Master of Kastamon, Emperor of Eternity: Ioannes Komnenos as Border-maker and Border-breaker in Theodoros Prodromos’ poem ‘On the advance to Kastamon’

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Introduction*

The Byzantine poet Theodoros Prodromos lived in the reign of Ioannes II Komnenos (r. 1118–1143). During this period, he was a court poet and wrote extensively about the emperor and his family, describing military triumphs, marriages, and deaths within the ruling family as well as the funerals that followed. His poems also describe several notable icons and, in a famous epigram, a particularly fine ceremonial sword that allegedly belonged to the general Alexios Kontostephanos and was dedicated to SS. Theodoros and Demetrios. This paper will focus on one of his panegyric poems, Poem IV in the Hörandner edition, dedicated to the capture of Kastamon in 1134.1 As the title of the poem proclaimed, it was a declamation of the dēmes which was purportedly recited on the day Ioannes Komnenos entered the city after his capture of Kastamon.2 This poem contains 290 lines of political verse. According to the editor, the poem can be found in four manuscripts (Parisinus 2831, Vat. Gr. 305, 306 and

* The author expresses his gratitude to Central European University for the generous support allowed him to begin the article, and Dumbarton Oaks’ Research Library and Collection for the fellowship that allowed him to finish it. I also thank Angelina Volkoff and Nikolaos Zagklas for the suggestions and corrections to this article, and Nicholas Matheou for his assistance on all stages of the process.


2 For the role of the dēmes in poems of Prodromos, see W. Hörandner, “Einleitung,” in Historische Gedichte, p. 78. See also the chapter on court poetry by Hörandner in the E. Jeffreys’ volume on Rhetoric in Byzantium.
307). One of them, Vat. Gr. 307, includes works of Aristotle (Physics) with Themistios’ paraphrase, Michael Psellos, excerpts from medical treatises, a poem of Konstantinos Akropolites as well as some other anonymous poems.

Kastamon, a Byzantine fortress in Paphlagonia, became one of the key points in the intense struggle between the Byzantine Empire and a band of Turks allied to the emirate of the Danishmendids. Scholars have traditionally used two narrative sources to reconstruct this struggle: the Deeds of Ioannes and Manuel Komnenos by Ioannes Kinnamos and the Historia of Niketas Choniates. Kinnamos wrote his work some 40 years after the conflict, while Choniates composed the first version of the Historia in the 1180s. Thus, the poem, with all its complexity and genre-specific fervour, is a contemporary and undeservedly forgotten source on the siege of Kastamon and the Byzantine expedition of 1134. It should be read alongside another poem on the same subject, which Hörandner placed under the number III in his volume.

The aim of the present paper is to reconstruct one particular aspect of this poetic cycle, namely the structure of Prodromos’ imagined space. In Poem III, Theodoros Prodromos focused his attention on the siege and capture of Kastamon, putting the siege of the Anatolian city in a Trojan War context, including many quotations from the Iliad. At the same time, the poem (which might be useful for the military historian) does not provide abundant material to reconstruct imagined space in a wider sense. On the other hand, Poem IV with its focus on the campaign as a whole describes not only Kastamon, but also the wider universe that is to be conquered by the victorious armies of Ioannes Komnenos.

It is possible to distinguish three different levels of space that Prodromos articulated in his poem: the local level of Kastamon and other cities; the regional level of Anatolia, which the author calls “Persia”; and the universal level. First, I will investigate the main spatial landmarks of the poem to reconstruct the envisioned map of Theodoros Prodromos. Second, I will study the process of imperial expansion on all three levels (the capture of the city, the incursion into the country, the establishment of Byzantine power over the East). Third, I will investigate how Theodoros Prodromos depicted the process of imperial border-making with the fortification of the newly conquered “Persian land”. Finally, I will try to understand how Prodromos inscribed both

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3 For the long struggle over Kastamon, see relevant passages in the works of Speros Vryonis and Claud Cahen. The latter tried to use Prodromos’ panegyric and inserted some indirect quotations from “On the capture of Kastamon” into his account: see Speros Vryonis, The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh Through the Fifteenth Century (Los Angeles, 1971), p. 119; Claud Cahen, Formation of Turkey: The Seljukid Sultanate of Rum, Eleventh to Fourteenth Centuries (London, 2001), pp. 19–20.