On *Digenis Akritas*
Grottaferrata Version Book 5

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O NLY TWO VERSIONS of the epic *Digenis Akritas* narrate the hero's encounter with the daughter of the Syrian emir Haplorrhabdes: Book 5 of the Grottaferrata version (G) and Book 6 of the version Z which the latest editor, E. Trapp, reconstructs from the Trebizond manuscript and the Andros manuscript now in Athens.[1] For this material, however, as Trapp notes,[2] Z is likely to represent a contamination of its source, Y, with γ, the source of the Grottaferrata version; hence the following discussion will be based on the more authentic Grottaferrata version alone. The episodic character of this material has been previously recognized, but the appropriate conclusions have not, I think, as yet been drawn from it. Thus, Kyriakidis hypothesizes that the incident was added by the redactor of the Grottaferrata version.[3] This cannot be true, however, even of the redactor of γ, since, as Trapp has shown, the Escorial manuscript contains two verses from the introduction to this episode.[4] I will argue that this material is likely to have derived from a separate song incorporated not without difficulty into the epic *Digenis Akritas*.[5]

Book 5 of the Grottaferrata version begins with an act of bridetheft, a popular theme of acritic song[6] and a motif which likewise plays

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[1] *Digenis Akrites, Synoptische Ausgabe der ältesten Versionen* (Vienna 1971) 26–33; on Trapp's reconstruction of this version *cf.* the reservations of E. Jeffreys, *JHS* 92 (1972) 253–55, and "Digenis Akritas Manuscript Z," *Dodoni* 4 (1975) 163–201; L. Politis, *Scriptorium* 27 (1973) 327–51.

[2] Trapp (*supra* n.1) 63; full stemma, 46.

[3] S. Kyriakidis, "Forschungsbericht zum Akritas-Epos," *Berichte zum XI. Internationalen Byzantinisten-Kongress* II (Munich 1958) 2, 30.

[4] Lines 1081–82~Z 2412–15: Trapp (*supra* n.1) 31 and 62.

[5] *Cf.* E. Trapp, "Hagiographische Elemente im Digenis-Epos," *AnalBoll* 94 (1976) 275–87, esp. 277 and 286, who finds parallels between the episode of the daughter of Haplorrhabdes and the *Life* of St Theoktiste of Lesbos composed at the beginning of the tenth century by Niketas of Lesbos; he concludes that our episode may have been added to the original epic under hagiographical inspiration.

[6] I retain the term simply for the sake of convenience (see R. Beaton, "'Digenis Akrites' and Modern Greek Folk Song: a Reassessment," *Byzantion* 51 [1981] 22–43, esp. 27 and 43); *cf.* P. Kalonaros, ed., Βασίλειος Διγενής Ἀκρίτας, τά ἔμμετρα κείμενα II (Athens 1941) 229ff nos. ια, ιβ, ιδ, ιε.

an important rôle in the epic *Digenis Akritas*. If a social historian were
to take the content of our epic at face value, he would conclude that
the normal way for a Byzantine or Arab to marry was to steal a bride.[7]
In fact, the Grottaferrata version has no fewer than four instances of
bride-theft and six of attempted bride-theft, and no other method of
securing a spouse is so much as mentioned! It is one of the ways a
hero can display his prowess, whether or not romantic motives are
involved; thus, Philopappus makes stealing a bride prerequisite to
joining his ἀπελάται (version E 751, Andros 1619). We see the bride-
theft plot in its simplest form in Book 4 of the Grottaferrata version.
Here young Digenis steals his bride (with the young lady's conniv-
ance) and is pursued by her father, who is a general, and his troops.
Next the hero proves his prowess in a trial of arms in which he defeats
and kills his adversaries except for the bride's father and brothers.
The plot need not take this precise form, however. The test of prow-
ess appears elsewhere as a contest, such as the chariot race by which
Pelops won the hand of Hippodamia. The test may be won by valor as
in Digenis' case or by cunning as in some versions of the Pelops saga.

Elsewhere we see variations on the basic folktale motif of bride-
theft. Thus, when the emir seizes a Greek woman as his bride, her
brother defeats the emir in a trial by arms (no Greek should come
out second-best in our poem!). We fully expect that this defeat will
cost the emir his bride, if not his life. However, attention is diverted
from the expected outcome by a red herring: the Saracen tells the
bride's brothers to seek their sister's corpse among the women put to
death for refusing to submit to the emir's advances (G 194–96).
Then follows the emir's surprising offer to convert to Christianity.
The motif *omnia vincit amor* is invoked to account for his sudden
volte-face (G 268–69). The plot demands that the hybrid warrior who
is the hero of the poem should be the son of an Arab and a Greek;
patriotism demands that the emir should not win the conventional
trial by arms against a Greek opponent; hence the expedient of con-
version and the motif of love's invincibility as the psychological
explanation. The basic bride-theft plot is varied again when in Book 2
the emir's plan to bring his bride back with him to Syria to visit his
mother is discovered by the bride's brothers and treated by them as
an instance of bride-stealing. After all, good faith has not yet been
fully established, and the emir's acceptance as a son-in-law had in the
first place been contingent on his promise to convert to Christianity

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[7] On the motif with particular reference to the Russian version *cf.* W. J. Entwistle,
"Bride-snatching and the 'Deeds of Digenis,'" *Oxford Slavonic Papers* 4 (1953) 1–16.

and live within the Empire. At his wife's intercession, the emir does finally succeed in visiting his mother, but alone. Finally, Book 6 of the Grottaferrata version consists of a long series of attempts to harm or steal Digenis' wife, all of which he successfully repels.

The metamorphoses of the stolen bride plot in Book 5 can be best analyzed against this background. Here a bride is first stolen, next abandoned, then rescued by Digenis, raped by him, and finally returned to the man who had stolen and abandoned her in the first place. This tale is a reversal of that of the wooing of Digenis' mother in that now the abductor is a Greek and the bride the daughter of a Syrian emir (G 2111). She falls in love with the Greek,[8] who is being held prisoner by her father, and helps him escape with much of the family treasure (G 2133, 2251). The plan is that, like the emir who sired Digenis, she will convert to Christianity, and they will wed and live on Byzantine soil. However, while they are encamped at an oasis on their way to the borders of the Empire, he abandons her in the middle of the night.[9] Thus, the folktale of the stolen bride gives way to that of the abandoned bride.

An abandoned-bride plot may end either happily or in an act of vengeance; the two types can be called respectively the Ariadne and the Medea pattern. While up to the point of her abandonment the bride of Book 5 of the Grottaferrata version resembles Medea, in that she renders her paramour decisive help against her father and escapes with him only to be abandoned, our heroine harbors no thought of vengeance. Thus, in the absence of the vengeance motive, we would expect our heroine to become an Ariadne, abandoned by her lover only to be rescued by another lover still more desirable, namely Digenis. I suggest that this is the original form of the story — that it was one of several competing versions of Digenis' winning of his wife. The poet responsible for combining the Digenis materials into a coherent epic preferred the more heroic version of Grottaferrata 4, in which Digenis steals his bride and defeats an entire army in order to keep her,[10] but he did not want to give up the attractive story of the meeting at the oasis. However, when he incorporated that tale into a context in which Digenis was already married, he did not succeed in concealing all the seams in the new plot.

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[8] He is the son of a general named Antiochus whom the Arabs had defeated at Zygos (cf. Trapp [supra n.1] ad G 2304).

[9] The curious detail that when she notices his preparations for departure she dresses herself as a man seems to betray dependence on folksong: cf. Beaton (supra n.6) 35–36 and 42.

[10] This is a motif with parallels in folksong: cf. Beaton (supra n.6) 39.

The first indication that the incident was originally more than a casual encounter occurs after the woman has identified herself and Digenis describes the effect of her beauty upon him: he thought that she was the second part, *i.e.* the other half, of his soul[11]—hardly the way an already married man speaks about a woman who will play no major rôle in his life. After the woman has told her story, a band of Arabs attacks, and Digenis repels them. Digenis here has an opportunity to display his prowess and thus prove to both the Arabs and the woman his identify as the Ἀκρίτης.[12] The incident also has another aspect, however. The motif of intruders who try to separate or otherwise interfere with a couple is proper to lovers or spouses. As has already been mentioned, a number of variants of it occur in the next book of the poem, where the principals are Digenis and his wife. Note too that such a victory in battle can take on *ex post facto* the aspect of a victory in a contest to win a bride. Thus, Digenis' defeat of Leander and routing of the other ἀπελάται earns him Maximo's respect (G 2987ff) and his second victory over her convinces her that he is worthy to be her lover (G 3102). We may suspect that Digenis' victory over her Arab countrymen in the original version of our story was a surrogate for victory over the kinsmen of a stolen bride. In addition, one detail is very difficult to account for unless one assumes that the woman at the oasis was to become Digenis' bride, namely the fact that she has already received Christian baptism when he meets her (G 2270). This is a difficulty, for she has come directly from her father's house and has not yet reached the borders of the Empire. Moreover, the plot of the poem, as it now stands, does not demand the anomaly, since Digenis merely asks that she be willing to convert as a condition for restoring her to her former lover (G 2267). Her previous conversion, however, would secure a great advantage for a poet who intended her to become at once the bride of Digenis himself. Moreover, the assumption that Grottaferrata 5 is based on a tale in which Digenis marries the woman at the oasis helps to explain the most shocking incident of the entire poem, Digenis' rape of a defenseless woman on their journey to find her lover.[13] The author of

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[11] ἥψατο γάρ μου τῆς ψυχῆς τὸ ἀπόρρητον κάλλος, ὥστε δευτέραν τῆς ἐμῆς ταύτην εἶναι νομίσαι (G 2100–01); for the interpretation *cf. Digenis Akrites*, ed. John Mavrogordato (Oxford 1956), note on 2229 of his edition. *Cf.* Pl. *Symp.* 191Α6, ποθοῦν ἕκαστον τὸ ἥμισυ τὸ αὐτοῦ συνήει.

[12] Aristotle would have approved of our author's procedure in this regard: πασῶν δὲ βελτίστη ἀναγνώρισις ἡ ἐξ αὐτῶν τῶν πραγμάτων ... (*Poet.* 1455a16ff).

[13] *Cf.* W. P. Ker, *The Dark Ages* (Edinburgh/London 1904) 345: "Digenis, however, though a great champion, would have been hooted as a felon for some things in his

the epic has retained the consummation of the relationship from the original Ariadne-plot in spite of the resulting disharmony with the character of Digenis as presented elsewhere in the poem.[14] The awkwardness is increased by the necessity, in first-person narrative, of Digenis condemning his own misdeed. In the face of these obstacles the epic poet would hardly have retained the incident except as a concession to a well-known tradition.

The attempt of the epic redactor to find an alternative dénouement to the marriage of the daughter of Haplorrhabdes to Digenis is unconvincing. Since according to the epic plot Digenis is already married, a substitute must be found for Digenis-Dionysus as the bride's new husband. The lot falls, surprisingly, to her previous lover, the same man who left her to die in the desert ten days before. The result is achieved by some rather peculiar feminine psychology and a highly implausible shift in the plot. When the woman shows concern over the fate of her former lover, who has, as she has heard, encountered the notorious highwaymen Mousour, Digenis comments: καὶ τότε πρῶτον ἔμαθον ἀγάπην γυναικείαν θερμοτέραν κατὰ πολὺ ὑπάρχειν τῶν ἀρρένων.[15] This poet would revise the old saw to read: "Hell hath no fury like a *man* scorned." Digenis' diagnosis is confirmed when she describes herself as still a slave to the love of the man who abandoned her (G 2272).[16]

There remain, however, two formidable obstacles to reuniting her with her lover: (1) the problem of locating him; (2) the question whether he will now change his mind and have her as his wife. The

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biography; his betrayal of the damsel in his charge requires the vengeance of Sir Guyon or Sir Arthegall, and his repentance is filthy."

[14] The case of Maximo, who gives consent, is different. What is shocking about the Maximo-episode is rather that Digenis murders her so ruthlessly after his wife suspects his adultery even though he spared the Amazon's life after defeating her twice in battle (*cf.* Ker's complaint [*supra* n.13] that "the gloating respectability of the Byzantine author has spoilt a good passage of old romance ... "). I suspect that, as in Grottaferrata 5, the hero's encounter with an Amazon was once a separate song which culminated in Digenis' marriage to the defeated woman and that the unsatisfactory ending of the epic version results from the exigencies of a plot in which Digenis is already married.

[15] G 2254-55. The following verse (2256, φθείρει δὲ μᾶλλον ἄθεσμος καὶ παράνομος μίξις) is suspect: the thought lacks relevance to this context. 2254-55 present the woman's feelings in positive terms (the *warmer* love of women); the poet has not presented any evidence for the corrupting effect of illicit intercourse upon this woman (unfortunately, corresponding material of Z is here lacking).

[16] On the 'slave of love' motif in ancient literature see most recently R. O. A. M. Lyne, "Servitium amoris," *CQ* N.S. 29 (1979) 117-30; most relevant for our purposes are the Greek examples discussed at 118-20.

first problem is evaded by poetic sleight of hand. Digenis reports that he saved her lover from Mousour, whom he killed, and that he left him in custody with some friends[17] until his return. He adds: γνω-στὸν δὲ πᾶσιν ἔφηνα καὶ παράνομον μάλα (G 2307). Now deprecatory terms such as παραβάτης (G 2159, 2215), ὁ πλανήσας (2187), and ὁ πλάνος (2200) have been applied to the young man at various points in the preceding dialogue by both the abandoned bride and Digenis. However, at the time when he saved him from Mousour five days ago, Digenis had no way of knowing that the young man could be called an outlaw (παράνομος).[18] It was simply necessary for the plot that he be able to be located. The remaining problem of the young man's psychology is not dealt with. We are not told why he abandoned his bride in the desert. We are left to assume, with the victim, that his motives were opportunistic. Nor are we told his feelings upon being confronted by Digenis with the bride he abandoned. Digenis—or rather the poet—imposes a solution. Digenis admonishes him repeatedly not to abandon the woman again, adds a dire threat,[19] and leaves. But will he, left to his own devices, be more reliable than before? The reader has no reason to believe that he has repented his previous behavior.

Finally, Grottaferrata 5 is only weakly connected to the main thread of epic narrative. No attempt is made to bring it into chronological relation to the preceding events. On the other hand, the epilogue verses 2325–33, though designed for the purpose, provide only a superficial link to the following narrative: we are suddenly informed that the events just described bring the calendar to mid-April, a convenient, if obvious, way of connecting them with the panegyric of May with which Grottaferrata 6 begins. The epilogue also depicts Digenis' state of mind—his feelings of guilt and shame at having committed adultery and his *consequent* decision to change his place of residence.[20] The change of venue is likewise dictated by the desire to

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[17] In G 2308–09, Z 2721 provides confirmation of Legrand's αὐτῶν for the non-sensical αὐτῆς.

[18] So already Dennison B. Hull in *Digenis Akritas: the Two-Blood Border Lord* (Athens [Ohio] 1972) 142 (*ad* 5.263).

[19] The threat (2310–11) is oddly inserted in direct speech without being fully integrated into context.

[20] ὡς αἰσχυνόμενος αὐτὴν μεγάλως ἀδικήσας, μετ' ὀλίγον γὰρ ἔδοξα μετοίκησιν ποιῆσαι (G 2330–31). Note that the following line (2332, διὰ τὸ γνῶναι καὶ αὐτὴ τὴν παράνομον μίξιν) has been suspected (by Mavrogordato *ad loc.*) because it renders the antecedent of ἥν in the next line ambiguous (it should refer back to μετοίκησιν, not μίξιν). The problem is commonly solved, *e.g.* by Mavrogordato and Trapp, by printing 2332 in parentheses. This is not an appropriate solution, however, once the poem is conceded to have been composed orally (*cf.* Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* [Cam-

forge a link with the following book, in which the borderer and his wife are encamped in a meadow. Though originally the encampment in the meadow was not motivated by a change from one dwelling to another,[21] it is so interpreted by the epic redactor. How this change of location is supposed to help the hero's psychological state is, however, never explained.

In the usually straightforward epic *Digenis Akritas*, Book 5 of the Grottaferrata version stands apart with its strange twistings of plot and deformations of character. These fall into place, however, if one begins from the assumption that the poet was struggling to integrate recalcitrant originally autonomous materials into a very different overall scheme. The resources that the epic poet had at his disposal for the task were modest: the slave-of-love motif is invoked to account for the woman's continued affection for the man who abandoned her; the cliché of youthful passion appears in the prologue as a partial excuse for the hero's behavior; and no psychological background at all is provided for the young man who first abandons and then accepts back his bride. The poet, then, tries to satisfy the demands both of his large-scale plot and of a tale in which Digenis wins a bride under different circumstances, without being able to bridge the gap completely.

Karl Lachmann's theory of epic composition from individual lays is no longer given much credence for the Homeric poems with their considerably greater internal unity.[22] The theory is much more plausible, however, as applied to *Digenis Akritas*. We have seen that Grottaferrata Books 5 and 6 are connected to the main narrative by the thinnest and most superficial of tissue. The earliest stage in the formation of the saga is likely to have been a series of songs on the

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bridge (Mass.) 1960] 207–20; C. A. Trypanis, *Gnomon* 45 [1973] 615–16 and *Greek Poetry from Homer to Seferis* [London/Boston 1981] 499ff; R. Beaton, "Was Digenis Akrites an Oral Poem?" *BMGS* 7 (1981) 7–27, argues that the poem is a conflation of learned and oral traditions), since in an oral poem no graphic convention can disambiguate the text. The suspect line cannot be dispensed with, however, since it is needed to explain 2330: why should Digenis feel ashamed in her presence if she does not know? Order can be restored merely by transposing 2331 and 2332.

[21] Rather, we have a version of the 'bower of love' motif so common in romance: *cf.* A. R. Littlewood, "Romantic Paradises: The Rôle of the Garden in Byzantine Romance," *BMGS* 5 (1979) 95–114 at 97ff (on our scene see 101). Note that it is only at the very end of Grottaferrata 6 (the epic redactor!) that Digenis decides that he wishes to live on the Euphrates.

[22] Salvatore Impellizzeri, *Il Digenis Akritas. L'epopea di Bisanzio* (Florence 1940), rightly recognizes the primacy of the *Einzellied* in *Digenis Akritas* (though without reference to Book 5: see 25ff) but adds an unfortunate attempt to revive the application of Lachmann's theory to the Homeric epics as well (102ff).

"Deeds of Digenis" narrating his encounters with various ἀπελάται. These will have spawned in turn set-pieces on such themes as "Digenis' winning of his bride," "Digenis' meeting with the emperor," "Digenis' house," and "Digenis' death." At a later stage a "Lay of the Emir" will have been added to account for the origin and name of so brilliant a hero. In any case, it is clear that in *Digenis Akritas* the individual song is primary, the combination of songs into a connected narrative secondary and superficial.[23]

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