LEONTIOS MAKHAIKAS’S GREEK CHRONICLE OF THE ‘SWEET LAND OF CYPRUS’: HISTORY OF MANUSCRIPTS AND INTELLECTUAL LINKS

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Abstract
The chronicle attributed to Leontios Makhairas (c.1360/80–after 1432) and written in the local Greek dialect constitutes a major landmark in the historiographical production of medieval Cyprus. It recounts the history of Cyprus from the fourth century to 1458, focusing primarily on the Lusignan rule and embodying a fusion of the Byzantine and Latin Eastern historiography.

Three manuscripts of the two recensions of the chronicle are well known: the ones in Venice (after 1523), in Oxford (1555) and in Ravenna (c.1600), the latter two preserving a similar shorter version; there also exists an Italian translation of the Ravenna text at the Vatican Library. The discovery of a hitherto unknown mid seventeenth-century manuscript (London, British Library, Harley 1825), containing extracts from the Oxford manuscript, enhances our understanding of the chronicle’s circulation and sheds light on the links connecting their copyists, owners or translators, as well as on the social and intellectual context that instigated an interest in the text and allowed its circulation and preservation.

Medieval Cypriot literary production is distinguished from that in other parts of the Latin-ruled Greek world by a rich historiographical tradition, the continuity, variety and volume of which caused an early interest among scholars. The second quarter of the fifteenth century witnessed a major landmark in the island’s history-writing with the composition in the local Greek dialect of an important prose chronicle attributed to Leontios Makhairas (c.1360/80–after 1432). The chronicle recounts the history of Cyprus from the fourth-century visit of St Helena to the death of King John II Lusignan in 1458, but it is primarily a history of the island’s Lusignan rule, focusing on the reigns of Peter I (1359–1369) and Peter II (1369–1382). Although it borrows from many literary genres, it

* I am grateful to Natasha Constantinidou for her precious advice.
may be described as a dynastic history and a kind of memoir. Thus it does not fit well into any of the conventional history-writing categories of the Western or Byzantine traditions, embodying the syncretism of the Byzantine and Latin Eastern worlds in the Lusignan kingdom and transforming thirteenth-century crusader historiographical tradition into a Greco-Frankish one peculiar to the socio-cultural reality of fifteenth-century Cyprus. This paper intends to investigate the provenance and history of the chronicle’s manuscripts, the links connecting their copyists, translators, owners or editors, as well as the intellectual and ideological context that instigated an interest in the text and allowed its transmission and preservation. Retracing the channels of the chronicle’s transmission and reception will hopefully also enhance our understanding of the circulation of manuscripts concerning medieval Cyprus.

Similar to the other medieval narratives from Cyprus, but unlike Latin Eastern chronicles, Makhairas’s text has known a limited manuscript circulation. The chronicle has survived in three manuscripts owned by the Marciana Library in Venice, the Bodleian Library in Oxford and the Classense Library in Ravenna; they were all three copied in the sixteenth century and preserve two recensions. A manuscript examined by Christos Papadopoulos in 1889 at the library of the Cypriot monastery of Makhairas, the chronicler’s family name suggesting a connection with the monastery or the villages in the area, was lost in 1892 in a fire which destroyed the monastery entirely. Papadopoulos describes the chronicle as ‘Leon Makhairas containing much information about Cyprus’ (‘Λέων ὁ Μαχαιρᾶς περιέχων πολλά περὶ Κύπρου’) and adds that the monastery also possessed the chronicle of George Boustronios as well as ‘various chroniclers writing about the Kingdom of Cyprus’ (‘Χρονογράφοι διάφοροι πραγματευόμενοι περὶ βασιλείου Κύπρου’). In a register of the monastery’s property compiled between 1843 and 1867, ‘4 histories of Cyprus’ and ‘1 manuscript history of Cyprus’ are mentioned.

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4 Papadopoulos (1890: 316); Tsiknopoullos (1968: 145); Pieris and Nicolaou-Konnari (1997: 80). Sykoutres (1924: 149 n.1) accuses Papadopoulos of citing the contents of the 1873 second volume of Constantine Sathas’s BGME, that included the first edition of the chronicle (see below), and not a manuscript; nevertheless, besides the admittedly strange similarity between the manuscripts cited by Papadopoulos and the contents of the second volume of BGME, Sykoutres offers no explanation for his statement and, as he was born in 1901, he cannot have examined the monastery’s library before the 1892 fire.