

The empire of Trebizond and the Pontos, 13th – 15th centuries

1. Historical framework

The Empire of Trebizond comprises the area surrounding the modern day city of Trabzon on the south eastern Black Sea Coast in Turkey. It provides a unique case study of a Byzantine successor state that remained virtually independent through its existence, whilst it also offers a case study of a late medieval small state in the territories that (formerly) belonged to the Byzantine empire.

History of the empire

The empire of Trebizond was founded in 1204, at the time of the foundation of the Latin Empire in Constantinople as a consequence of the Fourth Crusade. The exact course of the foundation process for the empire of Trebizond has been largely debated without clear consensus, but it is evident that during the first years of its existence, the empire formed one of the three successor states to the Byzantine empire, challenging the remaining two, namely the Empire of Nicaea and the Despotate of Epirus. The founders of the empire were Alexios and David Komnenos, grandchildren of the Byzantine emperor Andronikos I Komnenos (r. 1183-5), of whom Alexios became the first emperor of Trebizond (r. 1204-1222). The foundation of the empire was greatly facilitated by Queen Tamar I of Georgia, the maternal aunt of Alexios and David, but the empire did not become part of Tamar's territories, but an independent region that developed into a state that called itself an empire. The empire was ruled throughout its existence by male and female descendants of Alexios, thus making the dynasty of the Komnenoi – sometimes in secondary literature designated as 'Grand Komnenoi' – the longest ruling Byzantine dynasty. The empire of Trebizond fell in 1461, eight years after the fall of Constantinople, to the Ottoman Turks, after a failed alliance with Uzun Hasan, leader of the Aq Qoyunlu (White Sheep).

Research on the empire to date

The history of Trebizond has been studied mainly as part of Byzantine history, notably by Sieur Charles Fresne Du Cange, Edward Gibbon and P.W. Afzelius. A turning point was marked when Johann Philipp Fallmerayer discovered the manuscript for the Chronicle by Michael Panaretos. His history of the Empire of Trebizond, as well as his 'Original-Fragmenten' made key primary sources available for modern scholarship. Trebizond has been studied by British scholars: George Finlay included Trebizond in his history of the Byzantine empire. William Miller's narrative of the history of Trebizond from 1926 is still today the most recent English one. Anthony Bryer's lifetime work shows thorough knowledge of the area and has brought into light for the first time several topics in the study of the history of Trebizond that merit further study. Together with David Winfield, he published the extensive monograph on the monuments of Trebizond and its surroundings. Trebizond has also been studied by Russian scholars, notably Fodor Uspenskij, who did fieldwork in the region and was forced to leave during the Russo-Turkish war, taking along him a manuscript from the archives of the Vazelon monastery – this manuscript is the only monastic cartulary surviving today from the region. A. A. Vasiliev dedicated a great part of his work to Trebizond and wrote a key article on the foundation of the empire. Today, Sergey Karpov and Rustam Shukurov work actively on the region and are the authors of the most recent monographs of the area: Karpov has during his extensive work on the empire written especially on the empire's trade with Italians, whereas Shukurov has focused on the empire's relations with the east.

Thus the empire has been subject to scholarship, but in comparison with other regions studied in late Byzantine studies, it remains understudied and mistakenly classified as an area of marginal interest. It has often been studied in isolation and omitted or only marginally mentioned in overall scholarship on the Byzantine empire. However, understanding the empire of Trebizond is crucial for understanding the late Byzantine world – and not only that: Trebizond should not only be discussed in the context of Byzantine history, but its study related closely to general medieval history, especially to that of Italian trade, as well as to early Ottoman, Caucasian, Black Sea, Russian and Armenian history. There is enough source material

available on the empire to make it a case study, and it should be studied in comparison with its neighbours and alliances, to understand how representative it was of a late medieval small state.

2. Aim of my research

The Pontic world of Trebizond provides an opportunity to study the history of the Late Byzantine period from a frontier perspective as opposed to the majority of the sources available for this period, which were written in Constantinople, and which closely represent the view of the Byzantine Palaiologan emperors. The view from Trebizond complements our historical understanding of the final centuries of the Byzantine Empire, of its conflicts and alliances with Turkoman tribes and of the rise of the Ottomans. The empire of Trebizond has been researched in terms of its internal history, its topography and its relations with Italian traders and its eastern neighbours. The aim of the current research is to deepen the understanding of the empire in the 14th century as a period of crisis and consolidation of the empire. The current research will aim to determine some of the factors that contributed the development of the empire of Trebizond from a 'successor state' into a successful political unit.

The history of Trebizond has been written, but it lacks a context, which only can be provided by a comparative study with other late medieval small states – such as Cilician Armenia or the shrinking Byzantine empire. Questions of trade, internal politics, geographical factors and participation in wars will be assessed. It will also be discussed, to which extent the concept of the 14th century as an 'age of adversity' in Europe, was valid in the eastern Black Sea region.

Moreover, the relationships with the empire of Trebizond and its neighbours will be determined in detail. To what extent was it an independent state? Especially, its relations with Georgia and the Byzantine empire will be discussed. The research will trace the relations between Trebizond, supported in its foundation by the Georgian Queen Tamar, and assess developments of rapprochement and alienation.

Moreover, it will be added what the significance of the 'latent Turkification' of the empire was. Notably in the mid- 14th century, Alexios III Komnenos of Trebizond pursued a policy of active marriage alliances with neighbouring Turkic tribes, thus making his enemies into his vassals and family members. This process has been discussed by Anthony Bryer. I will examine what it meant for the Trapezuntine family policies and how the integration of Turks as members of the royal family affected became internal politics of the empire that affected its external politics. Trebizond had multiple identities: in addition to its self-perception as 'a Byzantine Empire', it formed the centre of a 'Pontic' world. This universe encompassed the shores of the Black Sea and it extended into Anatolia and the Caucasus. Pontic Trebizond dealt comfortably with Georgians, Armenians, Turks, Italians – it was in the middle of a variety of languages and religions. Its emperors were Greek –speakers, but its subjects were predominantly not.

Most importantly, the research will address in detail the relationship between Trebizond and the Byzantine empire, two enclaves that both considered themselves 'Byzantine' and remained in predominantly Greek –speaking, Christian rule for two and a half centuries, in the middle of an increasingly 'Turkified' Anatolia. It will be examined, how Trebizond perceived and portrayed itself as opposed to how it was perceived in the Byzantine empire – and what eventual differences in this perception and portrayal implied. It will be discussed, whether in Trapezuntine rhetoric there was an understanding of Trebizond and Byzantium being part of the same empire or whether they were portrayed as independent states – and what their relation was. Constantinopolitan sources give the impression of Trebizond being a remote land of the east and call it the territory of 'Colchis' or the land of the Laz'. Trapezuntine sources give another impression and their elaborate titlature and adoption of Byzantine customs also speaks about a political agenda. In secondary literature about the late Byzantine empire, Trebizond is often discussed in terms of its role as a 'successor state' in the early 13th century, whereas its status after that is more problematic. Moreover, it is often forgotten that the Palaiologan emperors of Constantinople and the Komnenoi of Trebizond were closely related, which speaks against a discourse of rivalry or competition between the two states. Thus, the

first question I seek to address is to what extent Trebizond was an independent state from the Palaiologan empire and to what degree it was allied to it.

The second question I wish to address is the question of sources. As mentioned above, the chronicle by Michael Panaretos has not received the critical study it would merit as a source. Conclusions for the whole duration of the empire are often made from this source, as well as from others, as if the empire was a stable entity that did not change during the two and a half centuries of its existence.

Thirdly, I wish to study the transformation the empire underwent in its loss of the status of 'successor state' and its processes of crisis and consolidation during the fourteenth century. This will involve a study of the role of two long-ruling emperors, Alexios II Komnenos (r. 1297-1330) and Alexios III Komnenos (r. 1350-1395) and the civil war that took place between their rules. I will also look at the period following the rule of Alexios III and discuss whether the state experienced weakening in the first half of the fifteenth century or whether it remained strong and viable until its fall, caused by external rather than internal factors.

3. Significance of this research

With this study, I wish to contribute towards the discussion of the late Byzantine period, not only in the context of the Byzantine empire itself, but the Byzantine world. My thesis is an attempt to shed light on large, long-term developments in the 14th and 15th centuries in Anatolia and in the Eastern Mediterranean by writing the history of Trebizond and focusing on the challenges it faced and how it survived them. This region had been marked by a moving frontier between large empires – but the late medieval period shows the result of a fragmentation that was visible before and after the Battle of Manzikert and increasingly accelerated after the Fourth Crusade in 1204. This was a period traditionally characterised with a rhetoric of fragmentation, decline and fall. The decline and fall held true no doubt for the Byzantine empire as a political entity, but this does not sufficiently explain the processes of the late Byzantine period. The process of political fragmentation happened both in Anatolia and the Balkans – and this agrees with a larger process of a fragmented political map throughout late

medieval Europe, with small states as the core political units, interconnected through familial alliances. I wish to contribute towards a study that sees the period as a hiatus between large empires as key political units and, furthermore, to study the reasons that led to the pattern of small states being the dominating political structure in Europe and the Near East.

Based on research to date and preliminary observations, this study aims to establish that the empire of Trebizond has not yet been a well understood political entity in Late Byzantine studies. This research will aim to discuss further what the relationship between Palaiologan Constantinople and Komnenian Trebizond was. It will be shown that the current understanding on the empire of Trebizond is on one hand based on its role as a 'successor state' in the early 13th century and on the other hand based on sources that mainly date from the late 14th century. This research will focus on the crisis and consolidation of the empire during the 14th century and place it into a narrative of continuity from the 13th to the 15th century. This was the period when Alexios III managed the Turkmen neighbours of the empire, who signified a great threat and who recently before his rule had made a destructive attack into its territories. Alexios made these Turks his sons-in-law and gave them imperial titles, thus creating peace by the right marriage alliances.

4. Sources

This study is primarily based on literary sources, but some material evidence will also be considered as and when necessary. The main source on the empire of Trebizond is the chronicle written by Michael Panaretos. Panaretos wrote a chronicle of the emperors of Trebizond, recording accurately names and dates but remaining very sparse on other information. Its most recent editor, Odysseus Lampsides, has observed that the events covered by Panaretos end in 1382. The brief continuation to this – the last four paragraphs – cover a few key events, mainly imperial deaths and marriages – until the marriage of David I Komnenos, who became the last emperor of Trebizond. Thus nearly the whole duration of the empire is contained within one source, which makes it convenient to study. However, this source has not been studied systematically, nor has an annotated translation been produced. Odysseus Lampsides has

produced the most recent Greek edition and general commentary in the mid 20th century, yet the chronicle requires a more thorough and critical commentary in order to be accurately used as a source. Panaretos wrote during the rule of the emperor Alexios III Komnenos, who ruled exceptionally long between 1350 and 1395. His rule was preceded by the relatively stable rule of Alexios II Komnenos, which was followed by a long civil war with rapid and violent changes of rulership.

A Trapezuntine literary source also to be considered is the *Periegesis* by Andrew Libadenos, recording his travels in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea and about his involvement with the Trapezuntine court for several years. This source, which combines the genres of history, travel account and hagiography in a high rhetorical style, has nearly escaped scholarly attention apart from its edition by Odysseus Lampsides. Libadenos' account complements certain events covered very briefly by Panaretos, during certain key events before and after the rise to power by Alexios III Komnenos. Constantinopolitan histories also briefly cover the empire of Trebizond, although portraying it as a distant – and, sometimes, insignificant – entity. The relationship between Constantinopolitan and 'Trapezuntine' sources will be discussed in my thesis, as well as the problems in using the term 'Trapezuntine' sources – whose authors often hailed from Constantinople. Thus, it can be seen that these sources focus on Trebizond, but it is debatable whether they represent a 'Trapezuntine' voice and perspective.

A main archival source will be the archives of the Vazelon monastery, situated in the Matzouka (modern Maçka) valley. This is the only archival collection that has survived from Trebizond and, as other Trapezuntine sources, it has received very little scholarly attention compared to other late Byzantine archival sources.

In addition, literary material survives from the 14th century, including encomia and hagiographies of the patron saint of Trebizond, St Eugenios.

Another set of sources consists of coins from Trebizond. During the first decades of its existence, the empire of Trebizond developed its own coinage, the silver asper, which was compatible with the coinage of its immediate neighbours.

5. Work to date and plan

The first year of the research project began with work on the chronicle written by Michael Panaretos. To my knowledge, the only existing translation of the chronicle is into German, in Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer's *Original-Fragmenten*. In the course of my research, my aim is to produce an annotated translation of the chronicle.

The beginning of the project was also spent in reading primary and secondary sources and establishing to which extent various questions arising from the existing source material have been discussed. I chose to write that chapter on an issue that has occupied plenty of space in scholarship: the question of the usage of the term *megas* together with the family name of the Trapezuntine rulers: Komnenos. All the emperors from Trebizond belonged to the lineage of this Alexios I Komnenos. Although the emperors of Trebizond thus belonged to the family of the Byzantine Komnenoi, they are usually referred to as Grand Komnenoi or Megaloi Komnenoi. This designation stems from the frequent occurrence of the word *megas* together with the name of the emperors of Trebizond. This term occurs in the form of [...(forename)...] *o megas Komnenos*, e.g. *Alexios o megas Komnenos*, which has been interpreted so that *megas* is an attribute to the surname rather than the forename. I will not enter into the depths of the meaning of *megas*, but in the sources that I have considered it varies between 'great', 'senior', 'illustrious' or even 'holy'.

The earliest scholars on Trebizond took *megas* to mean 'great'; it was the groundbreaking Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer, the first to write a thorough narrative history on Trebizond, who came up with the term 'Grosskomnenen', 'Grand Komnenoi'. The meanings of *megas* have been the subject of a wide debate, which surged periodically throughout the 20th century – having an opinion on the significance of *megas* seems to be part of the compulsory curriculum of any scholar working on the Empire of Trebizond. Although this meaning has been debated, the usage of the term has received less attention – it has been taken for granted that *megas* was used for each Trapezuntine emperor. This has influenced our understanding of the empire of Trebizond: e.g. in editions of primary sources, *megas* next to 'Komnenos' is sometimes

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capitalised without palaeographic grounds to this. Partially due to this, megalomaniac pretensions have often been associated with the empire of Trebizond.

In the first chapter, I wanted to reassess the viability of this designation: whether *meegas* could be used generically to refer to the ruling dynasty of Trebizond or whether it referred to certain individual emperors. Moreover, it was discussed how frequently *meegas* was used as a self-designation by the emperors and how often was it an attribute used for the emperors. These questions are important to answer, as they reflect the world the Empire of Trebizond formed and developed in.

At the moment, I am working on the *Periegesis* by Andrew Libadenos and other 14th century material to provide a comparison, to get a more in-depth understanding on primary accounts on the events around the early 14th century in Trebizond.

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