," in *Das diplomatische Selbst in der Frühen Neuzeit. Verhandlungsstrategien – Erzählweisen – Beziehungsdynamiken. The Diplomatic Self in Early Modern Times. Negociating – Narrating – Shaping Relations*, eds. Julia Gebke *et al.* which is due for release in 2019.

of the author had been available.[17] Apart from some biographical data in his historiography and a few references in contemporary letters,[18] no further information about Kritoboulos is known. Yet, some verses on Augustine and a prayer have survived which prove that Kritoboulos was connected to other Byzantine scholars of his time.[19] Since hardly any information concerning Kritoboulos can be considered as testified, it is appropriate to consider him first and foremost as a late Byzantine historian who gives an important contemporary account on the conquest of Constantinople and who was immediately affected by the recent events.

A Historiography for Whom? Cursory Examinations on the Proem and Letter of Dedication

Among the principal Greek sources on the fall of Constantinople, Kritoboulos' historiography seems to diverge from the common negative view of the Ottomans. By offering an alternative evaluation of the antagonist, the author conceives a far more positive stance on the outcome of the capture of Constantinople as a whole.[20] Instead of staging the Ottoman ruler as the epitome of a *bête noire* as Diether Roderich Reinsch aptly puts it with regard to the historiography of Doukas,[21] Kritoboulos portraits Mehmed II in a more positive manner. In contrast to Doukas' account, the sultan is even addressed in a letter of dedication[22] as

> αὐτοκράτορι μεγίστῳ, βασιλεῖ βασιλέων Μεχεμέτι, εὐτυχεῖ, νικητῇ, τροπαιούχῳ, θριαμβευτῇ, ἀηττήτῳ, κυρίῳ γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης θεοῦ θελήματι Κριτόβουλος νησιώτης δοῦλος τῶν δούλων τῶν σῶν.

> the Supreme Emperor, King of Kings, Mehmed, the fortunate, the victor, the winner of trophies, the triumphant, the unconquered, Lord of land and sea by the will of God, [by] Kritoboulos, the islander, servant of [his] servants. (Krit., Letter of Dedication, pr.)[23]

Kritoboulos seems to be thoroughly aware of the fact that he is writing the history of an Ottoman superior from a Byzantine's and hence an inferior's point of view. Therefore, he explains the reasons that led him to write this side of the story both in the letter of dedication and in the proem

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17 For further information on the re-discovery of Kritoboulos' *History*, cf. Reinsch, *historian, raya, patriot*, 297–298.

18 Kritoboulos is mentioned in a diary entry and letter of Ciriaco of Ancona as well as in the historiography of Gennadius Scholarios, cf. Reinsch, *historian, raya, patriot*, 299–300, and, for an extended explanation, cf. Reinsch, *Critobuli*, 75*–78*.

19 Cf. Reinsch, *historian, raya, patriot*, 298. For an edition of the Greek text, cf. Reinsch, *Critobuli*, 12*–16*, and, for further information, ibid., 77*–78*. To the best of my knowledge, no translation has been published so far.

20 Konstantinos Moustakas, "Byzantine 'Visions' of the Ottoman Empire. Theories of Ottoman Legitimacy by Byzantine Scholars after the Fall of Constantinople," in *Images of the Byzantine World. Visions, Messages and Meanings. Studies presented to Leslie Brubaker*, ed. Angeliki Lymberopoulou (Farnham *et al.:* Ashgate, 2011), 216.

21 Cf. Reinsch, *Mehmed in der Darstellung*, 15.

22 For further analyses on the (actually two versions of the) letter of dedication, cf. Reinsch, *Critobuli*, 18*–27*; Tóth, *Notes*; Grecu, *Kritobulos*, 4–7.

23 The passages cited in the following are all to be found in the first book of Kritoboulos' *History*. The Greek text is taken from the edition of Reinsch, *Critobuli*, the translation follows with few exceptions the English translation of Riggs, *History of Mehmed*.

of his *History* in detail. The letter of dedication uses numerous epithets to present Mehmed II as a capable ruler and military strategist and gives priority to predominantly personal motifs. Not only did Mehmed II's unique deeds and vigor encourage the author to write his history, but, in his view, it would have been regarded as simply unfair not to give a detailed account of the sultan's deeds, especially given the fact they were κατ' οὐδὲν ἀπεοικυίας τῶν Ἀλεξάνδρου τοῦ Μακεδόνος καὶ τῶν κατ' ἐκεῖνον στρατηγῶν τε καὶ βασιλέων μὴ Ἑλληνικῶς, "in no way inferior to those of Alexander the Great, or of the generals and kings of his rank" (ibid.). Therefore, both the novelty of the topic and its exemplary character would have struck Kritoboulos.

These motifs are also picked up in the proem of Kritoboulos' *History*. Right from the beginning, the exemplary character of his literary topic is emphasized which is, therefore, doubtlessly believed to merit to remain in collective memory. But, in addition to that, other intentions come into effect: the author noticeably expresses his aversion to thoroughly discussed topics of Byzantine history. With respect to the novelty of the events that had taken place only recently, he states that his account was not only more credible but would also make a greater impact on collective memory because men, for the most part, would prefer accounts on the more recent events (chap. 1, 2). Anyway, the choice of his topic had not merely been a result of the deeds of Mehmed II but also of the new state of affairs since μεγίστη […] πάντων γέγονεν αὕτη καὶ μεταβολὴ πραγμάτων οὐ τῶν τυχόντων,"it had been the greatest event of all and a change in affairs of no little importance." (chap. 1, 3) In order to explain this important matter appropriately, a παραίτησις, an *apology*, is directed to his recipients in the following chapters. There, it is explained why Kritoboulos chose ἀναγράφειν τε καὶ φανερῶς ἐκπομπεύειν καὶ διασύρειν τὰ οἰκεῖα κακὰ δέον ξυνκαλύπτειν μᾶλλον ἐς δύναμιν καὶ μηδαμοῦ τοῖς πολλοῖς ἔκφορα καθιστᾶν, "to record and openly hold up to ridicule and disparagement our own internal evils, which – in others' views – ought rather to be covered up as far as possible and by no means brought to the notice of the public" (chap. 3, 3). As the author points out, he did not write his historiography in order to express his delight about Constantinople's defeat nor about the sorrows which the Byzantines suffered during the Ottoman assaults - he argues that their fate is subjected to the vicissitudes of all things.

In this respect, Kritoboulos' historical concept also contrasts with the other principal Greek sources ideologically. Even though the historiography of Doukas clearly presents "the Ottoman rule as an illegitimate tyranny,"[24] it however (deliberately) remains rather vague regarding the imminent appearance of the Antichrist comparing to the *History* of Kritoboulos. Here, recently constructed end-time scenarios are explicitly neglected.[25] Instead of accounting εἰς τὴν παντελῆ ἐγκατάλειψιν τὴν γενομένην ἐν τῇ

[24] Moustakas, *Byzantine Visions*, 215.

[25] Cf. Rike Szill "Herrschaftszeiten! Endlichkeitsdiskurse im Kontext der Einnahme Konstatinopels 1453 in den Geschichtswerken des Dukas und des Kritobulos von Imbros," in *Letzte Dinge. Deutungsmuster und Erzählformen des Umgangs mit Vergänglichkeit im Horizont heterochroner Zeitsemantiken*, eds. Andreas Bihrer *et al.* which is due for release in 2019.

ἡμετέρᾳ γενεᾷ παρὰ τοῦ δικαιοκρίτου θεοῦ διὰ τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν, "the utter abandonment by God, the righteous judge of our generation [sc. the Byzantines] because of our sins" (Doukas, chap. 41, 19),[26] Kritoboulos rather stresses that

> τίς γὰρ οὐκ οἶδεν, ὡς, ἐξότου γεγόνασιν ἄνθρωποι, τὰ τῆς βασιλείας καὶ τῆς ἀρχῆς οὐδ' ὅλως ἔμεινεν ἔτι τῶν αὐτῶν οὐδ' ἐνὶ γένει τε καὶ ἔθνει περιεκλείσθη, ἀλλ' ὥσπερ πλανώμενά τε καὶ ἐξ ἐθνῶν ἔθνη καὶ τόπους ἐκ τόπων ἀμείβοντα πανταχοῦ μεταβέβηκέ τε καὶ περιέστη, νῦν μὲν ἐς Ἀσσυρίους καὶ Μήδους καὶ Πέρσας, νῦν μὲν ἐς Ἕλληνας καὶ Ῥωμαίους κατὰ καιρούς τε καὶ περιόδους ἐνιαυτῶν ἐπιχωριάσαντά τε καὶ οὐδέποτε ἐπὶ τῶν αὐτῶν βεβηκότα.
>
> since men have existed the kingly or ruling power has not always stuck to the same people, nor has it been limited to one race or nation[.] But as if it was wandering and going from nation to nation and from place to place in succession, it was always changing and passing, now to the Assyrians, the Medes, the Persians, and then to the Greek and Romans, according to the times and epochs establishing itself in a place and never returning to the same. (Krit. I, chap. 3, 4)

Insofar, it is hardly surprising that Kritoboulos is notorious for being a biased admirer of the sultan and disdained as loyal supporter of the latter, and being a pro-Ottoman flatterer as well as a selfish opportunist, who is "held to be in low esteem."[27] The aforementioned assessments remarkably often seem to rely on the passage taken from the letter of dedication which is cited above. Comparing the letter of dedication, however, with the actual proem of Kritoboulos' *History*, it rather seems remarkable that formal and traditional Persian titles, which are so numerous in the first passage, are missing.

> Κριτόβουλος ὁ νησιώτης [...] τὴν ξυγγραφὴν τήνδε ξυνέγραψε δικαιώσας μὴ πράγατα οὕτω μεγάλα καὶ θαυμαστὰ ἐφ' ἡμῶν γεγονότα μεῖναι ἀνήκουστα [...].
>
> Kritoboulos the Islander [...] wrote this historiography in the belief that events so great and wonderful which occurred in our own times, should not remain unrecorded [...]. (Krit. I pr.)

Instead of enumerating all the titles of the sultan or even mentioning Mehmed II as it was done in the letter of dedication, Kritoboulos explains the choice of his topic - apart from the novelty of the events, the author also focuses on the their monumentality and importance – before he finally states his topic more precisely as μεγάλου βασιλέως ἔργα Μεχεμέτεω, "the deeds of the great king Mehmed" (Krit. I, chap. 2, 3). Although the probability of Mehmed's deeds is expressed in order to write history, no clear reference to the magnificence and splendor of his achievements is made. The line of reasoning still refers to the justification of the chosen topic as a whole.

Here it becomes clear that the author focuses on telling the *events*.

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26 The Greek text of the cited passage is taken from the edition of Immanuel Bekker, *Historia Byzantina*, and is translated by the author of this article.

27 For a cohesive summary on the predominantly negative reception of Kritoboulos and his *History* in research, cf. Moustakas, *Byzantine Visions*, 216–217; Emrich, *Michael Kritobulos*, 36–38.

The deeds of the sultan merely serve as a narratological framework. Consequently, instead of constructing him as the heroic protagonist of the narrative, the personal accomplishments of Mehmed II seem to be degraded and the sultan himself appears as a mere henchman of fate. Thus, in contrast to prevailing claims of portraying the Ottoman sultan in a positive manner, Kritoboulos describes the main actions of Mehmed II during the siege and capture of Constantinople in an unexpectedly trivial way. Hence, the accounts of the construction of military fortifications such as the Rumelian castle (chap. 6, 2 and chap. 11, 5–6) focus less on the tactics of the sultan than on the building itself; both speeches of Mehmed II as military commander (chap. 14–16 and chap. 48–51) make him seem eloquent but their function seems to be to delay the actual plot due to several repetitions within and recurring summaries at the end of each chapter; neither the sultan's commands nor his actions are the key point in the general assault on Constantinople (chap. 60, 1–2); the initial satisfaction of his military success turns into grief after entering the city (chap. 68, 2); and finally, throughout the whole account, several setbacks of the Ottoman troops occur. It clearly emerges from these observations that the author seems to subtly criticize the achievements of Mehmed II but his criticism is expressed in a more moderate fashion than it is the case with other contemporary Byzantine historiographers such as Doukas.

A Eulogy for the Conqueror? A Eulogy for the City?

In addition to the abovementioned examples, there are several passages in the *History* of Kritoboulos which deserve further analysis. In this context, it seems suitable to focus on the account of the assault on Constantinople itself since it is considered the main achievement of Mehmed II for which he later obtained the byname *conqueror*. In both of his military speeches, the sultan gives reasons for attacking Constantinople. In sum, the city was not only attractive due to its topography but, being a disruptive element, it also posed a permanent threat to the sultan's plans on taking supremacy of the Eastern Mediterranean. Once again, it is the author's comment that leaves lasting impression - according to Kritoboulos, the war met with (almost universal) approval especially among young and inexperienced men:

> [O]ἱ μὲν ἰδίας ἕνεκεν φιλοτιμίας καὶ κερδῶν ἐλπίζοντες ἐκ τοῦδε πλέον ἕξειν καὶ τὰ αὐτῶν ἐπὶ μέγα χωρήσειν, οἱ δὲ χαριζόμενοί τε τῷ βασιλεῖ καὶ ἅμα κερδαίνειν καὶ αὐτοὶ ἀπὸ τῶν τοιούτων ἐθέλοντες, ἕτεροι δὲ ἀγνοίᾳ τῶν τοῦ πολέμου […].
>
> because of their own ambition and hope of gain, hoping to make something out of it and secure more riches for themselves, others to please the sultan and at the same time wishing to make some gain themselves out of such affairs, and still others, because of their lack of knowledge of war […]. (chap. 17, 1)

Reluctantly, but swept along by the present majority, the participants of the Ottoman council of war came to an unanimous decision. It is quite surprising that neither on part of the Ottoman troops nor on part of Mehmed II himself any account of delight or joy at the victory is given. The author

rather focuses on portraying the despair of the Byzantine people as well as the looting and devastation of their city. Hence, Kritoboulos' account shares more traits with a funeral eulogy than with a proper victory speech. His judgement reads as follows:

> Καὶ γὰρ ὄντως πάθος μέγα τοῦτο γέγονεν ἐφ' ἡμῶν ἐν μιᾷ δὴ ταύτῃ τόλει οἷον ἐν οὐδεμιᾷ τῶν πάλαι μνημονευομένων τε καὶ ἱστορουμένων μεγάλων πόλεων μεγέθει τε τῆς ἁλούσης πόλεως καὶ ὀξύτητι καὶ ἀποτομίᾳ τοῦ ἔργου· οὐχ ἥκιστα δὲ πάντας ἐξέπληξε τούς τε ἄλλους καὶ αὐτοὺς δὴ τοὺς δράσαντας καὶ παθόντας τῷ τε παραλόγῳ καὶ ἀήθει τοῦ γεγονότος καὶ τῷ ὑπερβάλλοντι καὶ ξενίζοντι τοῦ δεινοῦ.
>
> And indeed this was a great blow to us, in this one city, a disaster the like of which had occurred in no one of the great renowned cities of history, whether one speaks of the size of the captured city or of the bitterness and harshness of the deed. And no less did it astound all others than it did those who went through it and suffered, through the unreasonable and unusual character of the event and through the overwhelming and unheard-of horror of it. (chap. 68, 3)

In order to stress the monumentality of the event, the capture of Constantinople is systematically compared to the conquest of elder cities like Troy, Babylon, Carthage, Rome and Jerusalem, as well as to its own previous capture in 1204 (chap. 68, 4 – chap. 69, 3).[28] Anyway, Kritobulos remarks in his final comment that

> καὶ παράδειγμα πάντων οὖσα καλῶν καὶ λαμπρᾶς εὐδαιμονίας εἰκὼν νῦν εἰκών ἐστι δυστυχίας καὶ μεγίστων συμφορῶν ὑπόμνημα καὶ στήλη κακοδαιμονίας καὶ μῦθος τῷ βίῳ.
>
> while [the city] had been an example of all good things, the picture of brilliant prosperity, it now became the picture of misfortune, a reminder of sufferings, a monument of disaster, and a by-word for life (chap. 69, 2).

This passage does not exclusively refer to the Ottoman sultan since his deeds had almost entirely been thrust into the background in view of the siege and capture of Constantinople. Again, the report on the events, and the fate of the *city*, take center stage due to its exemplary character.

Conclusion

Whereas modern historians persistently judge Kritoboulos as a "traitor to the national cause [...], a betrayer of the people, guided by class interest alone,"[29] it has clearly emerged from the reasoning given above that the fate of his fellow countrymen has been very much of Kritoboulos' interest. In expressing his sympathies for the Byzantine people, as well as offering

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28 It is not only Kritoboulos who creates this sort of references to the aforementioned cities. Both Doukas chap. 41, 18 (referring to Jerusalem) and Laonikos Chalkokondylas I chap. 68, 2 (referring to Troy) offer similar comparisons. There also exists an anonymous Greek account which includes a comparison with Babylon and Jerusalem, cf. Pertusi, *La Caduta II*, 326–331. For further information, cf. Mary R. Bachvarova, Dorota Dutsch, and Ann Suter, eds., *The fall of cities in the Mediterranean. Commemoration in literature, folk-song, and liturgy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2016); Aphrodite Papayianni, "He Polis Healo: The Fall of Constantinople in 1453 in Post-Byzantine Popular Literature," *Al-Masāq. Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean* 22, no. 1 (2010): 36.

29 Reinsch, *historian, raya, patriot*, 306.

mild criticism of Mehmed II, his account is possibly even more accurate than those of other Byzantine historiographers.

Coming to a conclusion, the Byzantine sources on the capture of Constantinople in 1453 such as the account of Kritoboulos cannot be reduced to the simple formula of "decline and fall."[30] Considering the uncertainty of the contemporary authors who, in the immediate aftermath of the event, were not even able to determine the reasons that led to this outcome of events, it seems clear that they tried to offer a way out of one's individual crisis. In doing so, they also contributed to the literary discourse on the perception, interpretation and evaluation of the outcome of events. Undoubtedly, Kritoboulos perceives the capture of Constantinople as an un-heard catastrophe, too. It is, however, significant that his historiography offers a productive and a constructive re-evaluation of the new state of affairs which denies recently constructed end-time scenarios. This innovative approach is addressed to an audience intended to consist of both the Ottomans and the Byzantines. In essence, the principal Greek sources also reflect a marginal, but clearly more positive stance towards the Ottomans. For this, Kritoboulos' *History* is a well-chosen example.

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