

Slavery, Gender, and Divine Justice in Byzantium: Re-Assessing an Anecdote in Nikephoros Gregoras' *Roman History*

Nathan Leidholm

Abstract: *In his Roman History, Nikephoros Gregoras (c. 1295–1360) includes a curious aside about a “Scythian” woman who purchases an enslaved Byzantine man, marries him, and moves to Constantinople. The story’s “curiosity” stems from a series of unexpected elements and inverted expectations from a Byzantine perspective. This article argues that reading the anecdote within the context of Byzantine approaches to gender, ethnography, and, especially, slavery, reveals the many ways in which Gregoras upends cultural and literary expectations and creates meaning precisely through this subversion of expectations and topoi. The short narrative, it contends, is a microcosm of the traditional pastoralist-sedentary paradigm but also demonstrates the power of right belief and the ability of an enslaved Roman to convert his master, further heightened by the subversion of gender norms. Gregoras thus presents an argument for the spiritual strength of Byzantium, even in a time of social, political and military weakness.*

Keywords: Nikephoros Gregoras, ethnography, slavery, gender, Byzantine literature

In his *Roman History*, Nikephoros Gregoras (c. 1295–1360) includes a curious aside about a “Scythian” woman who purchases an enslaved Byzantine man, marries him, and eventually moves to Constantinople.¹ Several scholars have noted the unusual

¹ For an overview of Gregoras’ history and its relationship with other historical narratives produced in Byzantium, see Neville, *Byzantine Historical Writing*, 243–248. The standard edition of the text can be found in Bekker and Schopen, *Nicephori Gregorae*. All references in this article are to this edition.

character of the story, focusing on one or another aspect of the narrative, but none have interrogated those aspects of the anecdote that run most counter to expectations inherent in Byzantine literature and tradition. As a result, Gregoras' purpose in composing the narrative and the moral lesson he conveys therein have remained partially hidden in modern discourses. As this article will show, reading the anecdote within the context of Byzantine approaches to gender, ethnography, and, especially, slavery, reveals the many ways in which Gregoras upends cultural and literary expectations and, I argue, creates meaning precisely through this subversion of expectations and topoi.

The following arguments rely on a close reading of this anecdote, so I begin with a full translation of Gregoras' narrative.²

At that time there was among the Scythians [Mongols]³ who dwell on the other side of the Ister [the Danube River] a woman who had neither a husband nor children. [p. 543] When she saw in front of her door the captives who were being led away from Thrace (she had for a long time yearned to go over to the Rhomaioi [Byzantines] and to receive the divine baptism) she stirred and took for a husband one of the Christian captives who were for sale, having him confirm beforehand through oaths that he would not abandon the cohabitation with her even if they decamped for another place. While they were seeking for an opportune time a whole year passed in which she had two children from him, one already born and the other still in the womb. Therefore, she gained an even greater and firmer love for her husband. While matters stood thus, the former wife of the aforementioned man happened to be led away as a captive in the following year. When

Bekker and Schopen's edition of the *Roman History* was reprinted in *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Graeca*, ed. J. P. Migne, vols. 148–149 (Paris: Migne, 1865). For a biography of Gregoras, see Beyer, "Nikephoros Gregoras," 127–155.

² English translation by Shukurov and Krausmüller, *Mobility and Migration*, 84–85. For a German translation of Gregoras' entire work, including this passage, see van Dieten, *Nikephoros Gregoras*.

³ The archaizing term "Scythian" was used to denote a fairly wide range of peoples by Byzantine authors. Given the time period and geographic context, it is likely that Gregoras here is referring either to Mongols/Tatars or Cumans. On the Cumans and Byzantium, see also Savvides, "Οι Κουμάνοι και το Βυζάντιο," 937–955. For Mongol-Byzantine relations, see Nikolov, "Byzantium and the Mongol World," 191–211.

the man saw her, he burst into tears. And after the Scythian woman had learned the reason for the grief and the tears, she did not show jealousy towards the woman, but bought her, too, in order that she serve the needs of the house, and also be a comfort for the man who could see her close by. But when an opportune time had arrived, she received the holy baptism and went to the queen of cities [Constantinople].

There the previous wife ran to the patriarch and shouted and beat her breasts and claimed that she had been wronged by the Scythian woman who had taken away her husband. But when she, too, came and explained the matter as it stood in precise detail, there was nobody who could bring any justified charge, for she was the mistress of both as she had bought them with her own money when they were on sale and had so-to-speak taken them from wild beasts. Yet when all were silent, [p. 544] and could not bring a charge against her, she made such a judgement in the matter. She gave her husband the release as a free gift because they had lived together and she had borne his children, and she added that she wanted to free the woman but could not do so because she did not possess the wherewithal and she was a foreigner with two infants. 'Therefore', she said, 'she shall bring the price that was given for her and depart with her husband, and I will henceforth be with the infants, relying on the providence of the merciful God.' All praised this judgement, including the patriarch, and admired the greatness of the character of the woman. But not much later justice was brought to its proper conclusion by the merciful God who judges unswervingly from above. For when the woman left the city in order to collect the purchase price, and went around her neighbours in Thrace, where she had dwelt before, she again fell into the hands of the Scythians who all of a sudden invaded Thrace, and she disappeared as a captive whereas the man henceforth continued to cohabit with the good woman of Scythian descent.⁴

⁴ Gregoras, *Historiae Byzantinae*, I.542–544: 'Εν τούτοις τοῖς χρόνοις μία τῶν Σκυθῶν γυναικῶν, ἐκ τῶν ἐπέκεινα τοῦ Ἰστροῦ τὴν οἰκισιν ποιουμένων, μήτε σύζυγον μήτε παῖδας ἔχουσα, ἐπειδὴ τοὺς ἐκ Θράκης ἀπαγομένους αἰχμαλώτους πρὸ τῶν ταύτης ἑώρα θυρῶν (ἐπόθει δ' ἐκ πολλοῦ προσχωρῆσαι Ῥωμαίοις καὶ τὸ θεῖον δέξασθαι βάπτισμα), ὧνιον διαναστᾶσα σύζυγον ἔλαβεν ἓνα τῶν αἰχμαλώτων Χριστιανῶν, ὅρκοις αὐτὸν ἐμπεδώσασα πρότερον, μὴ λιπεῖν τὴν ταύτης συνοίκησιν, μήδ' εἰ ἄλλοθι ποῦ τὴν ἀποικίαν ποιήσαιντο. ἐπεὶ δ' εὐκαιρίας πρὸς μετοικίαν ζητουμένης ἐνιαυτὸς ὅλος ἐτρίβη, ἐν ᾧ δὴ καὶ τέκνα δύο τὸ μὲν γεγέννηκεν, τὸ δ' ἐν γαστρὶ φέρουσα ἦν, ἔτι πλείονα τὴν στοργὴν καὶ στερρότεράν πρὸς τὸν σύζυγον

Based upon Gregoras' sequencing of events, the story likely dates to sometime around 1337–38.⁵ It is probably related to his account of a serious Cuman/Tatar raid into Thrace beginning in 1337, which appears shortly before the anecdote in his text and includes a likely exaggerated number of captives (more than 300,000) supposedly taken by the raiders.⁶ Yet it is difficult to determine whether Gregoras' narrative here has any basis in reality, other than a broad association with the enslavement of Byzantine Christians in the region.⁷ To my knowledge, the story is not repeated in any oth-

ἔσχε. τούτου δ' οὕτως ἔχοντος ἔτυχεν ἐς τοῦτιον ἔτος αἰχμάλωτος ἀπαγομένη καὶ ἡ προτέρα τοῦ ρηθέντος ἀνδρὸς σύζυγος. ἦν ἐκεῖνος ἐδάκρυσεν θεασάμενος. ἡ μέντοι Σκυθὶς ἐκείνῃ γυνὴ τὴν αἰτίαν τῆς λύπης καὶ τῶν δακρύων μαθοῦσα οὐτ' ἠχθέσθη τάνδρῃ, οὔτε ζηλοτύπως ἔσχε πρὸς τὴν γυναῖκα· ἀλλ' ὥνιον εἰλήφει καὶ ταύτην, ἵνα καὶ ταῖς χρεαίαις ὑπηρετῇ τῆς οἰκίας καὶ ἅμα παραμύθιον εἴη τῇ θεωρίᾳ τάνδρὸς ἐκ τῶν ἔγγιστα. ἐπεὶ δ' εὐκαιρίας γενομένης τῷ θεῷ τε ἐτελέσθη βαπτίσματα καὶ τῇ βασιλευούσῃ τῶν πόλεων ἐπεδήμησε, δραμοῦσα πρὸς τὸν πατριάρχην ἡ προτέρα σύζυγος ἐβόα καὶ ἐστερνοτυπεῖτο καὶ ἀδικεῖσθαι ἔφασκε παρὰ τῆς Σκυθίδος, ἀφελομένης τὸν ἄνδρα αὐτῆς. Παρελθούσης μέντοι κάκεινης καὶ τὰ τοῦ πράγματος, ὥς εἶχεν, ἀκριβῶς διεξελθούσης, οὐκ εἶχεν οὐδεὶς οὐδὲν ἀπὸ δικαίου προφέρειν ἔγκλημα κατ' αὐτῆς. κυρία γὰρ ἦν ἀμφοτέρων, ἅτε χρημάτων οἰκείων ὠνίους ἐξ ἀγρίων φάναι θηρῶν εἰληφυῖα. ὅμως σιωπῶντων ἀπάντων καὶ μηδὲν ἐχόντων προφέρειν ἔγκλημα κατ' αὐτῆς, κρίσιν ἐπέθηκεν αὕτη τοιαύτην τῷ πράγματι. τῷ μὲν ἀνδρὶ προῖκα τὴν λύσιν παρέσχε διὰ τὴν συνουσίαν καὶ τὴν ἐξ αὐτῆς τῶν παίδων γέννησιν· τῇ δὲ γυναικὶ βούλεσθαι μὲν, μὴ δύνασθαι δὲ διὰ τε τὴν τῶν χρειωδῶν ἔνδειαν καὶ τὸ ἐπ' ἀλλοδαπῆς εἶναι σὺν δυσὶ βρέφεσι. „διὸ τὸ δοθὲν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς κομίσασα (ἔφησε) τίμημα αὐτῇ μὲν ἀπερχέσθω μετὰ τοῦ ἀνδρός· ἐγὼ δ' ἔσομαι τοῦ λοιποῦ μετὰ τῶν βρεφῶν, ἐς τὰς χεῖρας ἀποβλέπουσα τοῦ φιλανθρώπου θεοῦ.“ ταύτην τὴν κρίσιν πάντες ὕμνησαν ἅμα τῷ πατριάρχῃ καὶ τὸ μεγαλοφυὲς τῆς γυναικείας ἐκείνης γνώμης ἐθαύμασαν. ἀλλ' οὐκ εἰς μακρὰν ἡ δίκη τὸ προσήκον εἴληφε πέρας πρὸς τοῦ δικάζοντος ἄνωθεν ἀρρέπων φιλανθρώπου θεοῦ. ἐξελθούσα γὰρ ἡ γυνὴ περὶ τὴν τῶν λύτρων συναγωγὴν καὶ περιῖοῦσα τὰς γείτονας παρὰ τὴν Θράκην, ὅποι τὴν οἰκίσιν ἐπεποιήτο πρότερον, εἰς τὰς χεῖρας αὐτῆς ἐμπέπτωκε τῶν Σκυθῶν, ἐξαίφνης ἐπιδραμόντων κατὰ τῆς Θράκης. κάκεινῃ μὲν αἰχμάλωτος ὄχρετο ἀπιοῦσα· ὁ δ' ἀνὴρ ἔμεινε τοῦ λοιποῦ συνοικῶν τῇ ἐκ Σκυθῶν ἐκείνῃ χρηστῇ γυναικί.

⁵ Shukurov, *The Byzantine Turks*, 231.

⁶ Gregoras, *Historiae Byzantinae*, I.542–544 (Bk 11.3): Ἀρχομένου γε μὴν ἡρος ἤδη πλῆθος Σκυθῶν διαβάαντες τὸν Ἰστρον κατέδραμον τὴν Ῥωμαϊκὴν Θράκην ἄχρι θαλάττης Ἑλλησποντίας ... πλῆθος ἄγοντες αἰχμαλώτων ὑπὲρ τὰς τριακοσίας, ὥς ἔφασαν οἱ πολλοὶ, χιλιάδας. The significance of this correlation is covered more fully below.

⁷ For recent treatments of this enslavement, see esp. Grant, *Greek Captives*;

er extant source. Gregoras is known to have invented elements of his *History* in order to present certain elements of his own views or arguments.⁸ Both before and after the anecdote, Gregoras discusses the expansion of the Turks in both Thrace and Anatolia, which is consistent with near-contemporaries like Demetrios Kydones, who explicitly link the devastations wrought by the Mongols with the expansion of the Ottomans and other Turkish beyliks.⁹

In the books prior to the given anecdote (esp. 8–11), nearly all the breaks from the main narrative are speeches given by the author himself, further marking the story as unusual.¹⁰ The section immediately preceding the anecdote of the Scythian woman likewise deviates from previous sections. In it, Gregoras offers a brief aside describing how that summer a comet had appeared in the sky.¹¹ Both asides come near the end of Book 11, which marks a clear break in the larger *History*. Book 12, in fact, begins with a rumination on the utility of history and was written and disseminated at a later date.¹² Books 1–11 therefore form a more or less cohesive narrative and were written and circulated separately, meaning the story of the Scythian woman comes near the end of what was, at the time, a complete work.

Regardless of its historical basis, however, the anecdote's inclusion in his *History* is certainly not accidental. Gregoras introduces the passage as “another story worth hearing” (ἄκοῆς ἄξιον ἄλλο διήγημα), clearly laying out the anecdote's apparent didactic purpose. It is not simply a curiosity. And Gregoras' story has not gone unnoticed among modern researchers, nor has its rather unusual character.¹³

In the commentary accompanying their English translation of

Barker, *Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves*.

⁸ This is most famously the case regarding his theological positions, but there is no reason to believe it would be limited to this alone.

⁹ Gregoras, *Historiae Byzantinae*, I.538–542 and 544–550.

¹⁰ e.g., Gregoras, *Historiae Byzantinae*, I.328–339 (Bk. 8.8).

¹¹ Gregoras' interest in astronomy is well known, but the description of the comet is somewhat unusual in this portion of his *History*.

¹² Van Dieten, *Rhomaïsche Geschichte*, Vol. I, 37, calls it “ein zweites Vorwort.”

¹³ See also Leidholm, *Slavery and Unfreedom in Byzantine Thought*, esp. 343–345.

the passage, Rustam Shukurov and Dirk Krausmüller place its historical significance in the context of Byzantine-Mongol diplomatic relations. Without ascribing any causal relationship between them, they highlight the importance of these relations to the Byzantine Empire beginning in the late thirteenth century, when Michael VIII Palaiologos married his illegitimate daughter to the Il-Khanate ruler of Iran and Iraq. As they argue, the anecdote “highlights the connections between Byzantines and Mongols from a different perspective, shedding light on the microhistory of medieval prisoners of war.”¹⁴

For Johannes Pahlitzsch, too, the story demonstrates above all the continued practice of slave-holding into the fourteenth century.¹⁵ Gill Page, like some others, utilizes Gregoras’ passage to demonstrate certain Byzantine attitudes toward identity and ethnicity. She focuses on the Scythian woman’s change in religious affiliation and Gregoras’ tendency to identify her through her ethnic origins as illustrative of Byzantine views on identity.¹⁶ In Shukurov’s independent assessment, he sees the story as instructive regarding the application of the law in Byzantium, focusing on the Scythian woman’s appearance before the synod and the protections offered immigrants by the Byzantine legal system.¹⁷ He likewise argues that the anecdote puts the draw of Constantinople on full display, while offering a strong critique of Gill Page’s analysis of the passage.

More recently, Alasdair Grant has used the story both to illustrate the practice of alms collecting in order to free a captive family member and to demonstrate that “the legality of the enslavement outweighed questions of cultural similarity or difference.”¹⁸ Like Shukurov, he focuses on the legal procedures described by Gregoras. István Vásáry importantly places his commentary on Gregoras’ story in the context of the latter’s account of Tatar incursions south of the Danube beginning in 1337.¹⁹ Vásáry’s analysis of what he

¹⁴ Rapp *et al.*, *Mobility and Migration in Byzantium*, 83.

¹⁵ Pahlitzsch, “Slavery and the Slave Trade in Byzantium,” 166.

¹⁶ Page, *Being Byzantine*, 158–160.

¹⁷ Shukurov, *The Byzantine Turks*, 231–232.

¹⁸ Grant, *Greek Captives and Mediterranean Slavery*, 127.

¹⁹ Vásáry, *Cumans and Tatars*, 131–133.

calls the “curious story” of “the brave Scythian,” however, is effectively limited to “the fact that Tatars were part of everyday life in Byzantium in the first half of the fourteenth century.”²⁰

Thus, the relatively numerous modern assessments of the passage have focused on several aspects of the narrative, especially its legal underpinnings and its consequences for understanding the relationship between Byzantine identity and ethnicity. Nearly every scholar cited above has noted the unusual nature of Gregoras’ tale, yet none of them have seriously attempted to unravel the web of complexities and inverted expectations that make Gregoras’ anecdote so “curious.”

The story’s “curiosity” largely stems from a series of unexpected elements and inverted expectations from a Byzantine perspective. First of all, the tale is centered upon the enslavement of Byzantine Christians by a “barbarian,” even if the latter eventually comes to Constantinople and converts. While stories, including saints’ lives, recounting the enslavement of Byzantine Christians were not rare, they typically included the eventual redemption of these captives. Not so in Gregoras’ story of the Scythian woman. In Gregoras’ story, not only does a “barbarian” woman enslave and marry a Byzantine Christian man, but she is ultimately the story’s hero.

Then, there is the distinct gender role reversal. While free Byzantine women could certainly be heads of their own households and/or independently own slaves, sexual relationships between an enslaved man and a free woman were so taboo in both Roman and Byzantine contexts that they were rarely depicted, even in fiction. And while technically an act of Christian charity, the woman’s decision to allow the enslaved woman to buy her own charity after having freed the enslaved man represents another reversal of gendered expectations. As will be explored more fully below, enslavement itself was gendered in Byzantium, and the enslavement of free men was more shameful than it was for women. Captivity was viewed as inherently emasculating by Byzantines. The Scythian woman’s refusal to immediately free the enslaved woman (even if we are told it was due to financial difficulties), as well as Gregoras’ more unsympathetic treatment of the latter, is therefore somewhat surprising.

²⁰ Vászary, *Cumans and Tatars*, 133.

Although not the most unusual aspect of the story, the enslavement of Christians by a non-Christian and the master's subsequent conversion to Christianity represents a reversal of the assumptions deeply engrained in the Byzantine slave system. In the "open" slave system practiced in Byzantium, in which many enslaved people would eventually be freed, part of the justification for that system's existence was the master's efforts to Christianize their slaves and to create good, future citizens of the empire.²¹ Acculturation was envisioned as passing from master to slave, not the other way around.

Probably the most striking deviation from Byzantine literary and cultural norms, however, comes in Gregoras' assertion that the story culminates in what he describes as divine justice ("justice was brought to its proper conclusion by the merciful God who judges unswervingly from above").²² One would expect the story to result in the ultimate freedom of the enslaved Byzantine couple and their reunion as a free, married couple. When the enslaved woman returns to the countryside in an attempt to raise funds to free herself but is instead re-enslaved, this should logically read as a tragedy from a Byzantine perspective. Instead, Gregoras frames it as divine justice. In the following pages, I attempt to address each of these apparent anomalies in order both to contextualize them within Byzantine culture more broadly and, ultimately, to come to a clearer understanding of their meaning within Gregoras' moral framework.

Reversed gender roles are especially numerous in Gregoras' brief narrative. In the relationship between the Scythian woman and the enslaved Byzantine man, Gregoras' depiction consistently reverses the gendered expectations of Byzantine literature, as do some of the actions of the enslaved Byzantine woman. On one hand, the Scythian woman is portrayed in her charity, kindness, and piety, traits that were often associated with "good" women in Byzantine writing. But in numerous other ways, Gregoras attributes to her roles and actions that were distinctly more masculine in the Byzan-

²¹ For a recent analysis of this system, see Rotman, "Enslavement for Manumission," 638–657.

²² Gregoras, *Historiae Byzantinae*, I.544.10–12: ἡ δίκη τὸ προσήκον εἴληφε πέρας πρὸς τοῦ δικάζοντος ἄνωθεν ἀρρεπῶς φιλανθρώπου θεοῦ.

tine imagination. This obviously has important implications for our understanding of Gregoras' purpose in telling the story, especially as "virtues and vices were so tightly linked with conceptions of masculine and feminine behaviour that ethical performance is often indistinguishable from gender performance in the logic of eastern Roman texts."²³ Gregoras's broader narrative is not lacking in extraordinary, powerful women, and he certainly does not shy away from highlighting their intelligence, education, or agency.²⁴ But the anecdote of the Scythian woman is something different.

The initial premise of the story already runs counter to gendered expectations, as it is a free woman who purchases an enslaved man for the purpose of marriage. This would violate Byzantine law even if the genders were reversed, but there was a consistent expectation that free men would have sexual access to enslaved women that continued to appear throughout the Byzantine millennium.²⁵ Male slave-owners having sexual access to their female slaves was a common enough occurrence in the Byzantine imagination. The reverse was far less common. According to imperial law, a marriage between a free person and a slave was technically impossible.²⁶ If a free person wished to marry an enslaved one, they first had to secure their freedom, as legislated by Emperor Leo VI (r. 886–912) in his *novellae* 100 and 101.²⁷ In 1095, Emperor Alexios I Komnenos

²³ Neville, "Reading Greco-Roman Gender Ideals," 377.

²⁴ For example, Simonis, who is described as participating in the "urbanity and grace" (τῇ ὁμιλίᾳ μετὰ τινος ἀστειότητος καὶ χάριτος) of Gregoras' conversations among the circle surrounding the emperor (*Historiae Byzantinae* I.461; Bk 9.14). Gregoras even purports to reproduce a short speech given by the empress (Anna of Savoy), who is described as erudite and an eloquent speaker (*Historiae Byzantinae* I.306; Bk 8.5). For a recent assessment of another such woman who appears in Gregoras' writings, see Melichar, "An Eloquent Woman in the Council of Men," 99–118.

²⁵ See, for example, Leidholm, *Slavery and Unfreedom in Byzantine Thought*, 163–202.

²⁶ See also Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World*; Leidholm, *Slavery and Unfreedom in Byzantine Thought*, 27–82.

²⁷ For the text of these *novellae*, see Noailles and Dain, *Les nouvelles de Léon VI le sage*. For more discussion of the ramifications of such legislation, see Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World*, 189–195; Leidholm, *Slavery and Unfreedom in Byzantine Thought*, 27–82.

(r. 1081–1118) famously issued an edict granting slaves the ability to access full, legal marriage (γάμος) while still enslaved, but this did not change the fact that marriage could theoretically only be contracted by two people of the same legal status (either free or enslaved).²⁸

Among many Byzantine jurists and canonists, the reality of sexual exploitation of slaves was still recognized. Imperial legislation and canon law could try to combat it, but jurists or clergy were known to find the least objectionable outcomes, even in situations that did not conform exactly to those ideals set forth in legislation. Episcopal courts and canonists, especially, could exercise considerable flexibility in their decisions, following the principle of *oikonomia*.²⁹ This can be seen, for example, in the surviving dossiers of thirteenth-century bishops Demetrios Chomatenos and John Apokaukos.³⁰ It could also include a certain recognition of sexual relationships across the free-slave boundary.

In the late twelfth century, the famed canonist Theodore Balsamon responded to a series of questions posed to him by Mark III, Patriarch of Alexandria (1180–1209), which was then under Muslim rule. In one of these questions, the Patriarch of Alexandria asks, “If someone fornicates with a Christian captive woman, who is likewise orthodox, can he freely sell her?”³¹ Balsamon’s response

²⁸ Brand, “Slave Women in the Legislation of Alexius I,” 19–24; Köpstein, “Zur Novelle des Alexios Komnenos zum Sklavenstatus (1095),” 60–172. Interestingly, Alexios was prompted to issue this piece of legislation due to an influx of Bulgarian refugees, many of whom had been prisoners of war, into the empire after his military campaigns in the Balkans. Like Gregoras’ Scythian woman, many of them sought refuge in Constantinople and the protection of the emperor.

²⁹ The concept of *oikonomia*, or “moral concession,” allowed clergy, particularly bishops, to exercise their discretion in various disputes or other matters that came before them in the interest of avoiding worse sin. Canon 102 of the Quinisext Council (in Troullo, 691/2) defined the concept for the Byzantine church. For more, see Kazhdan, *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 1516–1517.

³⁰ For further discussion of these dossiers, see Leidholm, “Searching for Unfree Families in Thirteenth-Century Episcopal Registers,” 61–88.

³¹ Rhalles and Potles, *Σύνταγμα τῶν θείων καὶ ἱερῶν κανόνων*, IV, 483 (hereafter Rhalles and Potles). The complete *eratapokrisis*, or “question-and-answer,”

is as follows: “A master is free to sell the woman with whom he has fornicated and to profit from her price. But the slave-woman who has slept with her master will then be reckoned as free (ἐλευθερίας γὰρ τότε ἀξιούται), if she has not been sold prior to her master’s death (μέχρι τελευταίας τούτου ἀναπνοῆς).”³² Balsamon cites the *Basilika* (48.19.2) to support his answer, which states that if a man has sexual relations with his own slave and maintains this status until his death, the enslaved woman and any children resulting from this relationship will be considered free upon his death.³³ But this would not apply if the slave was sold.

Byzantine canon law obviously opposed sexual relations outside of marriage, regardless of free or slave status, and the Byzantine church had a long history of opposition to sexual liaisons between slave-owners and their own slaves, at least in theory.³⁴ Balsamon’s response, however, displays a great deal of moral flexibility and pragmatism. As in the legislation he cites, the birth and status of children was a deciding factor in Balsamon’s opinion. A similar rationale may lie behind Gregoras’ approach to his narrative of the Scythian woman, as he tries to convince his reader that the woman’s marriage to an enslaved Byzantine man constituted justice, rather than the latter’s reunion with his first wife. In fact, Gregoras goes so far as to contend that, while before the patriarchal synod, those present “could not bring a charge against her [the Scythian woman] (μηδὲν ἐχόντων προφέρειν ἔγκλημα κατ’ αὐτῆς),” despite the obvious fact that her marriage to a slave was well outside Roman law.

Not only is the couple’s power dynamic an inversion of the usual, literary representation of Byzantine slavery, but their actions and

produced by Balsamon can be found on 447–496.

³² Rhallès and Potles, IV, 483: Ἄδειαν ὁ δεσπότης ἔξει τὴν ὑπὸ τούτου πορνευομένην δούλην αὐτοῦ πωλεῖν, καὶ ἀποκερδαίνειν τὸ ταύτης τίμημα· ἐλευθερίας γὰρ τότε ἀξιούται ἡ δούλη μετὰ τοῦ δεσπότου συμφυετρομένη, ὅτε μέχρι τελευταίας τούτου ἀναπνοῆς οὐδὲν τι περὶ ἀναπράσεως ταύτης φθάσει γενέσθαι.

³³ For the *Basilika*, see Scheltema and van der Wal, *Basilicorum libri LX: Series A*. See also Penna, and Meijering, *A Sourcebook on Byzantine Law*.

³⁴ This is true, even if abundant evidence suggests that such practices continued throughout Byzantium’s history. In general, see Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*; Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275–425*.

the ways in which Gregoras describes each of them are decidedly gendered as well. Free women who had sexual relations with enslaved men were especially detested by the Romans and were harshly punished by the law, and these attitudes extended into the fourteenth century.³⁵ Yet the Scythian woman is consistently presented as the protagonist of the story and as a positive model for Gregoras' readers. He repeatedly refers to her as "that good Scythian woman" (τῇ ἐκ Σκυθῶν ἐκείνῃ χρηστῇ γυναικί).³⁶ As a slave-owner, the Scythian woman exercises nearly all the agency in the story. The enslaved man, meanwhile, is described as weeping at the sight of his former wife (ἦν ἐκεῖνος ἐδάκρυσε θεασάμενος). His sadness is only ameliorated thanks to the charitable efforts of his owner, who also happens to be his wife. He exercises very little agency in the narrative and is instead a passive partner and recipient of his free wife's beneficence.³⁷ Gender is always performative, and in Byzantium "an overly emotional man became female."³⁸

Gregoras' language makes clear that he expects the reader to see in the woman a reversal of gendered expectations. When she declares her intentions before the synod, we are told that the Scythian woman effectively overcame the shortcomings of her gender in coming to such a wise decision. The reader is told that all those present, including specifically the patriarch, praised her decision, and "wondered at the nobility of her feminine judgement" (τὸ μεγαλοφνὲς τῆς γυναικείας ἐκείνης γνώμης).³⁹

A less explicit, but still gendered aspect of Gregoras' story has to do with the enslavement of the Byzantine man. The Byzantines maintained an understanding of captivity as inherently emasculating, which means that the Roman man in Gregoras' story had already lost some aspects of his manhood at the moment of his capture. In Roman law, Justinian's *Corpus Iuris Civilis* preserves sev-

³⁵ See, for example, Grubbs, "Marriage More Shameful than Adultery," 125–154.

³⁶ Gregoras, *Historiae Byzantinae*, I.544.17.

³⁷ For a good overview of gendered expectations in Byzantine writing, see Neville, *Byzantine Gender*; Neville, *Anna Komnene*; Papaioannou, *Michael Psellos*.

³⁸ Neville, "Reading Greco-Roman Gender Ideals in Byzantium," 377.

³⁹ Gregoras, *Historiae Byzantinae*, I.543.9–10.

eral judgements by late Roman jurists that treat the issue of a Roman soldier captured in war. Though there was some disagreement among jurists about some of the finer points, a Roman man who was captured in war effectively lost his rights to own property, his *potestas* over his wife and children, and even his marriage was nullified.⁴⁰ The captive thus lost those legal rights that had effectively marked him as a free man.

Canon law, too, took up the issue of sexual assault among captives. Basil the Great's Canon 49, preserved and commented upon in Byzantine collections of the twelfth century and later, concerns a woman who is raped by force. This included an enslaved woman assaulted by her own master. While Basil's original focuses on the blamelessness of the women in such scenarios, Theodore Balsamon's commentary moves this focus slightly to include, specifically, prisoners of war who are sexually assaulted by their captors (παρὰ τῶν πολεμίων δηλαδή πρὸς τὰς αἰχμαλώτους). And though Balsamon's language makes clear that he is still imagining (primarily) captured women, this was not always the case in Byzantine thought or reality.

Such associations appear in other genres as well. Gregoras himself claimed that his bitter intellectual and theological opponent, Gregory Palamas, had suffered sexual humiliation at the hands of his captors when he was held captive by the Ottoman Turks. Palamas famously spent time as an Ottoman captive and is even known to have written several surviving letters from this period.⁴¹ For Gregoras, however, it served as an opportunity to further discredit his religious rival. He used Palamas' unfortunate circumstances to claim that he had been sexually assaulted by his captors, which apparently had the side-effect of "emasculating" his thought with the taint of Islam.⁴²

⁴⁰ Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery*, 291–98. See also Leidholm, *Slavery and Unfreedom in Byzantine Thought*, 233–234. For more on late Roman soldiers and masculinity, see Wood, "Military Manuals, Masculinity, and the Making of Christian Soldiers," 88–128.

⁴¹ Grant, *Greek Captives and Mediterranean Slavery*, 96.

⁴² Gregoras, *Historiae Byzantinae*, III.227–229; Kaldellis, *Ethnography after Antiquity*, 154–156; Grant, *Greek Captives and Mediterranean Slavery*, 96; Leidholm, *Slavery and Unfreedom in Byzantine Thought*, 234.

Like the enslaved woman in Gregoras' story, those Byzantines who found themselves in captivity would typically raise the funds for their freedom through "itinerant alms-seeking."⁴³ This would sometimes include the assistance of local churches or clergy as well. Surviving *aichmalotika*, or formulaic letters that would be carried by family members or clergy attempting to secure the necessary funds to ransom captives, attest to such practices.⁴⁴ Among the relatively few cases known in any specific detail, when several members of the same family were taken, it seems to have been common for a single family member to be released in order to procure payment for the rest of their family.⁴⁵

This practice was (partially) covered by Byzantine law. Constantine Harmenopoulos, in his fourteenth-century legal collection known as the *Hexabiblos*, noted that those who did not ransom their family members could be disinherited.⁴⁶ Following Alasdair Grant, such stipulations originated as early as Justinian, but their expansion and the increasingly harsh penalties in this later period likely reflect the reality of ever increasing numbers of Byzantine Christians subjected to capture and enslavement by neighboring powers. According to Harmenopoulos, securing the release of captured parents had become a legal obligation for Byzantine children by this period.⁴⁷

Although Gregoras' story of the Scythian woman inverts expectations in several ways, there is some (limited) precedent in earlier

⁴³ Grant, *Greek Captives and Mediterranean Slavery*, 119.

⁴⁴ On *aichmalotika*, see Grant, *Greek Captives and Mediterranean Slavery*, 119–124.

⁴⁵ See, for example, the case of one Demetrios and his father, whose attempts at gaining freedom from Turkish captivity are recorded in the notarial records of Giovanni Simeonachis. Mercati, "Di Giovanni Simeonachis," 330; Grant, *Greek Captives and Mediterranean Slavery*, 122–123.

⁴⁶ The *Hexabiblos* was completed in 1344/5, making it roughly contemporary with Gregoras' history. For an edition, see Constantine Harmenopoulos, *Πρόχειρον νόμων ἢ Ἑξαβιβλος*, ed. Pitsakes, 1971.

⁴⁷ Grant, *Greek Captives and Mediterranean Slavery*, 117–118; citing *Hexabiblos* 5.10. According to Grant (118 n12), "This law had roots ultimately in Novella 115.3.13 of Justinian, and was recapitulated in *Basilika* 35.8.41." See also Leidholm, *Slavery and Unfreedom in Byzantine Thought*, 230–232.

Byzantine literature, at least for some aspects of the narrative. As stated above, it is rather unusual for an enslaved Byzantine to appear as the villain, or at least the principal antagonist, in a story such as Gregoras'. This is somewhat mitigated, however, by long-standing stereotypes about slaves in general. Perhaps one of the closest stories to resemble this one in surviving Byzantine literature comes from Book Five of the Grottaferrata version of *Digenes Akrites*.

In lines 25–280, the hero comes upon a “very beautiful” girl hiding in a tree somewhere in Arabia. The reader learns that this girl, the daughter of the emir Aploravdis from Meferke, is in distress as the result of having fallen in love with a captured Roman.⁴⁸ The girl had apparently fallen in love with the man while he was enslaved in her father's household. After helping him escape, the girl was subsequently abandoned by the deceitful Roman. In this story, as in Gregoras', the captured Roman is not made into a hero, but he is not exactly punished either.

In the *Digenes* tale, the man's status as a captive apparently overrides his identity as a Christian Roman, as he is depicted as a liar and unfaithful. Under threat of death, Digenes commands the young man “to take her, as he had promised, as his lawful wife.”⁴⁹ This is not before, however, the protagonist has ruined the man's reputation by telling “everyone about him and especially that he was a law-breaker.”⁵⁰ We are told specifically that the young woman “had received holy baptism before my union with the man, on his instructions,”⁵¹ which was likely regarded as a positive development by the story's Byzantine audience. But the rest of her actions were less admirable, especially her betrayal of her parents.

From a modern perspective, the results of the story are almost

⁴⁸ *Digenes Akrites* G 5.67–70, ed. and trans. Jeffreys, *Digenis Akritis: The Grottaferrata and Escorial Versions*, 138–39 (hereafter *Digenes Akrites*). See also the brief discussion in Leidholm, *Slavery and Unfreedom in Byzantine Thought*, 182–183.

⁴⁹ *Digenes Akrites* G 5.271, ed. and trans. Jeffreys, 150–151. Translation by Jeffreys.

⁵⁰ *Digenes Akrites* G 5.263, ed. and trans. Jeffreys, 150–151. Translation by Jeffreys.

⁵¹ *Digenes Akrites* G 5.226–230, ed. and trans. Jeffreys, 146–149. Translation by Jeffreys.

universally tragic. Yet the episode was made legible to its Byzantine audience by drawing on traditions and stereotypes associated both with (sexually dishonorable) women and, especially, slaves. The enslaved Byzantine man acts dishonorably on multiple occasions, which was to be expected from untrustworthy slaves. Once he had been taken captive, his actions are tacitly contextualized through expectations of behavior of slaves, rather than Byzantine men. The woman, however, was not blameless, as her feminine weakness made her susceptible to becoming “enslaved by desire.” Such susceptibility to the desires of the flesh is precisely what made enslaved women in the household such a danger to its stability, at least in the Byzantine mind.

Byzantine authors, like earlier Romans, viewed the presence of enslaved women within the household as a perpetual danger to the home’s harmony and stability, even as they assumed that most households would include them.⁵² Much of this stemmed from an assumption of sexual access to such women and the ever-present threat of seduction assumed to accompany sexually available women. Even after Byzantine law and the church had deemed sexual relations with one’s slaves as immoral and illegal, evidence suggests it continued to be rather commonplace in practice.⁵³ In the story of the Scythian woman, the enslaved Byzantine woman is clearly presented as a threat to the Scythian woman’s happy new marriage and, therefore, the stability of her household. In part, this may help to explain the rather unsympathetic portrayal of the enslaved man’s former wife. When she first learned of her (enslaved) husband’s sadness at seeing his former wife, the Scythian woman “felt neither anger toward the man nor any jealousy toward the woman” (οὐτ’ ἠχθέσθη τάνδρῃ, οὔτε ζηλοτύπως ἔσχε πρὸς τὴν γυναῖκα). Yet it is the enslaved woman who runs to the patriarch at the first opportunity

⁵² For more on this, see Leidholm, *Slavery and Unfreedom in Byzantine Thought*, 203–242.

⁵³ For more on this, see Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family in Late Antiquity*, 1995; Laiou, “Sex, Consent, and Coercion in Byzantium,” 109–226; Leidholm, *Slavery and Unfreedom in Byzantine Thought*, 210–219; Paoletta, *Human Trafficking in Medieval Europe*, 2020; Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World*, 141–144.

to file suit and, thus, appears ungrateful for the mercy shown to her by the “good” Scythian woman.

Alterity, particularly religious alterity, was an assumed aspect of most medieval slave systems across the Mediterranean world, including Byzantium. Partially as an extension of this, acculturation and conversion were likewise built into the system. Unlike some other slave systems like those in the early modern Americas, Roman/Byzantine slavery was designed as an “open” one, meaning manumission was common, especially when a slave-owner neared the end of their life.⁵⁴ Although realities on the ground could look very different, rhetoric surrounding slavery in Byzantium, as in many contemporary societies around the Mediterranean, generally condemned (or at least discouraged) the enslavement of co-religionists.⁵⁵ Gregoras, alongside several of his contemporaries in an age of civil war, argued rather forcefully that both long-standing tradition and Byzantine law forbade the practice.⁵⁶ Even if the Byzantine slave system was designed to produce future citizens through conversion and acculturation, slaves were conceptualized as the quintessential internal “other.”⁵⁷

Gregoras’ choice to identify the protagonist as Scythian without giving her a personal name has the effect of repeatedly emphasizing the woman’s alterity and her “barbarian” origin. As most scholars rightly point out, the label likely refers to either Mongols or Cumans living on the northern shores of the Danube. In doing

⁵⁴ According to Youval Rotman, the creation of multi-generational clients through large scale manumission was not only common, but a central goal of Byzantine slave-holding. See Rotman, “Enslavement for Manumission.”

⁵⁵ For an excellent study showing how reality could be far more complex, see Dincer, “Enslaving Christians,” 1–19.

⁵⁶ Gregoras, *Historiae Byzantinae*, I.116, lines 5–11. Gregoras states quite plainly that not only Byzantines and “Thessalians,” but also Albanians, Serbs, and Bulgarians did not enslave their co-religionists. See also Köpstein, *Žur Sklaverei im ausgehenden Byzanz*, 58.

⁵⁷ For slaves as internal other, see Laiou, “The Foreigner and the Stranger in 12th Century Byzantium,” 71–97; Rio, *Slavery After Rome, 500–1100*, 137–138; Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, 143. Relatedly, for slaves as internal enemies, see esp. Origo, “The Domestic Enemy,” 321–366; Zhang, “Rethinking ‘Domestic Enemies’,” 409–431.

so, Gregoras was following a long tradition in Byzantine literature, particularly in history writing, of utilizing classicizing, archaicizing terminology for contemporary peoples.⁵⁸ Although the purpose of using such labels was not to deliberately obfuscate or simplify otherwise complex notions of identity, there were generally accepted guidelines to their employment. Much as they did for Herodotus, the Scythians as a model represented the antithesis of settled, Hellenic “civilization.”⁵⁹ While I have rendered it here in English as “the Scythian woman,” Gregoras typically refers to her as simply “the Scythian,” using the Greek feminine to indicate her gender. Thus, her Scythian identity is clearly centered, and her identity is subsumed under both her gender and this ethnic marker.

Cumans or other peoples labeled “Scythians” could be generally, and strongly, associated with slave status in Byzantine historiography, thanks in part to the rise of the Mamluks in Egypt.⁶⁰ Cumans were also among the most common origins of slaves bought or sold in the empire after the thirteenth century.⁶¹ By the mid-fourteenth century, there was a fairly recent history of Christianizing and resettling significant numbers of Cumans in the Byzantine Empire. By at least 1241, Nicaean Emperor John III Vatatzes had relocated a group of them near his eastern frontiers. As Akropolites records it, “the emperor John...had changed them from their wild nature

⁵⁸ The Byzantine practice of using classicizing and/or archaicizing terminology for contemporary peoples, which was meant to display the author’s familiarity with classical literature, especially Herodotus, is well-documented and has been discussed at length by numerous scholars. See, inter alia, Browning, “The Language of Byzantine Literature,” 103–133; Kaldellis, *Ethnography after Antiquity*; Wahlgren, “Byzantine Literature and the Classical Past,” 527–538.

⁵⁹ For an entry into the topic, see Braund, “Nuancing ‘Otherness,’” 21–30; Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus*, 1988; Lévy, “Les origines du mirage scythe,” 57–68.

⁶⁰ On this, see esp. Petrides, “Georgios Pachymeres between Ethnography and Narrative,” 295–318. This section of Pachymeres’ *History* describes how a “Scythian” slave came to rule over the “Ethiopians” of Egypt. Gregoras’ *Roman History* is framed as a continuation of Pachymeres.

⁶¹ Leidholm, *Slavery and Unfreedom in Byzantine Thought*, 186; Angelov, *The Byzantine Hellene*, 63. Russians and “Muslims” make up the other most commonly listed categories.

and taken them away from Macedonia, transferring them to the eastern regions.”⁶² So Gregoras could draw from an apparently successful attempt to acculturate and Christianize a population of Cumans in Byzantine territory.

Perhaps more importantly, however, this period also witnessed a relatively short-lived trend among some Byzantine intellectuals exemplified by the *Grand Logothetes* Theodore Metochites and Nikephoros Gregoras.⁶³ Metochites and his protégé here appear as leading voices questioning the traditions that unequivocally viewed Greece and Rome as the pinnacle of civilization, and sought lessons from the more recently successful nomads and pastoralists, especially the Mongols and, increasingly, the Turks.

Metochites’ views on the matter can be seen clearly in his *Miscellanea* (Σημειώσεις Γνωμικαί), an encyclopedic collection of essays covering a wide range of topics.⁶⁴ He dedicates an separate entry to the “Scythians.”⁶⁵ Metochites extols the strength and indomitable spirit of the Scythians, describing them repeatedly as unable to be mastered or controlled by others.⁶⁶ They were also the most numerous (πολυανθρωπότατον) of all peoples. Yet their customs and lifestyle were more akin to wild animals than to other men.⁶⁷ This

⁶² George Akropolites, *History*, 40 (See also Macrides’ comments at 200 n1).

⁶³ Shawcross, “Theories of Decline from Metochites to Ibn Khaldun,” 615-632.

⁶⁴ An edition of the full text can be found in Theodore Metochites, *Miscellanea philosophica et historica*. More recent, partial editions can be found in Hult, *Theodore Metochites on the Human Condition and the Decline of Rome*; Wahlgren, *Theodore Metochites’ Sententious Notes*. For a good analysis of the collection and its classical antecedents, see Xenophontos, “Plutarch and Theodore Metochites,” 310-23.

⁶⁵ Metochites, *Miscellanea*, 723-29 (Ch. 110). Gregoras is known to have read (and praised) the work, as he expressed in a letter to Metochites sometime around 1328. See Guiland, *Le correspondance de Nicéphore Grégoras*, 7-8 (Letter 15).

⁶⁶ Metochites, *Miscellanea*, 723 (Ch. 110): Σκυθῶν περί ξυνιδεῖν ἔστιν ὅτι τὸ ἐξ ἀρχῆς, ἐξ οὗ καὶ περὶ ἐθνῶν καὶ περὶ ἀνθρώπων αἱ ἱστορίαι μέμνηται, μέγιστον τῶν κατὰ τὴν οἰκουμένην τόδ’ ἐστὶ καὶ ἀδέσποτον τὸν αἰὲ χρόνον σκύθαι τὸ ἔθνος, καὶ οὐχ ὅτι γε ἀλλοτρίῳ γένει καὶ δεσποτεῖα μὴ δουλεῦσαν.

⁶⁷ Metochites, *Miscellanea*, 730 (Ch. 110): ...οὐκ ἄλλ’ οὐδὲν σφίσις ἔθιμον τῶν κατ’ ἀνθρώπους ἐδραίων πολιτευμάτων; (731) ...οὐ πάνυ τοι πλείστον χρήσιμον

depiction is especially meaningful as it stands in stark contrast to the previous chapter (109), in which Gregoras' mentor marvels at the wonder of Roman expansion and dominance. There, Metochites praises the Romans' "great hegemony over all the aforementioned peoples," having brought all of them under the rule of a single man thanks to divine providence (while lamenting the empire's more recent decline).⁶⁸

The contrast drawn by Metochites is, in fact, twofold. As Shawcross has argued, the image of a strong, "pure" Scythian race is designed to act as a mirror for the weakness of the Roman state in Metochites' own day. But their in-fighting and inability to be governed by a single ruler, especially one supported by God, makes them far from role models for his readers. These were a people who were to be feared and respected, if not exactly emulated.

Gregoras largely follows his mentor in his description of the Scythians, but he took Metochites' arguments a step further. Like the better known Ibn Khaldun, he sketches a picture, in which these powerful and unruly nomads conquer settled civilizations, only to find themselves conquered by the luxurious lifestyle of their new subjects.⁶⁹ Shawcross is likely right to link this depiction to Gregoras' generation having witnessed the transformation of the Golden Horde or even the Ottoman Turks from steppe pastoralists to more sedentary modes of existence.⁷⁰ Demetrios Kydones (1324–1398), whose father had been on the well-known diplomatic mission to the Golden Horde in 1341, echoed and, to some extent, continued the discourse begun by Metochites and Gregoras, but such sentiments did not appear frequently after the 1360s.⁷¹

αὐτοῖς τὸ πῦρ ὥσπερ καὶ ἄλλοις ἀνθρώποις...

⁶⁸ Metochites, *Miscellanea*, 722 (Ch. 109): Καὶ ταῦτα πάντα πρὸ ὁδοῦ γε ἦν τοῖς μεγάλοις ἐκείνοις ἀγωνισταῖς καὶ δρομεῦσι διὰ τῆς μεγάλης τῶν Ῥωμαίων, ὡς ἔφην, ἡγεμονίας κατὰ πάντων τῶν εἰρημένων ἐθνῶν τηνικαῦθ', ὡς εἴρηται, μοναρχούσης καὶ μοναρχουμένης ἐνὸς ἀνδρός.

⁶⁹ Shawcross, "Theories of Decline," esp. 625–26. See, for example, Gregoras, *Historiae Byzantinae*, I.40 (Bk 2.5).

⁷⁰ Following Shawcross ("Theories of Decline," 626), this intellectual moment came to an end when Byzantine Emperor John V was forced to accept nominal Ottoman suzerainty over the empire in 1371.

⁷¹ Ryder, *The Career and Writings of Demetrius Kydones*, 69–70. For editions

In some ways, the story of the Scythian woman follows this same trajectory and appears as a microcosm of the process. But in this instance, Gregoras seems to be placing a rather positive spin on the “civilizing” process and presents Byzantium, including the enslaved Byzantine man, as the catalyst for the transformation. Shawcross has described how Metochites’ “noble barbarians remained imaginary beings intended to serve primarily as a mirror held up to his own society, revealing its faults.”⁷² Gregoras’ repeated use of the label “Scythian” and the fact that he never provides the woman’s name highlights the woman’s “otherness” and perceived status as a “barbarian” in a similar way. It is also “Scythians” who initially enslaved both Byzantine figures in the anecdote, as well as the unfortunate Byzantine woman a second time. This may also explain why Gregoras felt the need to repeatedly refer to the woman as “the good Scythian woman” (τῇ ἐκ Σκυθῶν ἐκείνῃ χρηστῇ γυναικί).

Finally, we turn to the reversal of expectations in the Scythian woman’s conversion to Christianity. I have addressed this last, as I believe it is central to understanding the core, moral message being asserted by Gregoras. As Hannah Barker has argued, “One consequence of assuming slave conversion without manumission was a rhetoric of competition for slave souls. Conversion was one of the justifications given for slave ownership, because it increased the number of souls belonging to the ‘right’ religion.”⁷³ She goes so far as to contend that, from the perspective of the enslaved (or those fearing enslavement), the “spiritual violence” of conversion was among their greatest fears.⁷⁴ From this perspective, the Scythian woman’s conversion to Byzantine Christianity, as well as the slaves’ ability to (presumably) maintain their faith, is a praiseworthy aspect of Gregoras’ story that fits within broader Byzantine traditions, even as it flips the conversion from the enslaved to the enslaver. It

and translations of some of Kydonēs’ works, see Cammelli, *Démétrius Cydonès, Correspondence*; Loenertz, *Démétrius Cydonès, Correspondance*; Tinnefeld, *Die Briefe des Demetrios Kydones*.

⁷² Shawcross, “Theories of Decline,” 624.

⁷³ Barker, *The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves*, 14. See also Leidholm, *Slavery and Unfreedom in Byzantine Thought*, 97.

⁷⁴ Barker, *The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves*, 24.

also furthers Gregoras' clear intent to center religion in his brief narrative.

Gregoras' language strongly suggests that, according to him at least, the Scythian woman initially sought out the Byzantine slave specifically because she "desired to move to Byzantine (Roman) lands and to receive baptism" (ἐπόθει δ' ἐκ πολλοῦ προσχωρήσαι Ῥωμαίοις καὶ τὸ θεῖον δέξασθαι βάπτισμα). In this case, the enslaved Byzantine man serves as a catalyst for the acculturation of his new master. This, too, is a stark role reversal compared to the usual model of Byzantine slavery, in which enslaved members of the household were theoretically meant to be accultured by their Byzantine owners in a manner similar to that of parents and children.⁷⁵

Certainly Gregoras was drawing on a long tradition in Byzantine literature of praiseworthy slave ownership, including women. St. Mary the Younger, for example, is praised in her vita for her gentle, even sympathetic treatment of her household slaves. "Her own male and female servants she did not consider as slaves, but rather took care of them as if they were part of her own body, wisely discerning all that comes from God, taking into account that we are equal by nature and also that we use slaves as we do our hands and feet, and frequently we accomplish the hardest and basest services through them, while we ourselves take our ease. For these reasons she did not like to beat them, but was eager to feed and comfort them."⁷⁶ Many such cases can be found in extant Byzantine literature, like Theodore the Studite's portrait of his mother, which are focused particularly on women as gentle and pious slave-owners. According to Theodore, his mother set an example by "mixing fear with mercy" in her treatment of the enslaved members of her household.⁷⁷ Notably, however, none of these cases involved sexual relations or marriage with their household slaves.

The freeing of enslaved Christians predictably appears as a praiseworthy act with some regularity in both Byzantine and west-

⁷⁵ For a recent analysis of this idea, see Leidholm, *Slavery and Unfreedom in Byzantine Thought*, 83–122.

⁷⁶ "Vita S. Mariae Iunioris," trans. A. E. Laiou, 260. Translation by Laiou.

⁷⁷ "Vita S. Mariae Iunioris," trans. A. E. Laiou, 260: κέρασσα τῷ φόβῳ τὸν ἔλεον.

ern European sources of this period.⁷⁸ Here, too, the Scythian woman fits within the usual parameters of a praiseworthy figure in Byzantine literature. But the relative vilification of the enslaved Byzantine woman, and the lack of agency assigned to the enslaved Byzantine man, remains unusual. In Gregoras' day, Byzantines were acutely aware of the possibility of enslavement, as they were frequently among the enslaved rather than the enslavers.⁷⁹ Much of the resulting literature, including *aichmalotika*, is sympathetic to the plight of the enslaved.

This was especially prevalent after the thirteenth century, when the political and military conditions in the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean had shifted. As Alasdair Grant has recently argued, the reign of Umur in the Turkish beylik of Aydın (r. 1309–1348) marked a particular high-point of captive-taking around the Aegean.⁸⁰ Gregoras himself reports that, after their incursion into Thrace in 1337, the Tatars returned with upwards of 300,000 captives.⁸¹ Elsewhere, he gives a vivid account of the large numbers of Byzantines who were sold into slavery after the fall of Herakleia (Perinthos) to the Genoese in 1351.⁸² This attention to the plight of captured Byzantine once again makes Gregoras' narrative of the Scythian woman all the more anomalous.

What remains unclear is the crime or transgression committed by the enslaved Byzantine woman that apparently warranted her re-enslavement and disappearance. This, along with the continuation of the marriage between the Scythian woman and enslaved Byzantine man, is what Gregoras deems to have been “divine justice” (ἡ δίκη τὸ προσήκον εἴληφε πέρας πρὸς τοῦ δικάζοντος ἄνωθεν ἀρρεπῶς φιλανθρώπου θεοῦ). There is still work to be done on the

⁷⁸ See, inter alia, Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World*, 120–130.

⁷⁹ On this, see esp. Barker, *The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves*; Grant, *Greek Captives and Mediterranean Slavery*.

⁸⁰ Grant, *Greek Captives and Mediterranean Slavery*, 173–174. Gregoras himself describes the piracy and captive-taking of Umur in the second part of his *Roman History* (*Historiae Byzantinae*, II.671–2; Bk 13.10).

⁸¹ Gregoras, *Historiae Byzantinae*, I.542–544; Vásáry, *Cumans and Tatars*, 132.

⁸² Gregoras, *Historiae Byzantinae*, III.79, lines 22–24. See also Köpstein, *zur Sklaverei*, 63.

nuances of Byzantine conceptions of justice, divine or otherwise, but the narrative's conclusion is particularly puzzling.⁸³ The fact that children were involved may have made a difference. The newly baptized Scythian woman certainly delivers an act of charity when she grants freedom to her husband and the possibility to buy her freedom to the man's former wife, but the outcome of the story is anything but expected in a Byzantine context.

Perhaps nowhere was this expectation expressed more clearly or frequently than in romance literature. An extremely common trope in Hellenistic romance, taken up in many of those produced in Byzantium from the twelfth century onward, has one or both of the story's protagonists captured and/or enslaved, only to find freedom and be reunited by the end. This motif is central to all four surviving Komnenian romances of the twelfth century: Theodore Prodromos' *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, Niketas Eugenianos' *Drosilla and Charikles*, Constantine Manasses' *Aristandros and Kallithea*, and Eustathios Makrembolites' *Hysmine and Hysminias*. Among the Palaiologan romances, *Kallimachos and Chrysorrhoe* (probably written at roughly the same time as Gregoras' *History*) quite literally centers upon the abduction of Chrysorrhoe and her eventual reunion with Kallimachos.⁸⁴ *Libistros and Rhodamne*, likely also dating to the mid-fourteenth century, follows a similar narrative structure.⁸⁵

The upending of this literary trope becomes all the more noteworthy considering that Gregoras is generally quite sensitive to the plight of his fellow Romans who fell under the yoke of slavery. He was acutely aware of the perilous condition of Byzantine lands in the mid-fourteenth century, having written about his experiences in war-ravaged or otherwise vulnerable regions of Byzantine territory.⁸⁶

⁸³ For existing treatments of the topic, see, for example, Laiou, "Law, Justice, and the Byzantine Historians," 151–186.

⁸⁴ Beaton, *The Medieval Greek Romance*, 119.

⁸⁵ For an introduction to these texts, see Beaton, *The Medieval Greek Romance*; Goldwyn and Nilsson, *Reading the Late Byzantine Romance*. Achilles Tatios' *Leukippe and Kleitophon* is the most common Hellenistic model for these Byzantine tales.

⁸⁶ Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire*, 843. As Kaldellis also points out, this devastation is attested by documentary evidence from Mt. Athos. For

In his analysis of a “quite strange” ethnographic digression on the Scythians in George Pachymeres’ *History*, Antonis Patrides argues that “the very elements in Pachymeres’ account which appear the most extraneous and digressive may well be the ones that encapsulate the political punch of his discourse.”⁸⁷ Perhaps a similar reading is helpful for Gregoras. The combination of ethnic and gender role reversals, in addition to a clear emphasis on right belief in the anecdote may have had two purposes: to give some positive spin on the enslavement of Christians and as a call to right belief in a period of internal weakness and turmoil. Thus, the many aspects of the story that run counter to cultural expectations may have been deliberately designed to highlight precisely this framework and serve to strengthen Gregoras’ emphasis on the spiritual, rather than the material world. By framing the moral of the anecdote through the attraction and ultimate triumph Byzantine Christianity, Gregoras is able to use the narrative of the good Scythian woman to offer his readers a defense of orthodoxy and its redemptive power in a historical moment fraught with difficulties and complications that included both the threat of enslavement by non-Christians and theological disagreement among co-religionists.

Gregoras’ anecdote of the Scythian woman does not run entirely counter to cultural expectations in all aspects. In fact, the Scythian woman behaves precisely like a woman when actively pursues a sexual relationship with the enslaved Roman man, even if that relationship is given a morally acceptable (if illegal) facade of marriage. Her charity, which seems to form the basis of Gregoras’ praise for her, is also a feminine virtue (if not exclusively). So there are elements here of consistent gendered normativity in the long Roman tradition. And her more masculine traits need not carry a negative connotation either. As Neville rightfully points out, “when women acted like men, they were expressing more virtue than was expected for their gender. When men acted like women, they were degener-

example, an act from Ivron dated to 1341 describes land as empty of people due to Turkish raids. See Lefort *et al.*, *Archives de l’Athos*, 108 (no. 87).

⁸⁷ Patrides, “Georgios Pachymeres between Ethnography and Narrative,” 297.

ate and displaying a gross lack of virtue.”⁸⁸

Within the context of Gregoras’ thought that used the Scythians as a mirror for the relative weakness and instability of the eastern Roman Empire in his day, the story of the Scythian woman may have added an important bit of nuance. The story is a microcosm of the pastoralist-sedentary paradigm established in Metochites and Gregoras’ other writings, but this is not all. The Scythian woman’s gender, and her flaunting of several gender norms, may serve to heighten the sense of her “otherness” in the short narrative, which is clearly the case when Gregoras chooses to identify her repeatedly as “the Scythian woman,” rather than by a personal name. If the purpose of the story is to demonstrate the power of right belief and the ability of an enslaved Roman to convert his master (and therefore grant him some agency), the subversion of gender norms may play into it. The Scythian woman’s trajectory presents a story of hope and growth toward a distinctly Byzantine vision of a better future, whereby the enslavement of Roman people results in bringing a Scythian into the Byzantine fold, culturally, politically, and religiously. A representative of the unruly Scythians, who, as Metochites claimed, served no other master, had been tamed by the spiritual strength of Byzantium, even in a time of social, political and military weakness.

Bilkent University

nathan@bilkent.edu.tr

ORCID: 0000-0002-9684-5256

⁸⁸ Neville, “Reading Greco-Roman Gender Ideals in Byzantium,” 377.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

- Bekker, I. and L. Schopen, eds. *Nicephori Gregorae historiae Byzantinae*. 3 vols. Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae 6–8. Bonn: Weber, 1829–1855.
- Cammelli, G. *Démétrius Cydonès, Correspondence: Texte inédit, établi, et traduit*. Les Belles Lettres, 1930.
- Hult, K., ed. *Theodore Metochites on the Human Condition and the Decline of Rome: Semeioseis gnomikai 27–60*. Kriterium, 2016.
- Jeffreys, E. *Digenis Akritis: The Grottaferrata and Escorial Versions*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Kiessling, M.T. and M.C.G. Müller, ed. *Theodore Metochites: Miscellanea philosophica et historica*. Leipzig, 1821.
- Lefort, J. et al., eds. *Archives de l'Athos: Actes d'Iviron, IV. De 1328 au début du XVIe siècle*. Lethielleux CNRS éditions, 1995.
- Loenertz, R.-J., ed. *Démétrius Cydonès, Correspondance*. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1956.
- Macrides, R. *George Akropolites, The History: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Migne, J.P., ed. *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Graeca*. Paris, 1865.
- Noailles, P. and A. Dain, eds. and trans. *Les nouvelles de Léon VI le sage*. Les Belles Lettres, 1944.
- Pitsakes, K., ed. *Constantine Harmenopoulos, Πρόχειρον νόμων ἡ Ἐξάβιβλος*. Dodone, 1971.
- Rhalles, G.A. and M. Potles, eds. *Σύνταγμα τῶν θείων καὶ ἱερῶν κανόνων*. Athens, 1854.
- Scheltema, H.J. and N. van der Wal, eds. *Basilicorum libri LX: Series A*. 8 vols. Wolters, 1945–1988.
- Talbot, A.-M., ed. *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*. Dumbarton Oaks, 1996.
- van Dieten, J.L., trans. *Nikephoros Gregoras. Rhomäische Geschichte=Historia Rhomaike*. 6 vols. Bibliothek der griechischen Literatur 4, 8, 9, 24, 39, 59, 66. Anton Hiersemann, 1973–2000.
- “Vita S. Mariae Iunioris.” AA SS, Novembris IV (BHG 1164). Société des Bollandistes, 1925.
- Wahlgren, S., ed. *Theodore Metochites' Sententious Notes: Semeioseis gnomikai 61–70 & 72–8. A Critical Edition with Introduction, Translation,*

Notes, and Indexes. Kriterium 2018.

Secondary Sources

- Angelov, D. *The Byzantine Hellene: The Life of Emperor Theodore Laskaris and Byzantium in the Thirteenth Century*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Barker, H. *That Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260–1500*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019.
- Beaton, R. *The Medieval Greek Romance*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 1996.
- Beyer, H.-V. “Eine Chronologie der Lebensgeschichte des Nikephoros Gregoras.” *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 27 (1978): 127–155.
- Brand, C.M. “Slave Women in the Legislation of Alexius I.” *Byzantinische Forschungen* 23 (1996): 19–24.
- Braund, D. “The Movement of Scythian Nomads Nuancing ‘Otherness.’” *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 1/2 (2000): 21–30.
- Browning, R. “The Language of Byzantine Literature.” In *Greek Literature in the Byzantine Period*, edited by G. Nagy, pp. 103–133. Routledge, 2002.
- Buckland, W.W. *The Roman Law of Slavery: The Condition of the Slave in Private Law from Augustus to Justinian*. Cambridge University Press, 1908.
- Dincer, A. “Enslaving Christians: Greek Slaves in Late Medieval Cyprus.” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 31 (2016): 1–19.
- Evans Grubbs, J. *Law and Family in Late Antiquity: The Emperor Constantine’s Marriage Legislation*. Oxford University Press/Clarendon Press, 1995.
- Evans Grubbs, J. “Marriage More Shameful than Adultery: Slave-Mistress Relationships, ‘Mixed Marriages,’ and Late Roman Law.” *Phoenix* 47 (1993): 125–154.
- Finley, M.I. *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*. Chatto and Windus, 1980.
- Glancy, J. *Slavery in Early Christianity*. Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Goldwyn, A.J. and I. Nilsson, eds. *Reading the Late Byzantine Romance: A Handbook*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Grant, A. *Greek Captives and Mediterranean Slavery, 1260–1460*. Edinburgh University Press, 2024.

- Guilland, R. *Le correspondance de Nicéphore Grégoras*. Les Belles Lettres, 1927.
- Harper, K. *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275–425*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Hartog, F. *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History*, translated by J. Lloyd. University of California Press, 1988.
- Kaldellis, A. *Ethnography after Antiquity: Foreign Lands and Peoples in Byzantine Literature*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.
- Kaldellis, A. *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium*. Oxford University Press, 2024.
- Kazhdan, A. ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*. Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Köpstein, H. “Zur Novelle des Alexios Komnenos zum Sklavenstatus (1095).” In *Actes du XV^e Congrès international d’études byzantines, Athènes Septembre 1976*. Vol. IV, pp. 60–172. Association internationale des études byzantines, 1980.
- Köpstein, H. *Zur Sklaverei im ausgehenden Byzanz: Philologisch-historische Untersuchung*. Akademie Verlag, 1966.
- Laiou, A.E. “Law, Justice, and the Byzantine Historians: Ninth to Twelfth Centuries.” In *Law and Society in Byzantium, Ninth–Twelfth Centuries*, edited by A.E. Laiou and D. Simon, pp. 151–186. Dumbarton Oaks, 1994.
- Laiou, A.E. “Sex, Consent, and Coercion in Byzantium.” In *Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Societies*, edited by A.E. Laiou, pp. 109–226. Dumbarton Oaks, 1993.
- Laiou, A.E. “The Foreigner and the Stranger in 12th Century Byzantium: Means of Propitiation and Acculturation.” In *Byzantium and the Other: Relations and Exchanges*, edited by C. Morrisson and R. Dorin, pp. 71–97. Routledge, 2012.
- Leidholm, N. “Searching for Unfree Families in Thirteenth-Century Episcopal Registers: Demetrios Chomatenos and John Apokaukos.” *Medieval People: Social Bonds, Kinship, Networks* 37 (2022): 61–88.
- Leidholm, N. *Slavery and Unfreedom in Byzantine Thought on the Household*. Arc Humanities Press, 2025.
- Lévy, E. “Les origines du mirage scythe.” *Klèma* 6 (1981): 57–68.
- Melichar, P. “An Eloquent Woman in the Council of Men: Theo-

- dora Kantakouzene – Princess, Politician, and Prisoner in the Era of the Byzantine Civil Wars (1321–1342).” *Studia historica Brunensia* 72 (2025): 99–118.
- Neville, L. *Anna Komnene: The Life and Work of a Medieval Historian*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Neville, L. *Byzantine Gender*. Arc Humanities Press, 2019.
- Neville, L. *Guide to Byzantine Historical Writing*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Neville, L. “Reading Greco-Roman Gender Ideals in Byzantium: Classical Heroes and Eastern Roman Gender.” In *The Routledge Handbook on Identity in Byzantium*, edited by M.E. Stewart, D.A. Parnell, and C. Whately, pp. 377–394. Routledge, 2022.
- Nikolov, A. “Byzantium and the Mongol World: Contact and Interaction (from Batu to Tamerlane).” In *The Routledge Handbook of the Mongols and Central-Eastern Europe*, edited by A.V. Maiorov and R. Hautala, pp. 191–211. Routledge, 2021.
- Origo, I. “The Domestic Enemy: The Eastern Slaves in Tuscany in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries.” *Speculum* 30 (1955): 321–366.
- Page, G. *Being Byzantine: Greek Identity before the Ottomans*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Pahlitzsch, J. “Slavery and the Slave Trade in Byzantium in the Palaeologan Period.” In *Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean (c. 1000–1500 CE)*, edited by R. Amitai and C. Cluse, pp. 163–186. Brepols, 2017.
- Paoletta, C. *Human Trafficking in Medieval Europe: Slavery, Sexual Exploitation, and Prostitution*. Amsterdam University Press, 2020.
- Papaioannou, S. *Michael Psellos: Rhetoric and Authorship in Byzantium*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Penna, D. and R. Meijering. *A Sourcebook on Byzantine Law*. Brill, 2022.
- Petrides, A.K. “Georgios Pachymeres between Ethnography and Narrative: Συγγραφικὰ Ἱστορία 3.3–5,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 49 (2009): 295–318.
- Rapp, C. et al., eds. *Mobility and Migration in Byzantium: A Sourcebook*. Vienna University Press, 2023.
- Rio, A. *Slavery After Rome, 500–1100*. Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Rotman, Y. “Enslavement for Manumission: The Creation of Byz-

- antine 'Private Subjects.'" *Slavery and Abolition* 44 (2023): 638–657.
- Rotman, Y. *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World*, translated by J.M. Todd. Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Ryder, J.R. *The Career and Writings of Demetrius Kydones: A Study of Fourteenth-Century Byzantine Politics, Religion and Society*. Brill, 2010.
- Savvides, A. "Οι Κουμάνοι και το Βυζάντιο: 11ος–13ος αιώνας μ.Χ." *Byzantina* 13 (1985): 937–955.
- Shawcross, T. "Theories of Decline from Metochites to Ibn Khaldun." In *The Cambridge Intellectual History of Byzantium*, edited by A. Kaldellis and S. Siniosoglou, pp. 615–632. Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Shukurov, R. *The Byzantine Turks, 1204–1461*. Brill, 2016.
- Tinnefeld, F. *Die Briefe des Demetrios Kydones: Themen und literarisches Form*. Harrassowitz, 2010.
- Vásáry, I. *Cumans and Tatars. Oriental Military in the Pre-Ottoman Balkans, 1185–1365*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Wahlgren, S. "Byzantine Literature and the Classical Past." In *A Companion to the Ancient Greek Language*, edited by E.J. Bakker, pp. 527–538. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Wood, J. "Military Manuals, Masculinity, and the Making of Christian Soldiers in Late Antiquity." *Journal of Early Christian History* 11 (2021): 88–128.
- Xenophontos, S. "Plutarch and Theodore Metochites." In *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Plutarch*, edited by S. Xenophontos and K. Oikonomopoulou, pp. 310–323. Brill, 2019.
- Zhang, A. "Rethinking 'Domestic Enemies': Slavery and Race Formation in Late Medieval Florence." *Speculum* 99 (2024): 409–431.