

University of Szeged, Faculty of Arts
Doctoral School of History
Medieval Studies Programme

Zoltán Szegvári

The Image of the Latins in Late Byzantine Epistolography

Abstract of the Doctoral Dissertation



Supervisors: Dr. Habil. Olajos Terézia (SZTE; 2018 †) – Dr. Habil.
Almási Tibor (SZTE); External Advisor: Dr. Mag. Doz. Andreas
Rhoby (ÖAW)

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1.) The Scope and Topic of Investigation, Status Artis

In my dissertation, I analyse the representations of the Latins, that is, Westerners in selected works of Late Byzantine Epistolography, in approximately 150 letters. The subjects present in the depictions of the Latins are discussed in the dissertation within two major thematic blocks, one including secular and one including religious topics.

The fall of Constantinople in 1204 and the Latin occupation of considerable, formerly imperial territories meant a grave trauma for Byzantine society and the relations between Byzantium and the West fundamentally changed. The denominational boundaries which, despite the Catholic–Orthodox schism of 1054, were permeable before 1204, became rigid and branding the Catholics as heretics gradually became the dominant viewpoint in the Orthodox Church. The initially defensive, then reconquering wars of the Byzantine successor states and the – in spite of the defeats and collapse of the Latin Empire – overwhelming military and economic advantage of the Western Christian world similarly supported the entrenchment of anti-Latin views in the 13th century Byzantine world.

These stereotypes had an effect in both the secular and the ecclesiastical dimensions of society, as well as in the fields of morality and culture, seeking solace for the decline of the Byzantine world in the hope of resurgence of the Empire, the perceived superiority of the Orthodox faith and the Ancient Hellenic culture of Byzantium. said developments were further intensified by the failure of the Union of Lyons (1274–1282) with the Catholic Church and the accelerating decline of the Empire from the end of the 13th century.

However, from the middle of the 14th century, the Unionist thought became more pronounced again, connecting the aim of healing the Schism with the hope of Western aid against the Ottoman threat. Parallely, interest in Western, that is, ‘Latin’ culture grew since the twilight of the 13th century. These two tendencies were strongly intertwined with each other and, albeit they represented minority views in Byzantine intellectual life, their effects were profound both in the fields of culture and politics.

The representation of the Latins has been the subject of many scientific analyses in recent decades. These projects examined the historiographical sources of the era,¹ the lists of the

¹ PAGE, Gill: *Being Byzantine. Greek Identity before the Ottomans*. Cambridge, UK; New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008

perceived religious errors of the Latins,² hagiographic works of the period³ and also contemporary ethnographic descriptions.⁴ But the sources of Byzantine epistolography were included in these examination only to a very limited degree, not independently of the long-lived stereotype of Byzantine epistolography being verbose and containing little historical information.

2.) Structure and Methodology of the Thesis

My dissertation follows the following structure. Following the preface, I briefly introduce the sources used for the analysis, then I describe the methodology of my research. This is followed by the first great thematic unit, which discusses the non-religious topics presented about the Latins in the sources. Its first chapter analyses the representations of violent conflict between Byzantines and Westerners. The second chapter is concerned with the problem closer relationships between Latins and Byzantines, while the third one examines the negative and positive comments on Latin morality. The fourth chapter discusses the representations of the *niveau* of Latin culture, the relationship between Byzantine culture and the Latins and the relationship between Byzantines and Latin culture, meaning culture in its abstract sense, while chapter five deals with remarks on Latin material culture.

Then follows the second great thematic unit, in which the topics of religious nature presented by the letters are analysed. It begins with chapter six, which examines the descriptions of the practice of *azymes*, that is, the use of unleavened bread for the Catholic Eucharist, while the seventh chapter deals with the mentions of the *Filioque*, the Catholic teaching on the origins of the Holy Spirit, in the sources. The eighth chapter is concerned with religious questions appearing occasionally in the analysed corpus, which spectrum includes, for instance, the charge of religious innovation (καινοτομία) and the question of papal primacy. Chapter nine discusses the mentions of perceived religious common points between Byzantines and Latins, while the tenth and final chapter summarizes the results of dissertation. Each previous chapter is closed by its own, independent conclusion.

² KOLBABA, Tia M.: *The Byzantine Lists: Errors of the Latins*. Illinois Medieval Studies. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000

³ HINTERBERGER, Martin: *A Neglected Tool of Orthodox Propaganda? The Image of the Latins in Byzantine Hagiography*. In HINTERBERGER, Martin – SCHABEL, Chris (Eds.): *Greeks, Latins and Intellectual History 1204-1500*. Leuven – Paris – Walpole, MA, Peeters, 2011, pp. 129-149

⁴ KALDELLIS, Anthony. *Ethnography after Antiquity: Foreign Lands and Peoples in Byzantine Literature*. Empire and After. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013

Regarding its methodology, the dissertation, besides the close reading of its sources, applies two methodological approaches. The first is cultural anthropological methodology devised for the analysis of ethnicity by Fredrik Barth and Thomas Hylland Eriksen. This approach defines ethnicity as a group identity, of which the foundations are the subjective beliefs in the existence of the group and the belonging of the individual to the group. For the identification of the group and the validation of its exceptionality, those who identify themselves as its members typically apply well discernible cultural traits (language, religious rites, material culture).

However, the most important elements of the existence of the ethnic community are not the cultural traits used for its definition, but the differences supposed by its members between their own ethnic community and other ones, and the boundary constructed on their basis. It is an important consideration of my thesis that what kind of differences and similarities between the Byzantines and the Latins are expressed by its sources, is there a boundary to be drawn between the two communities on the basis of these traits and if it is, what is the nature of the boundary?

The other methodological device is the approach of Byzantines epistolography as a literary genre. This approach stresses the representative nature of the genre and its connection to performance, that is, the authors reckoned with an audience wider than the addressee, aimed to promote an image of themselves, and their works were often performed in front of an audience with an intent to have a certain effect- The representative nature of the genre is confirmed by the circumstance that the extant Byzantine letters are usually preserved in letter collections, which were edited by persons close to the author soon after his death or the authors edited their own collection while they were still alive.

3.) Novelties and Results of the Thesis

The first novelty of the dissertation its subject, as these *corpora* of Byzantine epistolography had not been examined as the sources of the representation of the Latins. Besides, the methodological approaches are also novel in the analysis of Byzantine epistolography, as the only example for the thorough application of the model devised by Barth and Hylland–Eriksen

in Byzantine Studies had been the analysis of Late Byzantine historiographical works by Gill Page.⁵

The dissertation, not independently of the aforementioned circumstances, also serves with new results. An important conclusion of the second chapter is that two types of violent conflict between Latins and Byzantines are presented by the letters, which are military engagement and brutal tyranny of Latins over Byzantines. In the latter case, the oppressive nature of Latin rule is treated as evident by the authors, and its alleged results range from the persecution of innocent persons to the hopeless despair of the subjugated Byzantine populations.

Furthermore, in depictions of armed conflict between Byzantines and Latins, it is almost always the Byzantine side which is presented as occupying the moral high ground, their motivations behind the conflict regularly appear as valid and morally right, while the ones of the Latins are treated as invalid and morally wrong. The sole exception is the portrayal of the fights between the forces of the Byzantine oligarch Leon Sgouros by Michael Choniates, in which the Latins are presented as the lesser of two evils, but even that is most probably a result of the deep personal enmity between Choniates and Sgouros.

Beyond that, a peculiar tendency of portraying the Byzantines as the victims and the Latins as the aggressors can be observed. In most cases, the Latins appear as the initiators of the conflict, while the Byzantine only react to it, carrying on righteous self-defence, which is an effective device of deflecting the responsibility for the escalation of the events to the Latins. If it is still the Byzantine side who initiates the conflict, its justified nature is always very pronounced, and can be traced back to atrocities committed by Latins against Byzantines, which stresses the Byzantine victim – Latin aggressor dichotomy even further.

The closer relationships analysed in chapter three show a more complex image. On the first hand, negative depictions dominate the picture, such as the collaboration of the Daimonioannes family with the local Latin elite is presented as a consequence of their aligning selfish interests and mutually low morals, while the defining experiences in the description of Maximos Planoudes to the placating embassy to Venice led by him are personal humiliation and being threatened. On the other hand, a Greek-speaking and pro-Byzantine young Genoese contact of Manuel Kalekas is presented by him as a quasi-compatriot, while Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos underlines the informal, helpful attitude towards the Latin petitioners coming to his court, treating it as elementary, that well-meaning petitioners deserve such a reception. From

⁵ PAGE, Gill: *Being Byzantine. Greek Identity before the Ottomans*. Cambridge, UK; New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008

These episodes present a wide spectrum of closer relationships between Latins and Byzantines, including both negative and positive interactions.

The remarks about the morals of Westerners, analysed in chapter four, also display a peculiar image. The subjects presented are diverse, ranging from the question of respect shown towards the proprietary rights of Byzantines, through the arrogance attributed to the Westerners and the field sexual morals to the problem of the trustworthiness of the Latins. These questions surface logically in a society of which a part comes under foreign rule, while another part of it suffers a considerable loss of power as a result, and a common experience for them is their lessened potential to interact with the community responsible for these changes as its equals.

Frustration, anger, suspicion and fear are natural emotions in such situations, especially, if the dominant community serves with experiences that are understood as negative ones on a regular basis. Sources by the non-dominant community that describe the moral shortcomings of the dominant group are usually related to these emotions, and can either mirror the honest beliefs of their authors or conscious attempts to compensate for the balance of power with claims of moral superiority, as well as attempts to catalyse resistance against the *status quo*. The predominantly negative representations of Latin morality in the letters can be explained well with the model described above, just like the often emotionally charged tone of their respective details.

The fifth chapter discusses the multifaceted field of details regarding culture. Albeit some of the analysed letters uses the ethnonym Latin for the Roman cultural heritage of Byzantium, most of them applies term to Medieval Western Christian culture, expressing evaluations from contempt to admiration. It is also conspicuous, that references to material culture appear only occasionally in the sources, while remarks to the non-tangible, abstract elements of culture dominate in them. Another striking circumstance is that evaluations of Western culture tend to the extremes, they are either definitely condemning or definitely positive in their presentations of it. These views most often fit well into the general opinions of their respective authors about Latins, that is, anti-Latin authors usually condemn Western culture, while pro-Latin authors praise its achievements.

The religious questions that only occasionally appear in the sources, analysed in chapter six, also display a surprising variety. Comments in this chapter cover the charge of religious innovation as well as explanations of Unionist activities with material interests, or the identification of Catholic religious habits with Babylon. The prevalence of negative evaluations voiced about these subjects is also striking. The explanation of this phenomenon is not clear,

but it is very possible, that anti-Latin authors dealt with the differences between Catholicism and Orthodoxy more keenly in their letters than the pro-Latin ones.

Chapter seven, concerned with letters commenting on the question of the Catholic use of *azymes* in the Eucharist present an interesting result, as all five letters in this section were written by Demetrios Chomatenos, metropolitan archbishop of Ochrid. The limited number of sources and the circumstance that all of them are the works of the very same author restrict the conclusions to be driven from them, of which it is important to underline the seemingly limited attention for this subject in Byzantine epistolography. Chomatenos voices views in these letters that are difficult to reconcile with each other, which fact is probably not a result of a development in his opinion regarding the practice of azymes, but rather of the adept tailoring of his message to its audience and the situation. If my conclusion is right, the abovementioned letters of the metropolitan exemplify the common intertwining of religious questions and actual politics in the Medieval Christian world, and they also illustrate the representative nature of Byzantine epistolography.

Chapter eight analyses representations of the Filioque, the theologically most important difference between Catholicism and Orthodoxy in the period. Three approaches to the dogma are present in the letters. Openly hostile opinions constitute the absolute majority, demonstrating the importance of this teaching in the contemporary denominational conflict. The second opinion, that is, the denial of the difference between the *Filioque* and the Orthodox teaching becomes understandable exactly in the mirror of such a widespread rejection. Nonetheless, this approach could have only limited success, especially against educated opponents of the Catholic opinion, like Gregorios Palamas. Thirdly, acknowledgments of the actual meaning of the Filioque while expressing support for it are also present in the analysed sources.

The ninth and final thematic chapter deals with the display of common points between Catholicism and Orthodoxy in the letters. These can be organised into three major groups, which are the appraisals of tolerance towards Catholicism, open sympathy for the Catholic faith and the hope for Christian solidarity against the Ottoman threat. It is noticeable that the comments discussed in this chapter are overwhelmingly pro-Latin in their stances, which is most logical, regarding that all three of these subjects were common themes in pro-Latin discourses. However, the refutation of such opinions was regarded as important by the anti-Latin camp, therefore, the absence of anti-Latin views in the letters commenting on these subjects is a surprising result.

Relying on these results, the final conclusions of my dissertation can be summarised in four points. First, a wide range of generalising opinions about the Latins is presented in the analysed letters. These views can be organised into various categories, from everyday morality to violent conflicts. Second, the subjects appearing in the sources display a definite overlap with the views voiced about the Latins in Byzantine discourses in general. The clear majority is constituted by those religious and secular topics that were key elements of the distinction between Byzantines and Latins in the period, such as opinions on the origin of the Holy Spirit, or perceived civilisational differences.

The third conclusion refers to the attitudes displayed by the authors towards the subjects presented by them. The spectrum of evaluations in the sources ranges from rigid condemnation to enthusiastic appraisal, and both negative and positive opinions tend towards the ends of the scale, while the number of moderate opinions is relatively low. Besides, negative opinions are in a clear majority. Finally, the fourth conclusion involves the background of these opinions. The representations of Westerners in the letters display a very strong correlation with the general views of their authors regarding the Latins, that is, anti-Latin authors usually express anti-Latin views in their letters, while pro-Latins comment on Westerners in a positive light. According to my point of view, further examinations of Byzantine epistolography may serve with new and important details both about the representations of the Latins and other ethnic communities in Byzantine culture.

4.) Publications Related to the Dissertation

Szegvári, Zoltán: Egyetlen szó, ami oly sokat számít – a Filioque-kérdés reprezentációja válogatott késő bizánci irodalmi levelekben (A Sole Word that Matters So Much – The Representation of the Filioque-Question in Selected Late Byzantine Epistles). *Athanasiana* 50 (2020) pp. 55-66

Szegvári, Zoltán: A korai Épeiros egyházi elitjének latinságképe episztolográfiai hagyatékuk körében (The Latin-Image of the Ecclesiastical Elite of the Early Medieval Epirus in the Mirror of their Epistolary Heritage). In Végheő Tamás – Szegvári Zoltán (Edd.): *Ζωοδόχος Πηγή. Művelődés Bizáncon innen és túl.* (Nyíregyháza, 2019), megjelenés alatt.

Szegvári, Zoltán: Egy nyugati császár bizánci szemmel: Isidóros kijevei metropolita képe Luxemburgi Zsigmondról. (A Western Emperor through Byzantine Eyes: The Image of Isidorus, Metropolitan of Kiev about Sigismund of Luxembourg). *Athanasiana* 47 (2019), pp. 143-154

Szegvári, Zoltán: Örökösödési per bizánci módra, avagy egy 13. századi jogügylet a kortárs jogász szemszögéből (Lawsuit of Inheritance in a Byzantine Way, or a 13th Century Legal Transaction through the Eyes of a Contemporary Jurist). *Napi Történelmi Forrás* 5. (2019), Paper: <https://ntf.hu/index.php/2019/10/11/orokosodesi-per-bizanci-modra-avagy-egy-13-szazadi-jogugylet-a-kortars-jogasz-szemszogebo/>

Szegvári, Zoltán: The Letters of Lazarus Against the Union: Arguments of Orthodox Resistance to the Union of Lyons (1274). *EASTERN THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL* 4:2 (2018), pp. 291-308

Szegvári, Zoltán: A második Rómából az elsőbe (From the Second Rome to the First One). In: Szanka, Brigitta; Szolnoki, Zoltán; Nagy, Zsolt Dezső (Edd.): *Középkortörténeti tanulmányok* 10. A X. Medievisztikai PhD-konferencia (Szeged, 2017. június 7-9.) előadásai. Szeged, Szegedi Középkorász Műhely, 2018, pp. 299-307