

Roman Shlyakhtin, MA  
Department of Medieval Studies  
Central European University  
Budapest

## **The Image of the Seljuk Turks in Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries**

### *1. Byzantium and the Seljuks: Background and Main Research Question*

When medievalists speak about twelfth-century Byzantium, they usually and especially in recent discussions mention the crusades and problems of mutual misunderstanding between east and west, which led to the fall of Constantinople in the wake of the Fourth Crusade in 1204. In such discussions specialists in the western middle ages occasionally neglect the fact that twelfth-century Byzantium was not solely occupied with the crusades, but also with the complex relations with the new neighbors to the east and to the west. I am particularly interested in the relations between Byzantium and its eastern neighbors: the Seljuk Turks.

The Seljuks appeared on the Byzantine borders suddenly in the 1040s. In 1071 they defeated Byzantine emperor Romanos IV Diogenes in the battle of Mantzikert. Ten years later they arrived at the shores of the Bosphorus. Alexios I Komnenos (r. 1081–1118), by means of war and diplomacy, moved the Byzantine-Seljuk border zone eastward. His son John II Komnenos (r. 1118–1143) and grandson Manuel I Komnenos (r. 1143–1180) continued Alexios' policies and pushed the Turks further east, from the valleys of coastal Asia Minor. Two nomadic conglomerates – the Danishmendide emirate and the Seljuk sultanate centered around Ikonion – fought for river valleys and grazing lands with Byzantium and each other. The border war continued all the way down to the fall of Constantinople in 1204. The newly emerging “empire of Nicaea” and the renewed sultanate of Ikonion concluded a conscious piece, which lasted more than fifty years until the coming of the Mongols.

These deeds of the Seljuk Turks and the Byzantines were recorded by the same Byzantine writers who wrote about Byzantium and the crusades. The aim of my dissertation is to investigate the image of the Seljuk Turks in Byzantine literature of the eleventh and twelfth centuries – defining literature (mostly court rhetoric, in prose and verse) as the political and public discourse of the empire – and thus add a crucial aspect to our ever deepening understanding of pre-Komnenian and Komnenian Byzantine history and culture, always keeping in mind the different agendas of different authors and the intricate interplay between rhetorical production and *Realpolitik* in a courtly world of patronage and performances.

What then was the image of Seljuk Turks in eleventh- and twelfth-century Byzantine literature? This large question falls into groups of subquestions, which will be answered successively in the chapters of the dissertation.

## 2. Summary of Dissertation

The introductory chapter deals with the sources. Currently, I have around fifty source texts of different genres, lengths, and value. The most important sources for my topic are the works of historiographers (e.g., Michael Attaleiates, Anna Komnene, Niketas Choniates), but I also use court poetry (Theodore Prodromos, “Manganeios Prodromos”), court rhetoric (Michael Italikos), epistolography (Theophylact of Ochrid) and many other works of different genres including one astrological poem.

The first chapter (on which I am currently working) is dedicated to several aspects of the Byzantine perception of the Seljuks as a (social) group. First, I address the myth of “Seljuk origin” (according to Byzantine ideas, the Seljuks were heirs to the Huns). Secondly, I study the Byzantine impressions of Seljuk language and Seljuk religion. The third and last part of this first chapter deals with the Byzantine perception of “Seljuk nomadism”: in this section I compare information found in Byzantine sources with the latest findings of archaeologists in the region and try to reconstruct the Byzantine attitude towards Seljuk nomadism.

My second chapter deals with the Seljuk distribution of power (again as seen through Byzantine eyes). It addresses the question of Byzantine views on the sultanate of the Great Seljuks (whose master was usually called “great sultan”) and on the formation of political conglomerates in Asia Minor. I dedicate special attention to the ancient terms which the Byzantines used to denote different Seljuk agents of power (“satraps,” “archsatraps”).

The third chapter of my dissertation is dedicated to the military aspect of the image. How did the Byzantines depict and imagine Seljuk tactics? What was their opinion about the military prowess of their competitors? In the same chapter I address the extensive information about the Byzantine-Seljuk diplomacy and try to decipher the intricate messages sent through special sets of diplomatic gifts.

The fourth chapter, entitled “Seljuk Kaleidoscope,” may well be the most entertaining for prospective readers. It deals with the images of different individual Seljuk Turks popular among Byzantine writers. Among the case studies in this chapter are the victor of Mantzikert, sultan Alp Arslan.; a “loyal servant” of Andronikos Komnenos called Poupakas; the “treacherous sultan” Kiliç Arslan II; and, finally, “ideal sultan” Kay-Khusraw . This kaleidoscope of Seljuk heroes obviously demonstrates the increasing “integration” of the Seljuks into the Byzantine thought-world over the course of the twelfth century.

The fifth chapter will be dedicated to comparison of the image of the Seljuk Turks with the image of other “Others” of Byzantine literature, especially “the Franks” .In the conclusion I will draw the sum of the image of the Seljuk Turks in Byzantine rhetorical discourse but first and foremost elucidate the reasons for which the Byzantines wrote about the Seljuks and for which narrative – and, by implication, political – purposes they used and misused them, and which political realities this reflected.

## 3. Methodology and Approaches

My sources are highly rhetoricized texts largely written in the artificial sociolect which became the trademark of Byzantine *litterati* from the ninth century onwards. The basic methodology which I use to study these intricate written sources is narratology and rhetorical analysis. Byzantine historiographers created the image of the Seljuk Turks with the help of different narrative (such as order, rhythm, focus etc.) and rhetorical (figures and tropes) features which can be well analyzed with the toolbox(es) provided by Gérard Genette, Mieke Bal, Heinrich Lausberg, and others.

A second approach, closely related to the first but highlighting one particularly significant aspect, is intertextuality. To build up different components of the image of the Seljuk Turks, Byzantine writers used “citations, references, cultural languages, which cut across the text in various stereophonies.”<sup>1</sup> Intertextuality allows one to reveal all networks of allusions and quotations in the selected text and to read codes thus inserted into these texts.

Additionally, I borrow from the American school of religious studies, namely from the works of Jonathan Z. Smith, the definition of “locative” and “utopian” modes of *religion* and apply this concepts to the Byzan-

---

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, tr. S. Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 160.

tine *literature* of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. My first experimental paper on this topic at the 2012 Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies at the University of Oxford received good feedback: I am looking forward to applying the idea of these modes to the “Seljuk part” of Byzantine discourse and to see what the result will be.

Finally, my image studies are not entirely possible without the occasional reconstruction of the “real life” behind the image. Therefore, I draw on the results of archaeology and social history. I finally also use works on the “general history” of Seljuk Anatolia, which help a lot in clarifying details of biography of several important Seljuk leaders.

#### 4. Preliminary Results

The first result of the project is rather general. Before and immediately after the civil wars toward the end of the eleventh century, Byzantine literature was primarily operating in the “locative” mode. Writers were mostly interested in events which happened *inside* the empire. In the twelfth century, this situation noticeably changed: the “utopian” mode became more significant. The key period in this turn from the “inside” to the “outside” was the beginning of reign of John II Komnenos. This emperor’s court poets coined a new, aggressive ideology of imperial reconquest, which is preserved, e.g., in the poems of Theodore Prodromos. Equally, Byzantine historiographers became more interested in different kinds of “Others”: Anna Komnene was writing the history of her father at the very end of John’s reign and introduced her famous description of the crusaders (especially the Norman Bohemond), which is present in all modern textbooks.

The image of the Seljuks in Byzantine literature also changed together in this great cultural shift. Before the reign of John Komnenos the Seljuks were called “Turks,” and, in some early writings, “Huns.” During the reign of John Komnenos, this situation changed: the barbarians (“Turks”) all of a sudden became “Persians”, “noble enemies from the east.” From this time onward court poets and rhetoricians referred to the Seljuks as “Persians,” while other writers who circle continued to call them “Turks.” Some authors, like Anna Komnene, used both terms, which confused modern scholars.

As is well known, learned Byzantines hardly ever referred to their current neighbors by contemporary nomenclature but preferred ethnonyms attested in ancient historiography (such as “Persians” for Seljuks). While these ancient terms used by the Byzantines rarely retained their original meanings, they were not randomly used; close reading does allow to establish precise contemporary meanings. It can be shown that Byzantine writers, especially Niketas Choniates, had a very exact and clear idea about power balance in the nomadic conglomerates of Asia Minor: they used different ancient titles such as “satraps” or “archsatraps” to denote the functionaries of different levels.

In terms of such religiously inspired ideology, the Byzantines did not see Seljuks as a “holy warriors of Islam.” For them, the Seljuk rather were barbarians. When court poets of John Komnenos re-invented the Seljuks as “Persians,” they started to mention “fire-worshipping” as their religion. This seems to be a pure literary in- or perhaps rather *convention*: the Seljuks of the twelfth century could be animists, but not Zoroastrians. It is interesting to note that the Byzantines never tried to convert the Seljuks to Christianity: Anna Komnene says that her father had an idea of conversion, but did not have the time to execute it. Equally intriguingly, the Byzantines also did not engage in religious polemics with the Seljuks (as they later would with the Osmanlı or, contemporarily, with the Latins and Jews).

These are preliminary conclusions and they are patchy. I will develop them further and expand them during the final period of the work on my dissertation. I believe that the unique chance of participating in your PhD and post-doctoral training school would greatly help me achieve this goal.