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Constantine Manasses' *Synopsis Chronike*: The resemblance to a Byzantine novel and its novelistic and innovative characteristics

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Abstract

The twelfth-century AD in Byzantium was characterised by a literary renaissance, part of which was the creation of new literary genres and the further growth of already existing ones. This article examines one of the most important representatives of this renaissance, Constantine Manasses, and his world chronicle *Synopsis Chronike*, the first extensive historical text that was written in fifteen-syllable verse. In addition, by analysing its characteristics, it aims to offer a detailed picture of the narratological devices used in the chronicle and to compare them with those found in the three most famous Byzantine novels from the Komnenian period. It also attempts to investigate the reason why Manasses decided to write his chronicle in the way he did. This examination reveals that the *Synopsis Chronike* contains various novelistic features that make it closely resemble a Byzantine novel, while it shows that it was an entertaining historical text which was written by an author who wished to entertain his readers and his patroness with carefully selected popular stories.

Introduction

The Komnenian dynasty ruled the Byzantine Empire from AD 1081 until AD 1185, henceforth, unless stated, all dates are AD. Many changes in various aspects of the society, including literary renaissance, occurred during this period. In the twelfth century, the cultural and intellectual life of the Empire reached a high point since texts such as histories, chronicles and novels flourished and writers started to experiment and play around with the boundaries between different genres. A rather interesting example of such an intellectual is that of Constantine Manasses, who composed a world chronicle for his patroness, *sebastokratorissa* Irene.¹ His *Synopsis Chronike* is one of the most original texts of this period. Not only was it the first extensive historical text written in fifteen-syllable verse, but it also, as will become clear, closely resembles a Byzantine novel; it was, therefore, very popular during its time and in later centuries, as is suggested by the many manuscripts that have preserved the original Greek text.

Historical context

In 1081 Alexios I Komnenos was enthroned as emperor and commenced the Komnenian dynasty that ruled the Byzantine Empire until 1185. This period (namely the twelfth century) was characterised by relative political stability and economic growth, successful (although with only short-term results) foreign policy, the reinforcement of the clergy's role in many aspects of life in the Empire, the introduction of a military aristocracy that depended largely on family relations, thus making the connection to the imperial family an important condition for social climbing, and the increasing presence of Westerners (crusaders and pilgrims on their way to the Holy Land, traders - mainly from the naval cities of Venice and Genova - and mercenaries) in Byzantium.²

¹ For the transliteration of Greek names, I have followed Kazhdan 1991.

² Kakalidis 2012: 54-58; Nilsson 2014: 122-123.

The newly emerged 'aristocratic mentality contributed to the creation of a new environment for intellectuals at the court',³ since the court became a market for them as a result of the imperial family's desire for certain kinds of texts, thus leading to 'a system of 'write on demand', literary circles and patronage'.⁴ In addition, according to Magdalino, Byzantine intellectuals were highly affected by the empire's increasing defensiveness against foreigners, while they were also gaining confidence:

in the enduring vitality of the Empire's institutions, in the rightness of its traditions, in the wealth, splendour and renown of Constantinople and, above all, in the sheer weight of learning preserved and transmitted in the city's schools and libraries.⁵

Thus, at the same time as feeling insecure, they also started becoming prouder of their own erudition and educational status, and highly aware of their intellectual past. Indeed, many intellectual figures of this period reacted to Western presence in the Empire by stressing either Byzantium's relation to Rome (e.g. Michael Attaleiates) or, more often, its ancient Greek origins and connection to classical Athens, namely a past that they could more exclusively consider as "theirs".⁶

As a result, the Komnenian period is characterised as a Literary Renaissance because of the creation of new literary genres and the further development of already existing ones, such as novels, world chronicles, histories, satires and dramatic poems.⁷ Indeed, twelfth-century writers tended to both renew and experiment with genres: according to Magdalino, who is specifically referring to historians:

³ Nilsson 2014: 122.

⁴ Nilsson 2014: 122-123.

⁵ Macrides and Magdalino 1992: 118.

⁶ At the same period the term Hellenes also gained in popularity, mostly in reference to the Westerners (see Macrides and Magdalino 1992: 155-156; Kakalidis 2012: 59).

⁷ It is estimated that more historical narratives were written during this period than any other Byzantine period.

each, in his or her own way, set a new standard or precedent: Skylitzes in the critical discussion of his sources; Bryennios and Anna Comnena in writing history as epic; Manasses in writing in verse;⁸ Kinnamos in eye-witness accuracy; Zonaras in producing a world history that was both critical and concise; Glykas in combining history and natural history; Choniates in evoking and explaining the combination of brilliance and decay in the empire and legacy of Manuel Komnenos.⁹

The above-mentioned world chronicle is one of the genres that flourished during that period. In general, there was a relative (but not strict or clear) distinction between histories and chronicles in Byzantine literature. Histories were written in classical Attic Greek, according to the stylistic rules set by the ancient Greek tradition of history writing (mainly by Herodotus and Thucydides), and covered a relatively short period of time, close to when historians themselves had lived. Chronicles, on the other hand, were written in a simpler, less difficult language (although not in the vernacular), and either covered the period from the Creation of the world to the time of their composition (or perhaps a little before that), or continued the chronicle of another author, which had again started with the Creation. Early chronicles, like that of John Malalas in the sixth century, the *Chronikon Paschale* of the seventh century and the chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor in the eighth/ninth century, were rather laconic, as they were structured year by year in order to record various events in a very succinct way. Later chronicles (and certainly by the twelfth century) were structured around rulers, kings and emperors, and included an account of the great empires, namely the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Macedonian, Roman and Byzantine, while presenting the events that had taken place during their existence.¹⁰

⁸ Writing in verse within certain genres that were traditionally written in prose was a rather common practice at that time in Byzantium. See Zagklas 2018.

⁹ Magdalino 1993: 395.

¹⁰ Bourbouhakis and Nilsson 2010; Kakalidis 2012; Krumbacher 1897; Macrides and Magdalino 1992.

Constantine Manasses and his *Synopsis Chronike*, its novelistic features and the reasons for its resemblance to a Byzantine novel

We know of five chronicles that have survived from the twelfth century: John Skylitzes' *Synopsis of Histories*, George Kedrenos' *Synopsis historion* (also known as *A concise history of the world*), John Zonaras' *Extracts of History*, Michael Glykas' *Biblos Chronike* and Constantine Manasses' *Synopsis Chronike*.

Constantine Manasses was a Byzantine intellectual associated with imperial circles and the Komnenian court. The scholarly literature has not reached a certain conclusion regarding the exact years he lived yet, although several suggestions have been made, mostly based on his literary works that have survived,¹¹ but Jeffreys estimates that he was born around 1120 and died after 1175.¹² We also know nothing about his family, except for the fact that it was socially well connected and related to the old family of Apokaukos,¹³ and that Constantine was probably related to Athanasios Manasses, patriarch of Antioch.¹⁴ Manasses was highly educated, like all the intellectuals and writers in Constantinople, but, to our knowledge, he never held a governmental or ecclesiastical office (he might, however, have taught rhetoric at the capital's Patriarchal School¹⁵). At an early age, probably when he was twenty years old, he joined other intellectuals, such as Theodore Prodromos and John Tzetzes, in the circle of *sebastokratorissa* Irene, wife of Manuel I's brother, Andronikos Komnenos, and a famous literary patroness.¹⁶ However, it seems

¹¹ Lampsidis 1996: XIV, Nilsson and Nyström 2009: 44, and Foskolou 2018: 78 all agree that he was born in 1115, while Treadgold 2013: 399 notes 1125 as his birth date. Kazhdan 1991: 1280 and Kakalidis 2012: 43 both estimate he was born ca. 1130 and died ca. 1187.

¹² Jeffreys 2012: 273-274.

¹³ Treadgold 2013: 399.

¹⁴ Magdalino 1997: 161.

¹⁵ Foskolou 2018: 78; Kakalidis 2012: 43.

¹⁶ For Irene as a patroness, see Jeffreys 2014.

that he distanced himself from her after Andronikos died in 1142 and Irene fell into disfavour. After her death in 1152 he found another patron in Manuel I's cousin, *sebastos* John Kontostephanos.¹⁷ Between 1160-1162, he participated in a diplomatic mission to the Holy Land: he was an imperial representative in John's embassy which was searching for a bride for Manuel I. Manasses recorded his experience in the *Hodoiporikon*, an 800 verse, fifteen-syllable poem. During his trip he gained another aristocratic patron, Alexios Doukas, the grandson of Anna Komnene, before he had to return to Cyprus, where Alexios was serving as the local governor, after falling ill at Tyre.¹⁸ Apart from his *Hodoiporikon*, Manasses wrote speeches in praise of members of the imperial family or other powerful, aristocratic families he was associated with, including: conventional *panegyrics*, a series of *ekphraseis*, a poem about astrology for his patroness and an erotic novel in verse, *Aristandros and Kallithea* (it survives only in fragments). His most important work though was the *Synopsis Chronike*,¹⁹ a verse chronicle that was also commissioned by Irene and was dedicated to her.

Synopsis Chronike (hereafter the *Synopsis*) starts from the Creation of the world and ends with the fall of Nikephoros III Botaneiates and the accession of Alexios I Komnenos to the throne in 1081. This chronicle, a chronological abridgement of many sources,²⁰ was composed around 1143 (probably after 1143, when Manuel I had become emperor and Irene was freed from confinement, and before her death in 1152). It is the first that was written in verse,²¹ with 6620 fifteen-syllable lines, in a metre known as 'political', which might have been common, although not for historical texts that were usually

¹⁷ Foskolou 2018: 79; Treadgold 2013: 400.

¹⁸ Magdalino 1997: 161-162.

¹⁹ Translated by Yuretich 2018.

²⁰ Apart from the Bible, Manasses must have read and used the histories of John Zonaras, George Kedrenos, George the Monk, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, John of Antioch, Theophanes Confessor and Pseudo-Symeon (Neville 2018: 200; Treadgold 2013: 402).

²¹ On versification in the *Synopsis*, see Grigoriadis 1998: 337-338.

prose narratives, but mostly for folk poetry, such as the heroic akritic songs *Akritika* or the Escorial version of the *Digenes Akritas*, and for later Byzantine romances. Judging from the quantity of manuscripts that have survived, Manasses' chronicle must have been very popular in the medieval world.²²

The *Synopsis* begins with a dedicatory epigram (the only part that is not written in fifteen-syllable verse, but in Dactylic Hexameter), where the author addresses and praises his patroness, and an elegant proem. What follows is the Creation and the events that took place up to Abraham's time, and then Manasses frames his narrative around the kings or emperors of Persia, Macedonia, Rome and Byzantium and their reigns. Although he does not provide any new historical information or details, and cannot be completely relied upon regarding the facts that he does give, he does not follow the conventional forms of chronicle-writing closely: he does not include entire passages taken from other chroniclers, but carefully chooses and includes events that he deems important or interesting, thus creating an episodic structure.²³ In general, as Nilsson notes:

Manasses' general literary technique does not differ radically from that of other Komnenian authors; he follows the exploratory vein that on the whole characterises the literary production of the Komnenian period. The selective use of sources, the careful blending of subject matter with structure, and the authorial intrusion reveals an author very much aware of himself and his skill, an author daring to subvert an established genre and include ekphrastic strategies or novelistic plots.²⁴

Indeed, several novelistic features can be traced in the chronicle written by Manasses, who also happens to be the author of one of the four erotic romances of this period. Apart from his *Aristandros and Kallithea*, the other

²² The original text is preserved in at least one hundred Greek manuscripts, and excerpts of it are found in various Byzantine anthologies. In addition, it was used by later writers (e.g. by Michael Glykas, Ephraim of Ainos and the anonymous author of the romance *Belthandros and Chrysantza*), and was translated into Middle Bulgarian during the fourteenth century (see Nilsson and Nyström 2009: 43-44).

²³ Lampsidis 1996: XLI.

²⁴ Nilsson 2005: 129-130.

three Byzantine novels from the Komnenian period are *Rodanthe and Dosikles* by Theodore Prodromos, *Drosilla and Charikles* by his pupil Niketas Eugenianos and *Hysmine and Hysminias* by Eumathios (or Eustathios) Makrembolites. All of them are influenced by ancient (Hellenistic) novels (such as Achilles Tatios' *Leukippe and Kleitophon* or Longos' *Daphnis and Chloe*), a genre that had always been popular among the Byzantines but was especially revived during the twelfth century, the century of narrative experimentation.²⁵ These novels take place in foreign lands and ancient times and have a standard plot: they describe the romantic adventures of a young couple, a beautiful, moral, chaste woman and a handsome, brave man (usually 'idealistic' characters) who fall in love, but face several difficulties as they are separated, usually by their parents, or abducted by pirates, but are saved at the end, before they finally reunite and get married. Novels also contain subplots, various rhetorical techniques, such as *ekphraseis* (rhetorical descriptions), *encomia* (praises) and *psogoi* (invectives), exotic characters, references to dreams and to the cult of the Olympian gods, and personifications of impersonal forces (mostly of Eros).

It has been thus argued that, in several ways, the *Synopsis* resembles a Byzantine novel. To begin with, it is written in verse, like most twelfth-century novels. Furthermore, as already mentioned, Manasses uses an episodic structure by selecting to narrate some specific episodes, based on their narrative potential and their usefulness for his plot, which are:

reported in the manner of a storyteller and loosely but securely strung together by alternating narratological devices, such as authorial comments, recapitulations or proverbial expressions.²⁶

As a storyteller, he also guides readers through the text by using narrative signposts,²⁷ introducing the following passages with phrases such as 'I will now give a concise account of how this happened', and inserting his own

²⁵ See Bourbouhakis and Nilsson 2010: 271-272.

²⁶ Nilsson and Nyström 2009: 45.

²⁷ See Croke 2010: 48-49.

comments and interventions that demand and challenge the reader's attention.

Regarding Manasses' language and style, his chronicle includes various figures of speech (like metaphors and rhetorical addresses), rare, rhetorically artificial vocabulary with many compound words, Homeric adjectives and images, evocations of the audience²⁸ and other forms of narrative, such as *encomia* (e.g. of Manuel Komnenos, which is combined with an encomium of Constantinople²⁹), encomiastic *ekphraseis*, *psogoi* (for example of the emperor Phokas³⁰), *gnomai* (proverbial expressions) and *ekphraseis*, all characteristics that can also be found in novels.

Ekphraseis were broadly used in Byzantium but, as Nilsson notes:

Manasses not only puts the device to exhaustive use, but also exploits its implied figurative and aesthetic meanings in a manner which is similar to, but probably even exceeds, the use of *ekphrasis* in the contemporary Komnenian novels.³¹

One characteristic example of this can be traced in the way that Manasses describes the garden of Eden on the sixth day of Creation.³² This *ekphrasis* is idyllic (we read about wonderful trees, flowers, fruit and animals), very descriptive and detailed (much more than *Genesis*, the source it is based on) and follows the conventional structure of garden *ekphraseis* found in novels. According to Nilsson, it also contains the erotic implications and sexual tension that are traditionally used in *ekphraseis*,³³ as the author mentions, for example, that the trees' "limbs mingle and their branches united. It was as if the leaves of the trees without hesitation embraced each other with loving

²⁸ Evocations suggest that the text was publically performed. Papaioannou 2010: 19. For *theatra* and the performance of literature in Byzantium, see Bourbouhakis 2010: 180.

²⁹ Yuretich 2018: 112.

³⁰ Yuretich 2018: 147.

³¹ Nilsson 2005: 130.

³² Yuretich 2018: 28-30.

³³ Nilsson 2005: 130.

caresses”³⁴. By inserting such an *ekphrasis* in his chronicle, Manasses shows how imaginative he can be and, at the same time, displays his erudition.³⁵ His description of Eden is similar to Eumathios Makrembolites’ elaborated *ekphrasis* of a garden in *Hysmine and Hysminias*. The author describes a fountain, certain benches around it and several plants, flowers, and trees, such as cypresses, myrtles, vines and roses which, as Nilsson notes, are considered to be erotic plants.³⁶ Makrembolites also attaches sexual connotations to the garden itself, just like Manasses, when writing that:

laurel and myrtle and cypresses and vines and all the other plants that adorn a garden ... had their branches raised like arms ... setting up a dance.³⁷

A further novelistic feature of the *Synopsis* is related to its general emphasis on adventure and romance. This can be particularly seen in the following episodes of Theodosios II’s reign (408–450) and the apple story related to his wife Eudokia, the events regarding Justinian I’s general Belisarios and the Trojan War.

The historical events concerning Theodosios II, his sister Pulcheria and his wife Athenais-Eudokia were very popular and tense, and therefore appear in most Byzantine chronicles. Manasses’ source most probably was the chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor, which only includes a short report of the events:

“In this year Attikos baptized the daughter of the philosopher Leontios, namely Athenais, and renamed her Eudokia. On the advice of Pulcheria she was married to Theodosios. She was remarkable for the beauty of her body, for the intelligence of her mind, and for her

³⁴ Yuretich 2018: 29.

³⁵ We also know of a series of independent *ekphraseis* written by Manasses: two descriptions of works of art found in the imperial palace, a description of the snaring of small birds on Bosporos’ Asiatic shore, a hunt description featuring Emperor Manuel I Komnenos and his falcon, and a description of a dwarf who was displayed in Constantinople.

³⁶ Nilsson 2001: 98-99.

³⁷ Jeffreys 2012: 179.

culture.” (Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronicle*, AM 5911, AD 417-418)³⁸

Manasses, on the other hand, is far more descriptive and eloquent. He describes Pulcheria and Eudokia as very beautiful and virtuous, highlighting both their appearance and soul (‘idealised’ characters are typical of novels), and expands on the way the latter was led to Constantinople and eventually to the throne as the emperor’s wife.³⁹ He also mentions another well-known story related to Theodosios, that of the apple. According to Nilsson and Nyström, stories regarding apples are a general motif broadly used in novels during the twelfth century, such as in *Hysmine and Hysminias* and *Drosilla and Charikles*,⁴⁰ where the authors refer to the apple of Discord and the Judgement of Paris, while Niketas Eugenianos also mentions the apples’ amatory connotations.⁴¹ As for Theodosios’ story, a man had given him a large apple, which he sent to his wife. Eudokia, though, gifted it to her friend Paulinus, who in return sent it back to the emperor. Theodosios recognised it, and after Eudokia swore to him that she had eaten it, he exiled her and had Paulinus murdered. Manasses writes an entire story about this episode,⁴² one indeed worthy of novels, which he tries to expand (e.g. by references to the Judgement of Paris) and embellishes with romantic features, in an attempt to make his chronicle more colourful and give it a sense of adventure.

Belisarios’ story was also well-known amongst Manasses’ audience since other chroniclers had written about it. His source must once again have been Theophanes the Confessor, who, however, describes it in a rather dry way. Manasses, on the other hand, expands it, makes it more vivid and finds the opportunity to enhance it by composing a lament for the brave and virtuous

³⁸ As quoted in Mango and Scott 1997: 130.

³⁹ Yuretich 2018: 113-115.

⁴⁰ Nilsson and Nyström 2009: 50.

⁴¹ Jeffreys 2012: 188, 370, 394.

⁴² Yuretich 2018: 115-117.

general⁴³ (a different literary genre, whose insertion in his text would have been more appropriate if he was writing a novel).

The Trojan War was another story typically included in Byzantine chronicles, as it led to the foundation of Rome and hence its successor, the Byzantine Empire. Its most original version though can be found in Manasses,⁴⁴ who chooses not to follow Homer, as he explicitly states at the beginning of his account. A series of elements that would be appropriate for a novel can be found here: firstly, regarding protagonists, there are references to a romantic couple, Achilles and Polyxena, Priam's daughter, a villain (the 'deceitful' Odysseus), and a happy ending for another couple, Menelaus and Helen, who, after many difficulties, reunite and return to their home. We also find evidence of strong friendships, several adventures, heroic acts performed by brave men, exotic people (e.g. Amazons, Indians and Ethiopians) who allied with Priam and the Trojans and, finally, the presence of envy. Moreover, in the episode where Priam asks for David's help, one can trace another novelistic feature, namely Manasses' appreciation for, and inclusion in his text of, lively and intriguing stories.

Finally, in many parts of the *Synopsis* one can find comments about the impersonal forces of Fortune (*Τύχη*), Envy (*Φθόνος*) and Love (*Ἔρως*), similar to the twelfth-century novels. As they take place in ancient times, these novels do not include any references to Divine Providence. Manasses is being cautious regarding this and only uses this practice twice in his entire work.⁴⁵ On the contrary, there is an abundance of references to the Olympian gods and the above-mentioned forces. Manasses also refers to these gods (e.g. in his account of the Trojan War), while he personifies Fortune, Envy and Love and presents them as supernatural beings that control peoples' lives. He also uses the image of the 'wheel of fortune' that rules people and events, a

⁴³ Yuretich 2018: 132-135.

⁴⁴ Yuretich 2018: 60-72.

⁴⁵ See Magdalino 1997: 162-163.

popular subject amongst his contemporaries. Thus, according to Macrides, he:

not only reflects this contemporary interest in his chronicle but also develops an interpretation of the past based on it. For he ascribes to envy (*phthonos*) the cause of instability in human affairs. This is nowhere more evident than in an extended passage on Justinian's general Belisarios, who fell from favour after a long and brilliant career.⁴⁶

All the above-mentioned features highlight the *Synopsis*' resemblance to a Byzantine novel, and Manasses' purpose in composing it in this way is also worth taking a look at. From its start, one can easily notice that Manasses did not write his chronicle in order to simply provide his audience with source material or new historical information. This is why he chooses to use the political verse, a metre that was not used for historiographical texts (Manasses' is the first extensive historical text written in it), but mainly for educational and entertaining purposes. The use of fifteen-syllable verse, therefore, distinguishes his chronicle from those previously written, and so does the fact that he avoids dry historical narratives. On the contrary, he adapts the already known historical material so as to produce an entertaining historical text. In the *Synopsis*, therefore, he does not present himself as an historian, but rather as a storyteller⁴⁷ who wishes to entertain his readers with good, popular stories which he carefully selects and relates (hence the chronicle's success and popularity that can be attested from the amount of the surviving manuscripts), and his audience's entertainment becomes his primary reason for writing.

Moreover, as we have already seen, Byzantine intellectuals' interest in romantic fiction was revived during the twelfth century, and many writers of this period tended to mix various literary genres in their texts.⁴⁸ This means that the insertion of novelistic features to his chronicle also served Manasses'

⁴⁶ Macrides and Magdalino 1992: 124-125.

⁴⁷ Lampsonis 1996: LVII.

⁴⁸ Foskolou 2018: 80.

purpose of showing that he was well aware of this tendency and knew and followed his contemporaries' literary preferences, which the text essentially displays, along with 'the author's own perception of history writing and the audience's expectations'.⁴⁹ The fact that he was commissioned by *sebastokratorissa* Irene to compose the *Synopsis* should also be taken into consideration here. His patroness might have specifically requested for these novelistic elements in his work, and Manasses had to please her, as she was the one who had paid him, and quite generously, judging from what he implies at the beginning of his text. Writing in fifteen-syllable verse might well have been her stylistic choice, a suggestion which strengthens the hypothesis that she generally preferred more 'popular' genres, such as novels.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Constantine Manasses was one of the most prominent intellectual and literary figures of the Komnenian period, at a time of literary renaissance. His chronicle, *Synopsis Chronike*, was written in fifteen-syllable verse, a metre that was extremely unusual for an historical text. It also has certain novelistic features, such as fictional elements or episodic structure, which make it resemble Byzantine novels, a genre that revived during the twelfth century. This novelistic character serves the author's purpose to entertain and instruct his readers and places his text somewhere between history and novel, without, by any means, diminishing its historical significance. Manasses, after all, seems to balance on the boundaries of the tradition of chronicle writing; he yearns for good stories and successfully combines them in order to show his own erudition and please both his audience and his patroness.

⁴⁹ Nilsson 2006: 56.

⁵⁰ Jeffreys 2014: 183.

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