

Antecedents and Context of *Digenes Akrites*

George Huxley

I

Historical Aspects of The Lay of the Emir

THE HISTORICAL CRITICISM of the epic *Digenes Akrites* begins with the recognition that the poem consists of two distinct parts. In the first part the centre of attention is the Saracen emir who, having fallen in love with his beautiful captive Eirene, an East Roman general's daughter, is willing to accept baptism in order to marry her; they settle in Cappadocia, where he becomes the father of Digenes. In the second part the hero is Digenes Akrites, the 'Twyborn borderer', himself, and the action is centred further to the east in Commagene, beside the Euphrates in the neighbourhood of Samosata, where, at Trosis, Digenes builds his palace and after many exploits dies. This part, the *Digeneid* proper, cannot have come into existence before the imperial advance eastwards from Cappadocia during the campaigns of John Kourkouas, who had reached Melitene in A.D. 931. On the other hand, the historical context of the first part, the *Lay of the Emir*, is the Cappadocian frontier a generation or more earlier, before the imperial advance had begun. The *Lay*, indeed, was originally a distinct poem; it was extended by the author of the *Digeneid*, but it is now lost, as is the original *Digeneid*.

The *Lay* and the *Digeneid* have recognisable historical contexts. It is with the background of the former that this paper is concerned; but epics with historical contexts are not necessarily epics about historical individuals, and we should resist the temptation to regard Digenes as a poetical representation of John Kourkouas, George Maniakes, or any other victorious agent of the central government in Constantinople. In so far as Digenes represents anything, he exemplifies heroically the military power, independence and riches of the akritic nobility in the century after the conquests of Kourkouas, before the incursions of the Seljuks began. The hero of the *Digeneid* gives every sign of being a

purely poetical creation of a learned Commagenian dependant of an akritic family, who lived sometime between about 940 and 1040;¹ in Digenes the akritic life takes on a superhuman quality, but nevertheless H. Grégoire thought that he had identified the historical prototype of Digenes.

In 788, according to Theophanes,² a capable officer called Diogenes, Tourmarch of the Anatolikoi, fell in battle at Kopidnados against Arab invaders of the Anatolic *thema*. Here, claimed Grégoire,³ who *en passant* changed *Κοπιδνάδον* to *Ποδανδόν* in the text of Theophanes, is the original of Digenes. The claim was strongly criticised by Mavrogordato,⁴ but it has even been favourably mentioned in textbooks.⁵ There is, however, nothing to commend it. The *τουρμάρχης* Diogenes is not an *akrites*; he belongs to the central organisation of the *themata*. He dies in war, not at home in peace. The name *Διογένης* has no etymological or semantic connexion with *Διγενής*, 'Twyborn'. Diogenes the Tourmarch does not belong to the period in which the original *Digeneid* took shape, but more than a century and a half earlier.

Yet Digenes has a prototype—his father, the Emir Mousour—Ioannes. Both are borderers. Both carry off brides from households of the Doukas family, or at any rate, from households of a Doux. Both are great warriors who campaign far beyond their homes near the frontier. Both bring their mothers to live with them in their second homes—the Emir from Edessa to Cappadocia, Digenes from Cappadocia to Commagene. Both die Orthodox Christians. Both are

¹ L. Politis, *A History of Modern Greek Literature* (Oxford 1973) 24, suggests that the poet of the lost original of the *Digeneid* lived at the end of the tenth or the beginning of the eleventh century. Since Digenes brings peace to the frontier, John Mavrogordato proposed to place the poet in the time of Constantine IX Monomachos (1042–1055), when there was peace on the frontier for the last time before the Seljuk onslaught (*Digenes Akrites* [Oxford 1956] lxxxiv); but Digenes reflects not the existence of peace but his creator's longing for it. The mention of imperial tribute to Ikonion in the Grottaferrata version (G 1993–94 Trapp) need not be a reference to the Seljuk Sultanate of Rūm; but even if it is, that is not a reason for dating the lost original of the *Digeneid* later than the East Roman defeat at Manzikert in 1071. I cite the earliest versions of the *Digeneid* from the synoptic edition of E. Trapp, *Digenes Akrites* (Wiener Byzantinische Studien 8, 1971); though his reconstruction of the manuscript tradition takes too little account of the interaction of oral and written versions of the poem, he makes much vital evidence conveniently accessible.

² p.463, 15–21 de Boor.

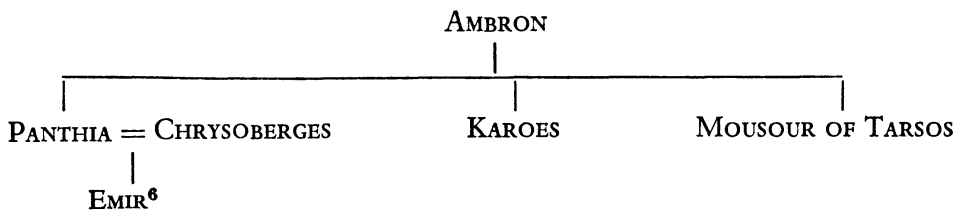
³ *Byzantion* 11 (1936) 608, and elsewhere.

⁴ *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) lxxi–lxxii.

⁵ A. A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire I* (Madison 1952) 370; R. J. H. Jenkins, *Byzantium, The Imperial Centuries* (London 1966) 65.

'twyborn': the Emir's father was Chrysocherpes, whose historical prototype was the Paulician heretic Chrysocheir, and his mother was the Muslim lady Spathia; Basil Digenes Akrites had the Emir for his father, and for his mother the East Roman Orthodox lady Eirene Doukas.

The Emir, then, is the original, a fictitious original, of the equally non-historical Digenes. It follows that the complete *Digeneid* originated later than the *Lay of the Emir*. We have an approximate *terminus ante quem* for the composition of the *Lay* in the campaigns of John Kourkouas. A more precise *terminus post quem* is provided by the mention of Chrysocheir or Chrysocherpes, the father of the Emir; with the Emir must be considered Ambron, his maternal grandfather and Karoes his mother's brother. The *Lay* presents the Emir's ancestry consistently in the Grottaferrata version thus:



The flesh-and-blood original of Ambron is the historical Emir of Melitene, Omar, who for long distinguished himself in war against the Empire, but in the end he was surrounded by the imperial forces under Petronas in 863 near the Halys and killed.⁷ Omar's incursions had been made all the more damaging by his alliance with the Paulicians in the eastern frontier lands; they were led by Karbeas and Chrysocheir, renegade imperial officers, whose epic embodiments in the *Lay* are Karoes and Chrysoberges (or Chrysocherpes).⁸ The high rank achieved by Paulicians under the Iconoclast emperors shows

⁶ See Mavrogordato, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 254. For variants in the genealogy see A. Pertusi, *op.cit.* (*infra* n.35) 538–40.

⁷ Genesisus p.96, 20, ed. Bonn; *Theophanes Continuatus* p.183, 6 ed. Bonn.

⁸ The Paulician vestiges in the *Lay* were first detected by C. Sathas and E. Legrand, who published the Trebizond version of the *Digeneid* in their book *Les Exploits de Digénis Akritas* (Paris 1875). Recently there has been much writing about the Paulician heresy. Relevant texts are re-edited by Ch. Astruc, W. Conus-Wolska, J. Gouillard, P. Lemerle, D. Papatryssanthou and J. Paramelle in "Les Sources grecques pour l'histoire des Pauliciens d'Asie mineure," *Travaux et Mémoires* 4 (1970) 1–227. The book of Nina G. Garsoïan (*The Paulician Heresy* [The Hague/Paris 1967]) must be read in conjunction with the comprehensive study of P. Lemerle: "L'Histoire des Pauliciens d'Asie mineure d'après les sources grecques," *Travaux et Mémoires* 5 (1973) 1–144. Allusions to Paulicians in Akritic epic are considered by Lemerle on pp.110–13 of his study.

that Paulicianism cannot have been a purely rustic or proletarian phenomenon. Karbeas himself had been the adjutant (*protomandator*) of the *thema* Anatolikoi, and Theodotos Melissenos, the *strategos* who appointed him to that position, can hardly have deplored his religious sympathies.⁹ But under the rule of the widowed Empress-Regent Theodora, Paulicians were put to the sword and their property was taken by the state. Amongst the victims of Theodora's troops was the father of Karbeas, who was impaled.¹⁰

So distressed was the adjutant at his father's fate that he fled, and five thousand with him, to the protection of Omar of Melitene. As general of the Paulicians, Karbeas decided to move the sectaries gathering at Amara and at Argaoun nearby, to Tephrike, a stronghold conveniently situated for raids deep into Romania and Armenia. In Tephrike a nascent Paulician state enjoyed the combined advantages of political independence and a military alliance with the Emir.

From the point of view of Orthodoxy there was nothing incomprehensible in the alliance of Muslims with Paulicians. Muslims honoured Christ, and Islam was regarded as a kind of Arianism to be placed on a level with other Christian heresies.¹¹ Muslims and Paulicians were in alliance against imperial Orthodoxy, and accordingly the author of the *Lay* and his more self-consciously Orthodox follower, the creator of the *Digeneid*, felt no difficulty in linking Chrysocherpes or Chrysocheir in marriage with the Moslem lady Spathia, whose name, indeed, may recall the Paulician fort Spathe.¹²

When Karbeas died in battle against the East Romans, he was succeeded as leader of the Paulicians by Chrysocheir,¹³ who soon after the usurpation of the Emperor Basil I led them across Asia Minor to Nikomedeia and to Ephesos, where he used the Church of St John the Divine as a stable for his horses.¹⁴ In an attempt to put a stop to such

⁹ N. G. Garsoïan, *DOPapers* 25 (1971) 99.

¹⁰ *Theoph.Contin.* pp.165–66 ed. Bonn.

¹¹ Vasiliev, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.5) I 207.

¹² See N. Adontz, *BZ* 29 (1929/1930) 224, on *Theoph.Contin.* p.267, 16, ed. Bonn. In G 255 Trapp her name is *Πανθία*; Kyriakides, *BZ* 50 (1957) 143, suggests that Pantheia was the original name and, somewhat implausibly, that it is taken from Xenophon's *Kyroupaideia*: *τῆς Πανθείας > τῆς Σπανθείας > τῆς Σπαθίας*. The variants may well have arisen during dictation.

¹³ A. J. Toynbee, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus and his World* (London 1973) 655.

¹⁴ *Genesis* p.121, 19–22, ed. Bonn.

raids Basil attacked the Paulician redoubts beyond the frontier, but he failed to take Tephrike,¹⁵ and his army was forced to retreat.

The distant raids of Chrysocheir are vividly recalled in the *Lay of the Emir*. They are recalled not because the author of the *Lay* found mentions of them in chronicles, but because the campaigns of the Paulicians had deeply impressed the folkmemory of Christians and Muslims in Asia Minor. Indeed, since the poet of the *Lay* lived before the campaigning of Kourkouas to and beyond the Euphrates, he composed his poems within two generations of Omar's death, and may even have witnessed some of the Paulician wars. In the Escorial version of the *Digeneid*, a late and perfunctory, dictated work¹⁶ which nevertheless preserves some details of the original poem, there is a specific mention of Chrysocheir's *κοῦρσον* to Nikomedeia. The Emir's mother asks him to remember his father's raiding:

*Κ' οὐδὲν θυμᾶσαι, τέκνον μου, τί ἐποῖκεν ὁ πατήρ σου;
Τὸ Κόνιον ἐκούρσευεν μέχρι καὶ εἰς τὸν Ἄμμον,
εἰς Νικομήδειαν ἔφθασεν κ' εἰς Πραίνετον ἐπέβην,
κ' ἂν δὲν ἦτον ἡ θάλασσα, πάντα εἶχεν ὑπαγαίνει.¹⁷*

The Emir's mother recalls that Chrysocherpes had refused an imperial offer of patrician rank because he would not forsake his religion by throwing down his sword (G 375–77), and such a peace-offer may well have been made in fact to Chrysocheir in Tephrike. She also, when trying to persuade the Emir not to transfer to Cappadocia, reminds him of the slaughter and enslavement of Romans by his grandfather Ambron (E 245–47); her plea is further strengthened by a mention of the successful raids of her brother, Mourses or Mousour of Tarsos (G 383–85), “who led his army to Smyrna by the sea, ravaged Ankyra, the city of Abydos . . . and from these victories returned to Syria.”¹⁸ [She is also made to say that Mourses attacked “Aphrike (*i.e.* Tephrike), Terenta, and the Six Towns” (τῆν Ἑξάκωμίαν). Tephrike and Terenta (Taranta) were Paulician forts, and there was a *κάτω Ἑξάπολις* beside the Euphrates not far from Meli-

¹⁵ Georgius Cedrenus 2.206–07, ed. Bonn.

¹⁶ C. A. Trypanis, *Gnomon* 45 (1973) 615. See also A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1960) 215.

¹⁷ E 248–51 Trapp: *Πραίνετον* Pertusi, *Aevum* 36 (1962) 44: *Πέρνετον* E.

¹⁸ Z 621 has instead of Abydos τῆν Ἀκινάν (that is, Egin), but Arab raids reached as far as Abydos.

tene.¹⁹ This looks like an inept addition from a catalogue of Comma-genian names, made by a poet long after the Paulicians' alliance with the Muslims had been broken and their redoubts conquered by the imperial forces.] Ankyra, Abydos, Nikomedeia and Ikonion were all reached in Saracen raids,²⁰ and the mention of them in the *Lay* adds greatly to the verisimilitude of the poem. The Armeniak *thema* was exposed to such frequent attacks that when the Emir's mother declares Mousour to have ravaged 'Armenia' (E 257), the poet almost certainly refers to the *thema*; this was not in Armenia, but further west, having been formed after troops stationed formerly in Armenia had retreated before the Arab advance in the mid-seventh century.

In 872 the Paulicians met their match in Christopher, Domestic of the Schools and the emperor's son-in-law. At Bathyrrhyax north of the Halys river on the road to Tephrike the returning rebels were caught between the armies of the *themata* and the picked troops of the Domestic. Chrysocheir was killed while trying to make his escape, and the Paulician state was now broken: *περόντος οὖν τοῦ Χρυσόχειρος συναπεραμάνθη πᾶσα ἡ ἀνθοῦσα τῆς Τεφρικῆς εὐανδρία*, remarks Cedrenus.²¹

The Emir in the *Lay* belongs to a context one generation later than Chrysocherpes and two later than Ambron. He does not fit into the context of the Paulician campaigns but into a later one, later than 872 but before the victories of Kourkouas; his heroic figure is not, however, to be forced into an inflexible chronological straitjacket. His achievements surpassed even those of his father and uncle in Romania, for he claims to have wiped out Herakleia (in Lykaonia); to have seized Amorion 'as far as Ikonion' (that is to say, he took Ikonion on the way home from a *κοῦρσον*, since Amorion is northwest of Ikonion); to have subdued Syria; and to have captured Kufah, *Κοῦφερ* in southern Mesopotamia (G 263–66). He even claims to have fought his way out of an east Roman encirclement at Mellokopia (Melegob),²²

¹⁹ E. Honigmann, *Die Ostgrenze des byzantinischen Reiches von 363 bis 1071* (=A. A. Vasiliev, *Byzance et les Arabes* III [Brussels 1935]) Map II. Z 622 has τὴν Ἐπτακωμίαν.

²⁰ H. Ahrweiler, "L'Asie mineure et les invasions arabes," *RHist* 227 (1962) 9–10 (repr. in her *Études sur les structures administratives et sociales de Byzance* [London 1971] ch.9).

²¹ Georgius Cedrenus 2.212, 21–22, ed. Bonn.

²² Different forms of the name are found. Ibn Khurdādbih says that the name means 'quarry of millstones', so he assumes *Μυλοκοπία* to be correct. See H. Gelzer, *Die Genesis der byzantinischen Themenverfassung* (repr. Amsterdam 1966) 85 n.1; H. Grégoire, *Byzantion* 5 (1929) 338. For the Greek village see R. M. Dawkins, *Modern Greek in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1916) 23–25.

south of the Halys (G 675), thus avoiding the doom of both Omar and Chrysocheir. In the poem the Emir symbolizes the Muslims' undiminished and confident aggression before the long-delayed East Roman counteroffensive brought imperial arms to the gates of Edessa and broke the spirit of the frontier Emirates; he has no identifiable prototype in late ninth or early tenth-century Edessa, and his change of religion was an event of a kind often witnessed by *akritai* on both sides of the frontier.

Frontier emirs and their households could change allegiance without penalty and even religion without pain because the East Roman administrators, recognising the Saracens to be superior to other barbarians, arranged for generous treatment of converted Muslims who settled in Romania.²³ Each convert was given a grant of money by the military authorities for himself and his ploughing-oxen and a fixed amount of corn for sowing and rations. Intermarriage with converts was also encouraged: a family that had adopted as son-in-law a Muslim who had accepted baptism was entitled to three years' immunity from the produce-tax and the hearth-tax, whether the family was a military or civilian one. Thus it is with no little verisimilitude that in the *Lay* the Emir is willing to accept baptism in order to marry the daughter of Andronikos Doukas and to live with her in Cappadocia.

Since the *Lay* came into being between the defeat of the Paulicians and the victories of Kourkouas, it is reasonable to claim as prototype for the Emir's father-in-law the Andronikos Doux or Doukas, an ambitious magnate prominent in the reign of the Emperor Leo VI. Almost certainly Andronikos had aimed to become emperor himself, but having been outwitted by the eunuch Samonas, a minister of Leo, he fled with his family and dependants to Kaballa near Ikonion.²⁴ He seized the castle there, but later defected with his followers to the Saracens of Tarsos, and later still he went to Bagdad. In the *Lay* Andronikos (or, to give him his 'Syrian' name, Aaron) is said by his eldest son to have been exiled to the frontier because of military insurrection (E 135): *Τὸν κύριον μας ἐξώρισαν διὰ μουρτικὰ φουσσᾶτα.*²⁵

²³ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Cerimoniis* 2.49, pp. 694–95 ed. Bonn.

²⁴ R. J. H. Jenkins, *Studies on Byzantine History of the 9th and 10th Centuries* (London 1970) X.230 For the career of Andronikos Doux (?–ca 908) see D. I. Polemis, *The Doukai* (London 1968) 16–21; Polemis, however, doubts that Andronikos aimed at the throne.

²⁵ *διὰ μούρτει καὶ διὰ φουσσᾶτα* E, corr. H. Grégoire et M. Letocart: see *Byzantion* 14 (1939) 211–26. *μούρτο* > *μούλτο*, Lat. *tumultus*. See also H.-G. Beck, *Geschichte der byzantinischen*

Since it is clear that the defection of the historical Andronikos Doukas is recalled by these words, the composition of the *Lay* can be dated within narrower limits, between 906 and the victories of John Kourkouas.

There is one more historical detail to be considered, though it does not prove what has been claimed from it. When the Emir's mother reproves him for having given up all for the love of a Roman girl, she asks: "Is there not amongst us the *μανδύλιν* of Naaman, who was king among the Assyrians and deemed worthy of miracles because of the number of his merits?" (G 758–60). Grégoire,²⁶ arguing that these words refer to the famous *μανδήλιον* of Edessa upon which was preserved miraculously the impression of Christ's face,²⁷ held that the passage was composed before 944, when the kerchief was brought to Constantinople after the army of John Kourkouas had threatened Edessa. The city bought immunity for herself, and for Samosata, Harrān and Sarūj also, by giving up the relic.²⁸

Grégoire's argument would have looked more convincing if the *μανδήλιον* with the impression of Christ's face were the only relic kept at Edessa, but the place was a famous repository of religious artifacts and ideas. There are three relics to be considered in connexion with the plea of the Emir's mother: (1) the Letter of Christ to King Abgar of Edessa; (2) the perfect Impression (*Ekmageion*) of Christ's face upon a linen—the *μανδήλιον*; (3) the *μανδύλιν* of Naaman, mentioned only in the *Lay* (the form of the noun *μανδύλιν* is close to Arabic *mandil* and corresponds to Latin *mantele*, our 'mantle').

Since a Muslim lady would not wish to support her argument with a purely Christian relic if a Muslim, or jointly Muslim and Christian, one could be used, it is far from certain that the poet had the famous *μανδήλιον* of Christ in mind. Nor should we emend *μανδύλιν* ('kerchief') to *μαντάτο* ('letter') in G 758, because having replaced a cloth with a letter, we would still be left with the name of Naaman, and there would be no reason to assume that the poet was alluding to the Letter

Volksliteratur (Munich 1971) 72. In the original *Lay* the emperor against whom Andronikos rebelled may not have been named. In the *Digeneid* the author added the emperor's name. He was either Basil (G 1007) or Romanos (Z 1319), but these names have no bearing on the date of the *Lay*.

²⁶ *Byzantion* 6 (1931) 486–90.

²⁷ For the history of this relic see S. Runciman, *CambHistJ* 3 (1931) 238–52.

²⁸ Toynbee, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.13) 319. See also J. B. Segal, *Edessa 'The Blessed City'* (Oxford 1970) 215–16.

of Christ to King Abgar of Edessa. It is best to regard the 'Kerchief of Naaman' as a relic known by the poet to have been venerated by the Muslims of Edessa. They could claim that it was older than the Letter and the Impression, and a towel fits well into the story of Naaman and Elisha, since the Assyrian would have used a *μανδύλιν* to dry himself after he had obeyed the prophet's command to bathe in the River Jordan.²⁹ Elisha was venerated by the Christians, but he would have been also a figure of interest to the Muslims, and Naaman was a name respected by the Arabs of the Euphratesia even in pre-Muslim times. Naaman, the tribal leader of the Skenite Arabs, fought as an ally of the Persians against the Empire late in the fifth century.³⁰

The mother of the Emir chooses her words carefully. She politely mentions a relic deserving of respect by her son as a Christian as well as by herself as a Muslim. A plain towel of Naaman would have no *Ekmageion* of the Assyrian upon it, and being aniconic would be more acceptable to Muslim sentiment than any Impression. We need not doubt that amongst the relics of Edessa there was a *μανδύλιν* said to have been used by Naaman when he had bathed in the River Jordan; but obviously the subject has no bearing upon the date of the *Lay of the Emir*, since there is no evidence that a 'kerchief of Naaman' was ever removed from Edessa.

The Kerchief in the *Lay* is significant because it shows that the poet knew local details from Muslim frontierlands. His interest in them is consistent with his lack of religious bias, which is also evident when he causes the brothers of Eirene to add to their plea for the return of their sister a polite expression of hope that the Emir may be found worthy to venerate the Prophet's tomb (G 74). In fact, as we learn from his mother, the Emir had visited the tomb with her and had seen in the night a miraculous radiance come from on high and fill the house with its light (G 748-51). Thus the akritic poet has knowledge of the light over the tomb of Mohammed that leads up to paradise. Informed and undogmatic interest in the Arabs and their religion is characteristic of the *Lay*, whose author reveals his fellow-feeling for the Saracen opponents of the East Romans by dignifying them too with the proud status of *akritai*: thus a Saracen retainer of the Emir is without hesitation called a Daylamite *akrites* (G 126). That the interest in Saracen life caused him to make use of Muslim epics from beyond

²⁹ Mavrogordato, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) xxxv.

³⁰ Theophanes p.141 de Boor.

the *akra* is possible but cannot be proven. One such epic, which lies behind the Turkish romance *Said Battal*, celebrates the historical warrior Abd Allah Abu-'l Husain el Antaki el Battal,³¹ who died in an Arab raid at Akroinos in 740.³² Certain it is however that the Cappadocian *akra*, like the passes of the Pyrenees, being disputed ground between Muslim and Christian, were a fertile seedbed of heroic poetry.

In considering the poetical tradition to which the poet of the *Lay* belonged it is not helpful to refer in the first instance to the demotic *τραγούδια* in which Digenes is the hero, because we have no reason to believe that such songs about Digenes existed before the original *Digeneid* was composed and because the *Lay* antedates the *Digeneid*. That a vigorous tradition of poetry existed in Asia Minor independently of the literary traditions of the capital is evident from a hostile remark of Arethas, Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, who died in 932. He rails against "the cursed Paphlagonians who compose songs about the adventures of famous men and go from house to house singing them for a tip."³³ Arethas is a prejudiced witness; singers had a respected rôle in society, and a story about a singer called Gyberion shows that their skills could be used even on behalf of the imperial government.

After the defeat of Thomas in the civil war against Michael II some partisans of Thomas held out under their leader Gazarenos in Saniana, a fortress near the River Halys. The emperor's agent charged with the task of recovering Saniana composed a song for Gyberion, who sang it outside the gates of the town. The words were directed at the steward (*oikonomos*) of a church or monastery in Saniana and promised to him the bishopric of Neocaesarea in Pontus if he would hand the town over:

ἄκουσε, κῦρι οἰκονόμε,
τὸν Γυβέριν, τί σου λέγει·
ἂν μοι δῶς τὴν Σανιάναν,
μητροπολίτην σε ποίσω,
Νεοκαισάρειάν σοι δώσω.

When the message reached the ears of the steward, he took the hint,

³¹ Mavrogordato, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) lxxii, following H. Grégoire.

³² For the date see E. W. Brooks, *JHS* 18 (1898) 202.

³³ S. Kougeas, *Λαογραφία* 4 (1912/13) 239.

and Gazarenos, having been shut out of the town, fled towards Syria; but he was captured and hanged.³⁴ Thus poets might please country folk, or they might aid the imperial administrators. They might also be retainers of the akritic nobility. One such retainer, as his interests show, was the author of the *Lay*. His interests are those of his patrons, not of the peasantry, and we shall not be far astray if we suppose him to have lived and to have written his poem, and perhaps also to have sung it, in a castle of Cappadocia sometime in the first quarter of the tenth century. Because the author of the *Digeneid*, who lived perhaps half a century later, belonged also to the world of the akritic magnates, he adopted the *Lay* as his own and expanded it, so as to praise the akritic nobility, who had become the proud possessors of territories to the east of Cappadocia—in Lykandos, Commagene and the Euphratesia.³⁵

³⁴ *Theoph.Contin.* pp.71–72 ed. Bonn. See also J. B. Bury, *A History of the Eastern Roman Empire* (London 1912) 107–08, and for the text of the song, K. Krumbacher, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Literatur* (Munich 1897) 793.

³⁵ Being concerned in this study with the *Lay*, I have not discussed the Commagenian contexts in the *Digeneid*: the topography of the *Digeneid* proper was placed on a firm basis by H. Grégoire in his account of Trosis/Trusch near Samosata, *Byzantion* 6 (1931) 499–507. There is a substantial study of problems in the *Digeneid* by Agostino Pertusi, “La Poesia epica bizantina e la sua formazione; problemi sul fondo storico e la struttura letteraria del ‘Digenis Akritas’,” in *La poesia epica e la sua formazione* (*AcadLincei* quad. 139, Rome 1970) 481–544. Amongst topics relevant to the *Lay* he examines the allusion to the *mandilin* of Naaman and points out (*op.cit.* 496) that it does not provide a secure terminus for dating the *Digeneid*. Other matters discussed by Pertusi are the relationship between the *Lay* and the story of Digenes (*op.cit.* 519ff.; see also H.-G. Beck, *op.cit.* [*supra* n.25] 70–74) and the hostile remarks of Arethas about Paphlagonian singers (Pertusi, *op.cit.* 502).

Thanks are due to Mr John Haldon for several instructive conversations during my tenure in the summer of 1973 of a visiting fellowship at the British School at Athens, and to the Managing Committee of the School for having appointed me to the fellowship. Dr Judith Herrin kindly discussed the Paulician background with me.

II

Digenes and the Akritai

WHEN THE AUTHOR of the *Digeneid* took over the *Lay of the Emir*, he adapted his continuation of the story to a Commagenian context, because the imperial frontier had been advanced—during the second quarter of the tenth century—eastwards from Cappadocia into the formerly Saracen territories beyond the Euphrates. The *Digeneid* proper describes the precocious youth, heroic exploits and peaceful death of Digenes the Twyborn Borderer; as the Emir, the father of Digenes, grows old he is no longer the centre of the poet's attention. The purpose of the present study is to examine historical elements in the *Digeneid* in order to throw light upon political and social circumstances in which it was created. We begin with some essential components of the original story, as the creator is likely to have told it.

In the course of his early exploits as horseman and hunter, Digenes distinguishes himself in combat with *apelatai* (abactors or cattle rustlers) of the frontier lands, but not before he had expressed the wish to be like an *apelates*—*Ζητῶ κ' ἐγώ, νὰ γένωμαι ὡς εἰς τῶν ἀπελάτων*¹—as if to emphasize the affinity between the akritic and apelatic ways of life on the borders of the Empire. The leader of the *apelatai* is the aged Philopappos, whose name recalls the ancient kings of Commagene; the poet borrows the name from local folkmemory, or it is possible that he had read it in an inscription of the Commagenian dynasty surviving to his day. In either case, it is an authentically local detail, and the Commagenian background of these *apelatai* is again emphasised when Philopappos and his friends recall their victory “at the Euphrates, down at Samosata” *Εἰς τὸν Ἀφράτην ποταμόν, κάτω εἰς τὸ Σαμουκάτο* (E 1311).

Digenes serenades Eudokia, daughter of the Roman general Doukas, and unaided, wins her hand. This episode is an obvious adaptation of the capture by the Emir, his father, of the daughter of Andronikos Doukas. Digenes journeys as an *akrites* on the borders, the *akra*, with his bride, and rests here or there with her in a tent. He meets the emperor, who had been campaigning against the ‘Persians’, by the

¹ *Digeneid* Z 1569 ed. Trapp (*Digenes Akrites* [Vienna 1971] 175.)

Euphrates (G 1926); ‘Persians’ here would be Seljuk Turks, as so often in eleventh-century Byzantine historiography, but in Z 2307 the emperor is said to be campaigning against the *Μαγούλιοι*: the name is a metathesis of *Γουλάμιοι*, Arabic *ghūlam*, ‘soldiery’, and it takes us back to the final campaigns against the Saracens in the tenth century, much earlier than the Seljuk wars of the eleventh. In the Grottaferrata (G) and Russian versions of the story, the emperor’s name is Basil, but in other texts, including the Andros and Trebizond manuscripts (Trapp’s Z tradition), the emperor is Romanos. No chronological inferences about the date of the original *Digeneid* may be drawn from these names, since it is not clear that the creator of the epic gave a name to the emperor who honoured Digenes. The title *Βασιλεύς τῶν Ῥωμαίων* would have sufficed.² The poet draws attention to the political and military independence of Digenes by telling how the emperor conferred upon him by means of a chrysobull authority to rule the borders (G 2002–03 and 2040). The *Digeneid* thus reflects the ambitions of the akritic noblemen who were the poet’s patrons; in the tenth century the imperial government was almost powerless to check the growth of authority and riches amongst the rural magnates of Anatolia.

The Digenes of the epic, like the Digenes of the ballads, is a super-human figure, in contrast to the idealized humanity of the Emir, his father, in the *Lay*. Amongst his deeds of prowess was the rescue of a girl of Mepherke (Martyropolis), one of the Arab frontier towns. She was the daughter of Melanthia, who has a Greek name, and the Emir Haplorrhabdes. Having been abandoned by her seducer, the captured son of the Roman general Antiochos, she waited forlorn beside a spring and a date-palm in the midst of the waterless plains of Arabia. Digenes restored her to her faithless lover and required him to marry her, though not before he himself had succumbed to her charms.³ The uncertain loyalties of frontier life are well illustrated by this story: for Melanthia, the wife of Haplorrhabdes, shows sympathy with the captured Roman, and when her daughter gives horses to him after setting him free and even makes him an eminent ruler in Syria, Melanthia approves, having no fear of her husband the Emir, who was away fighting in unceasing wars (G 2116–20).

² R. M. Bartikian, *Vizantiiskii Vremennik* 25 (1964) 165–66, points out also that there is no allusion to Nikephoros Phokas in the *Digeneid*: in Z 4205 *ὁ νικηφόρος* is not the name of the emperor but an epithet.

³ The girl appears with Digenes or with her lover in the desert on plates of about 1200 from Corinth: Alison Frantz, *Byzantion* 15 (1940/41) 90–91 and fig. 8.

When Digenes has defeated Philopappos and his band of *apelatai*, they persuade their kinswoman the Amazon Maximo to help them, but Digenes overcame her too. The chief of Maximo's troop of horse-men, *πρῶτον ἄγουρον ἐξάρχοντα τῶν ἄλλων*, is called Melimitzes or Melimentzes (G 2760–61, Z 3304, E 1390); he is the first to charge Digenes, but the hero quickly unhorses him with his staff. It is noteworthy that the *apelatai* communicate by means of a system of beacons, a typical detail of life at the frontier passes.

Digenes in his wandering with Eudokia had come to Trosis in Commagene, a day's march west of Samosata. Hereabouts, not far from the Euphrates, Philopappos had first seen her (G 2739) and hoped to win her for the *apelates* Ioannikios or Ioannakes, 'Little John'. In this neighbourhood, too, after the defeat of the *apelatai*, the scene of the rest of the poem is set. Digenes puts his tomb on a single-arched (*μονοκέρατον*) bridge (E 1648–49) and builds a palace which he surrounds, as any self-respecting East Roman magnate would, with a beautiful garden. The body of his father, who had died in the family's old home in Cappadocia, is laid to rest in a stone tomb in the grounds of the new palace near the Euphrates, and Digenes' mother Eirene comes to live with him and Eudokia; evidently the hero's conquests had made it safe to remove her eastwards. Before long Eirene also dies.

There is a prominent Commagenian monument on the hill of Sesönk near Trosis, and this may well have suggested to a local poet the idea of placing the palace of Digenes in the neighbourhood. There seems to be, however, no suitable monument near Trosis to represent the tomb of Digenes with its sarcophagus under four columns and a cupola on the arch of a bridge. The descriptions in G 3608 and E 1648–54⁴ are, however, sufficiently distinctive and consistent to show that the poet had a real structure in mind.

For the tomb on the bridge we may, with Grégoire,⁵ search no further than the splendid single-span structure which crosses the Bolan Sü (the ancient Chabinas), a tributary flowing southwards into the Euphrates in Commagene. Over the bridge passed the road from Melitene to Perre and Samosata. This, the most impressive structure of its kind in the heartland of the *Digeneid*, is surely the original of Digenes' arch and tomb. According to the accompanying inscriptions

⁴ The texts are analysed by A. Xyngopoulos in 'Ελληνικά 20 (1967) 24.

⁵ *Byzantion* 6 (1931) 504–05.

the bridge had been rebuilt in the time of Septimius Severus. At each end two columns were placed; they support nothing, but they may well have given to the poet the idea of a canopy supported by four columns with four arches over the sarcophagus.

The death of Digenes came in peacetime, not in war. The hero had brought such security and quiet to the *akra* that his authority, the poet asserted, extended into the formerly Saracen domains beyond the Euphrates. When the hero had been entertaining some Orthodox kinsmen from Amida (Emet), he caught a disease—*ὀπιεθότονος*, 'the back-bending', perhaps a form of meningitis—while taking a bath in his garden pool. As he lay dying, he recalled his exploits to Eudokia, and after uttering sentiments of unexceptionable Orthodoxy, passed away, though not before perceiving that Eudokia, who expired with him, had been spared the sorrows of widowhood.

To his wake came rulers of the East—Charzianians, Cappadocians, Boukellariots of the *themata*;⁶ worthy Podandites from the *kleisoura* on the Cilician frontier; men of Tarsos and of the Black Mountain of the Lebanon (by the latter displaced Mardaites may be intended); the elect of Bagdad; men of Bathyrrhyax (where troops of the Armeniak *thema* assembled); nobles from Babylon and many from Amida (G 3570–75).

Not only does the poet show by means of his list of mourners that Digenes was honoured on both sides of the frontier, he almost wishes it away, for he thinks of the Twyborn Borderer as an independent ruler whose power was felt far beyond Commagene; his view of Digenes suits the historical context, since clearly defined boundaries in mountainous territory are for the most part inventions of modern nationalist states. The poem even calls Digenes *βασιλεύς*, a title jealously guarded in Constantinople for the emperor himself; many, he says, did rejoice in the kingship of Digenes (G 3365). It is clear that the original poet was keen to idealize the aspirations to autonomy amongst his patrons in the frontier nobility, of whom it has been well said: "The great aristocratic families of the eastern marches were a

⁶ The text of G 3572 has *Κουκουλιθαρῶται*, which Mavrogordato takes to be a corruption of *Βουκελλαριῶται*, to match the other names of *themata* (*Digenes Akrites* [Oxford 1956] 244). D. Wood suggests that *Κουκουλιθαρῶται* means 'men from the Monk's-Hood Rocks' (from *κουκούλλιον*, 'cowl')—that is, from the district of Cappadocia (*Byzantion* 28 [1958] 91–93). The poet, however, knows people of this district as *Τρωγλοδύται* (G 17), and there was a place called *Βούκου λίθος* ← **Βουκουλιθάρι*, east of Caesarea, in the Lykandian district (Cedrenus [Skylitzes] 2.421 ed. Bonn).

constant and a growing menace to the throne during the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries. Under a weak sovereign their heads were practically independent despots, as were the Arab Emirs who confronted them across the border.”⁷ The poet’s phantasy even allows his hero to take Ikonion from the Empire, so that Digenes may remit to the emperor tribute once paid to the city by the imperial government (G 1993–95); in return for the Emperor’s honouring of Digenes the people of Ikonion are to pay back “as much again from their unwilling hands” as the Empire has paid to the city. There is no need to regard the tribute paid to Ikonion as an allusion to the Seljuk Sultanate of Rūm, since the dues paid to Digenes could well have entered the story long before the disaster at Manzikert in 1071, which led to the Seljuk conquest of central Anatolia.

The elaborate descriptions of Digenes’ palace are a prominent feature of the G and Z traditions of the poem. They reveal signs of literary reworking, and indeed so close are they to the allegorical poem *To Sophrosyne* of Meliteniotes that G, Z and Meliteniotes must share a common source—if in fact G and Z do not borrow directly from Meliteniotes. The author of *To Sophrosyne* may well be the Megas Sakellarios Theodoros Meliteniotes who died *ca* 1397,⁸ but his poem can tell us nothing about the description of the palace near Trosis in the original *Digeneid*. According to the E version, in which a connexion with Meliteniotes is not evident, there were battlements (*προμαχιῶνες* E 1618) in the garden wall. The wall itself was so carefully made of polished stones in their *ὀρθομαρμάρωσις* that they gleamed from afar, and it was adorned with strange carvings, for it was *ξενοχάραγος*.⁹ Within the well-watered demesne there were trees as well as flowers and vines. In the trees parrots sang, hailing him with his bride (E 1639–40), and in the *τραγούδια*, but not in extant versions of the epic, birds foretell the hero’s death. The garden and castle are closely linked in an akritic song from Pontos—*Ἀκρίτες κάστρον ἔχτιζεν, Ἀκρίτες περιβόλιν*.¹⁰

The original *Digeneid* may have been content to describe briefly the demesne and castle; but that there were contemporary tenth-century

⁷ R. J. H. Jenkins, *Studies on Byzantine History of the 9th and 10th Centuries* (London 1970) X.219.

⁸ H.-G. Beck, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Volksliteratur* (Munich 1971) 125, following F. Dölger.

⁹ A. Xyngopoulos, *Λαογραφία* 12 (1948) 560, explains the adjective.

¹⁰ N. Polites, *Λαογραφία* 1 (1909) 245, no.35.

estates in Anatolia worthy to be described in elaborate detail and to be claimed in the poem for the *akrites* himself is evident in the Armenian history of Thomas Artzruni and his continuator. They describe the buildings at Vostan on the south shore of Lake Van and on the isle of Aght'amar in the lake, where the Church of the Holy Cross was built between A.D. 915 and 921 by King Gagik of Vaspurakan.¹¹ The palaces have been destroyed, but the church still stands. Gagik built walls about his demesnes; he led water to his gardens; his palaces had courtyards and high towers; his buildings and estates in fact provide an apt prototype for Digenes' palace, especially since they had come into existence not long before the creator of the *Digeneid* was at work in the tenth century.¹² Their fame must have spread far beyond the shores of Lake Van to reach the Greeks and Armenians of Commagene and the Euphratesia two hundred and fifty miles to the west.

The author of the *Digeneid* gives no sign of having been an Armenian himself; but he was interested in Armenians nonetheless. He or the author of the *Lay* gives the Armenian name Mouselom to the father of Andronikos Doukas, the father-in-law of the Emir; and Melimentzes, the leader of Maximo's band of *apelatai*, also has an Armenian aspect. It is cognate with Armenian Mleh (or Melias), and Mleh-me(n)tz in Armenian would signify 'great Mleh'.¹³ Amongst the several Armenian warriors called Mleh or Melias the obvious prototype for Melimentzes in the epic is the frontier general Mleh, who in the time of the Emperor Leo VI resettled the desolate town of Lykandos and ruled its neighbourhood as a *kleisoura*. Later during the imperial drive to recover the Euphrates *limes*, Lykandos became a *thema* and Melias its *strategos*.¹⁴ The country between Cappadocia and Melitene prospered under his rule, and so Tzamandos was also replenished with Armenian dependants of Mleh. The Lykandian *thema* was well suited to stockraising and horsebreaking, as Constantine Porphyrogenitus makes clear in a glowing description: *κουρότροφος οὐσα ἀγαθή τε καὶ ἰππόβοτος καὶ παντοίων βοσκημάτων εἰς τροφήν ἐπιτήδειος*.¹⁵

There is realism in the presentation of Mleh in the epic as an

¹¹ For the church and the account of Thomas Artzruni see Sirarpi de Nersessian, *Aght'amar, Church of the Holy Cross* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1965).

¹² A. A. M. Bryer, *Antiquity* 34 (1960) 295–97.

¹³ N. Adontz, *BZ* 29 (1929/30) 216.

¹⁴ E. Honigmann, *Die Ostgrenze des byzantinischen Reiches* (Brussels 1935) 64–67.

¹⁵ *De thematibus* 1.12 (p.72 Pertusi).

apelates. In frontier societies cattle-droving and cattle-stealing can be overlapping activities, and as governor of Lykandos, far from the supervision of the central bureaucracy, Mleh would have possessed opportunities and authority to campaign on his own behalf, even against other akritic magnates. The appearance of Mleh of Lykandos in the *Digeneid* is thus a historical vestige in the poem datable before the mid-tenth century. The name Mleh the Great was long remembered on the frontiers, and he is recalled to this day in the name of the nomadic tribe who live on the borders of Cappadocia and Cilicia and are called 'sons of Melimentzes' (Melementzoglou or *Μελεμενδζόγλου*).¹⁶

Lykandos is also mentioned in the *Digeneid*, though not in connexion with Melimentzes. When Digenes has taken Eudokia from her parents' home, the general urges his men to hasten in pursuit of the 'all-bastard' (E 912-13):

... ἀγοῦροι ἀπὸ τοῦ Λύκαντος, ἀγοῦροι ἀπὸ τὴν βίγλαν,
†βοηθήκατε† εἰς τὸν παγκόπελον, ἐπήρεν τὸ παιδὶν μου.

Lykandos was waste land before the resettlement by Mleh. The poet thinks of the country as watched by the retainers of Doukas the General, and as the mention of the *βίγλα* in E 912 shows, he treats Lykandos as though it embraced a *kleisoura* at the limit of the general's lands in Cappadocia.

In the service of Doukas the General had been a certain Soudales, a Saracen. He was killed by Digenes as he tried to recover Eudokia for her father after the flight from the castle.¹⁷ A historical Soudales was one of the generals sent out by the Empress-Regent Theodora against the Paulicians. Skylitzes gives the persecutors' names as Leon son of Argyros, Andronikos son of Doukas and Soudalis,¹⁸ but in *Theophanes Continuatus* they are called 'son of Argyros and the son of Doux and Soudales'.¹⁹ Mavrogordato suggested that 'Soudales the Saracen' in the epic is taken from Skylitzes, because the conjunction of the names Soudalis and Andronikos Doukas is found in Skylitzes but not in

¹⁶ P. Karolidēs, 'Επιστημονικὴ Ἐπετηρὶς Ἐθνικοῦ Πανεπιστημίου 1905/06 (Athens 1906) 243; Mavrogordato, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.6) liii.

¹⁷ Z 1987, E 919.

¹⁸ Cedrenus 2.154 ed. Bonn.

¹⁹ p.165, 17-18, ed. Bonn. Skylitzes supplies the name Andronikos himself, not from a source: see D. I. Polemis, *Byzantinoslavica* 26 (1965) 76.

Theophanes Continuatus;²⁰ and he argued that because Skylitzes is a contemporary of Psellos, the presence of the two names Andronikos Doukas and Soudales in the poem is a hint of an eleventh-century date for the composition of the *Digeneid*. The argument is not a strong one, because in the poem the father-in-law of Digenes is called Doukas the *strategos*, not Andronikos Doukas, and Soudales the Saracen is said to be a retainer of this Doukas, the *strategos*. Andronikos Doukas in the epic is based on the rebel against the Emperor Leo VI, not on the account in Skylitzes of the Paulicians' persecutors. It is quite likely that Doukas the *strategos* and Soudales the Saracen are borrowed from the Doux and Soudales of *Theophanes Continuatus*, so that the name Soudales could have been taken into the epic as early as the third quarter of the tenth century, since the anonymous author of Books I to IV of *Theophanes Continuatus* worked under the supervision of Constantine Porphyrogenitus.²¹

If the poet took the name Soudales out of *Theophanes Continuatus*, he did not have to worry that it had been borne by a persecutor of the Paulicians. Nor is there any difficulty in a Saracen being a retainer of Doukas the General. Many a frontier family would have used renegade Arab *akritai* as lookouts because they knew the ground. The epic recognises that Soudales the Saracen is a *βιγλάτωρ*, because it states that he came *ἀπὸ τὴν Πέραν Βίγλαν* (E 919, Z 1987); the name Soudales does not have a Hellenic aspect, and may even be of Saracen origin.²²

Digenes, too, keeps watch in a *βίγλα* (G 2809, Z3350), as many an akritic nobleman must have done when campaigning against *apela-tai* or mounting guard in the hope of lifting booty. Plunder, indeed, must have provided much of their income. The frontier magnates were as eager as the *δυνατοί* in Anatolia generally to tax the peasantry on their estates, and thus they hastened the economic ruin of the soldiering folk from whom the armies of the *themata* had been recruited; but on the borders there were also repeated opportunities to acquire property by military force, either by raiding with private armies beyond the East Roman territories or by attacking Muslim invaders as they returned homewards laden with booty. Prisoners

²⁰ Mavrogordato, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.6) lxxxiii.

²¹ Gy. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica* I² (Berlin 1958) Quellen, 540.

²² Karolides compares Arabic *sad*, *soudoun* (= 'tribal chief'): *Epet.* 3 (1926) 332. Soudalis could represent (1) Syed Ali or Sad Ali; (2) Said Ali (*said* from *sa'ad* meaning 'happiness' and 'fortune'); or (3) Saud Ali (*saud*, as in the name King Saud, again from *sa'ad*). I thank my colleague Dr S. Q. A. M. A. Hossain for advice about these names.

were the most valued of such prizes because they could be freed on receipt of a ransom or sold into slavery.

It is difficult to overestimate the value of the *Digeneid* to the social historian. In the poem we are given an authentic and indigenous conception of the akritic spirit. Doukas the General has a large armed force of his own (G 1560). In his castle there is a numerous staff of housemaids (G 1564). His daughter Eudokia's dowry includes twenty centenaries of ancient coins, silver vessels, a wardrobe worth five hundred *litrai*, thirty-six estates with their income, four hundred prizewinning animals, eighty grooms, fourteen cooks, fourteen bakers, and one hundred and fifty other serfs (*ψυχάρια*) (G 1657–65). The poet understands the significance of dowries in strengthening the ties between powerful families, though the hero claims that he desires Eudokia only for her beauty (G 1695); the bonds are made tighter still when the contract for the dowry was completed with the emir (G 1844) and the general and his family presented other magnificent gifts (G 1845–82). Amongst the general's contribution were mules, palfreys, grooms, twelve hundred hunting leopards,²³ twelve hawks brought from Abasgia and twelve falconers with a falcon each. The importance of hawking in the akritic life is plain from the frequent mentions of hawks and other birds in the imagery of the poem: in the *Lay of the Emir Eirene's* youngest brother even dreams of hawks and of a falcon chasing a dove (G 447–54, Z 713–20). Akritic life on the northwest frontier of India is similarly devoted to falconry; the remark that Dir (between Chitral and Swat) is a state where practically every hawk has a man's wrist under it²⁴ is quite in the spirit of the *Digeneid*. Falcons were prized as much by the Saracens as by the Romans, as we see from the Arab historian Al Tabari, who reports that when Nikephoros I ransomed from slavery a girl of Herakleia whom he desired as a daughter-in-law, he sent to Al Rashid 50,000 Islamic drachmai upon a bay horse, one hundred silk garments, two hundred embroidered garments, twelve falcons, three hunting dogs and three horses.²⁵

²³ A trained feline, perhaps a hunting leopard, is shown walking beside a man on a plate from Corinth: Frantz, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 89 and fig.6. A plate from the Athenian Agora shows a falcon perched on the scabbard of a warrior who may be Digenes (Frantz, *art.cit.* 88–89 and fig.3).

²⁴ Peter Mayne, quoted by Terence Creagh Coen, *The Indian Political Service, A Study in Indirect Rule* (London 1971) 178 note.

²⁵ E. W. Brooks, *EHR* 15 (1900) 746 (under A.H. 190 = 27 Nov. 805–16 Nov. 806).

The riches of a dowry such as Eudokia's could be maintained only in a large household and vast landed estate, and when the poet provides Digenes with a palace, garden and lands fit to vie with the finest in the Empire, poetical licence hardly overpasses realism. The East Roman nobility were proud of their gardens, using them to express their power and riches, and the frontier aristocracy shared the pride in full measure. In his will written in 1059 the magnate Eustathios Boilas records that when he moved from Cappadocia to found a new estate in Taiq, an Armeno-Georgian district of the *thema* of Iberia "... I built my house and the holy temple from the foundations, and <laid out> meadows, parks, vineyards, gardens, aqueducts, small farms, watermills ..."²⁶ The estate of Boilas was magnificent, yet he was oppressed by neighbours even more powerful than himself, and it is easy to understand why the central government was not able significantly to curb the inherited privileges and to deplete the riches of the frontier nobility, even in the reign of the vigorous Emperor Basil II. Digenes the βασιλεύς with his private band of warriors, his conquests of the *apelatai* and his fellow-feeling for them, is a heroic exemplar of the challenges and opportunities afforded by frontier life. Digenes' palace is a fit dwelling-place for a fictitious Borderer of might and distinction in the period of confidence between the Byzantine advance beyond the Euphrates and the first raids of the Seljuks on Vaspurakan (which may have begun as early as 1029).²⁷

In Asia Minor concentrations of wealth in the estates of the *δυνατοί* caused a ruinous diversion of resources from the central treasury of the Empire, but confiscations were exceptional, and riches begat more riches at the expense of the peasantry and of the government. The tenth-century poet has no thought for the peasantry; he does not even trouble to introduce a Thersites, so devoted is he to themes designed to please his noble patrons; moreover, the imperial government is a peripheral, and for the most part irrelevant, aspect of his world.

The power of the *akritic* nobility was barely touched by the social legislation of the Macedonian emperors, and the exemplary punishments of certain families by the Emperor Basil II had no lasting

²⁶ S. Vryonis, *DOPapers* 11 (1957) 263–77, at 266.

²⁷ For this date: A. J. Toynbee, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus and his Age* (London 1973) 410 n.1.

effect upon their peers.²⁸ The *δυνατοί* were almost beyond challenge once the peasantry had decided that it was better to be the dependant of a local magnate than a taxpaying, but nominally free, subject of the government. The ruin of the theme-system was an inexorable consequence of this transfer of allegiance by the peasantry during the tenth century. The will of the Greek rural population to resist foreign invasion of Asia Minor was consequently sapped, so that after the battle of Manzikert in 1071 the Seljuk was seen as a deliverer by many humble Greeks of the countryside. Such was the grey reality of rustic life amongst the *πένητες*. In contrast, the *Digeneid* gives us a poetically composite, yet authentic, picture of the akritic nobility; theirs was a rich and colourful world, worthy to be praised by an epic poet. The author of the *Digeneid* was not concerned with social and economic wrongs; like Homer, he aimed to please powerful patrons, and Hesiodic railings against 'gift-devouring princes' were not his business.

THE QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY OF BELFAST
 March, 1974

²⁸ Basil II's Novel no.29 of 996 has an addendum naming as possessors of excessive wealth amongst the aristocratic landowners the families of Phokas and Maleinos in Cappadocia, and an Arab itinerary reports that the estates of the Maleinoi were enormous (G. Ostrogorsky, *DO Papers* 25 [1971] 7); in Ostrogorsky's words (*loc.cit.*), "Basil II was the last Emperor who attempted to check the upsurge of the landed aristocracy." In G 1925 an Emperor Basil, who, during his 'Persian' campaign, desires to meet Digenes, is said to have "buried with himself the royal glory"—ὁ καὶ συνθάψας μεθ' ἑαυτοῦ τὴν βασιλείον δόξαν. This can hardly be other than a reference to Basil II by the XIVth century redactor of the Grottaferrata text, but the words do not of course, prove that the original version of the *Digeneid* proper came into being later than the death of Basil II in 1025. For the social crisis caused by the growing power of the landed *δυνατοί* in the Xth century see Toynbee, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.27) 145–76, and especially G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, tr. Joan Hussey (Oxford 1958) 269–83.