

Byzantium in Dialogue with the Mediterranean

History and Heritage

Edited by

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The Byzantine Heritage in Greek Cinema: the (Almost) Lone Case of *Doxobus* (1987)

Konstantinos Chryssogelos

Greek cinema has never been fond of Byzantium. The cinematic production before the fall of the Dictatorship in 1974 comprises only two movies that show an awareness of Greece's Byzantine past: 1960's *Kassiani Hymnographer* (*Κασσιανή υμνογράφος*), a fictional recount, filled with religious overtones, of how Kassiani became a nun and consequently a renowned ecclesiastical poetess in the 9th century, and 1968's *Imperiale* (*Βυζαντινή ραψωδία*), a peculiar movie with a convoluted plot, set around the year 1000, about a general in the Peloponnese and his secret affair with Empress Zoe, the niece of Basil II.¹

Conversely, during the 1960s and the 1970s, the ancient Greek heritage found its way into several productions, including such classics as *Antigoni* (1961) by Yorgos Tzavellas and the Oscar nominated movies *Electra* (1962) and *Iphigenia* (1977) by Mihalis Kakoyiannis.² It should also be noted that in the long course of Greek cinema, there have been no less than four different cinematic versions of Longus's erotic romance *Dafnis and Chloe*, starting from Orestis Laskos's 1931 silent movie up to Nikos Koundouros's artistic *Young Aphrodites* (*Μικρές Αφροδίτες*, 1963).³

It was not until 1987 that Greek cinema was enriched with its third movie about Byzantium. It was entitled *Doxobus* (*Δοξόμπους*) and was directed by Fotos Labrinos, a long-time collaborator of the late great Theodoros Angelopoulos, and a celebrated director himself in the field of documentaries. The script was co-written by archaeologist and author Panos Theodoridis and the cinematography was assigned to Yorgos Arvanitis, yet another collaborator of

1 V. Karalis's opinion on the movie is different, as he praises the film's "historical accuracy," "impressive costumes" and "gripping dialogue," see Vrasidas Karalis, *A History of Greek Cinema* (New York, 2012), p. 125.

2 Other Hellenic films dealing with ancient Greece include the satires *See: Lucian* (*Βλέπε: Λουκιανός*, 1970) and *Boom, tara!! Ta tzoom!!* (*Μπουμ, ταρα!! Τα τζουμ!!*, 1972), and the philosophical allegory *The Process* (*Διαδικασία*, 1976). There is also a film adaptation of Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* (1972).

3 The other two versions of *Dafnis and Chloe* are Laskos's remake of his own movie in 1969 and Mika Zaharopoulou's 1966 version, which sets the story in the present time.

Angelopoulos. As a contestant at the 28th Greek Cinema Festival in Thessaloniki (September-October 1987), *Doxobus* won four awards.

In comparison to the two aforementioned Byzantine-themed movies, *Doxobus* constitutes a completely different case, namely a realistic approach to the cultural phenomenon of Byzantium. Realism is achieved via the use of a quasi-documentary style, which depicts the everyday life of 14th-century peasants and their interaction with civil servants, monks and clergymen. Moreover, the screenplay has made good and ample use of available primary sources, despite the fact that it also includes purely fictitious elements. To my knowledge, this approach is unique, especially in comparison to the few Byzantine-themed films that were produced throughout the world until 1987.⁴

It is not surprising then that the tagline of the movie was “An unknown Byzantium for the first time on the screen.” The bilingual leaflet (in English and in French) that was edited by the Greek Film Centre on the occasion of the screening of the movie in Berlin – it was kindly provided to me by Fotos Labrinos himself – sheds even more light on the realistic merits of the film. The English version reads: “The film’s basic aim is to present a picture of Byzantium – the Greek Middle Ages – in such a way as has never been attempted before in the Greek as well as the international cinema.” Andrew Horton also stresses the realistic tone of the work, as well as the interest of Labrinos in the everyday life of the common people in provincial Byzantium, in his essay that is included in the leaflet.

Yet, it would be somewhat misleading to regard *Doxobus* as a purely realistic film. The beautiful imagery of the Macedonian landscape clearly aims at captivating the eye of the viewer, whereas two scenes that depict the rituals performed by heretics, accompanied by strong, evocative music, convey to the spectator a sense of mysticism. These aspects show that *Doxobus* is primarily an art film, or at least one that serves likewise art and realism. Its cinematic beauty is again emphasized by Horton, while one contemporary critic of the newspaper *Eleftherotypia* (*Ελευθεροτυπία*) notices both the “authentic reproduction

4 For a general survey on world-wide filmography that has dealt with Byzantium throughout the years in a direct or indirect way, see Przemysław Marciniak, “And the Oscar goes to... the Emperor! Byzantium in the Cinema,” in *Wanted: Byzantium. The Desire for a Lost Empire*, Ingela Nilsson and Paul Stephenson, eds., Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis: Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia 15 (Uppsala, 2014), pp. 247–55. When it comes to the Greek film production on Byzantium, the author mentions only *Kassiani hymnographer* (p. 253). For the reception of Byzantium in Turkish cinema, see Buket Kitapçı Bayrı, “Contemporary Reception of Byzantium in Turkish Cinema: The Cross-examination of Battal Gazi Films with the Battalname,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 37/1 (2013), 81–91.

of the period” and the film’s “pictorial beauty.” Interestingly enough, another contemporary review in the newspaper *Avgli* (Αυγή) focuses solely on the historical aspect of *Doxobus*, whereas the movie critic of the newspaper *Ta Nea* (Τα Νέα) is fascinated exclusively by its artistic qualities.⁵

Furthermore, from an ideological point of view, *Doxobus* is a work that promotes and demands the reconsideration of the Medieval Greek past. Labrinos himself has stated clearly that his intention was to redefine and finally undermine what he saw as the State ideology on Greece’s Byzantine heritage. If the official voice is laudatory towards Byzantium, Labrinos sees in it a social and political nexus that is based on the dialectic of oppression and submission. In his own words, in the form of a comment on the uploaded version of *Doxobus* on YouTube, dating from late 2015 (Labrinos speaks via the profile of the user “Giannis Tsilis”): “Of course, the movie is not a history book. It tries to recreate an era in the style of a documentary and persistently ignoring all the stereotypes on Byzantium, in order to indicate exactly that the obsessions and the phantasies, with which Greek society has fed itself for the past 250 years, and reality are two different things.”⁶

It becomes apparent then that *Doxobus*’s dialogue with the Byzantine past, and subsequently with the Byzantine heritage of modern Greece, is multifaceted. Therefore, the purpose of the present paper is twofold: firstly, to trace the primary sources that were employed by the screenwriters, as well as to indicate the fictitious elements that permeate the movie. This topic pertains to the recreation of the Byzantine past through cinematic fiction – in this case the “documentary” style of *Doxobus*. Secondly, to explore and specify the intention of Labrinos to reconsider the Byzantine past. This topic is closely related to the history of Greek cinema, so that it is virtually impossible to explain some of the film’s aspects without taking into consideration trends, techniques and ideologies that were in fashion in Greek cinematic production from 1970 onwards. Contemporary reception of *Doxobus* will also be discussed briefly, inasmuch it resulted in the failure of the film to have an impact on Greek cinema, which in turn may explain to some extent the absence of Byzantine-themed movies ever since.

5 The newspaper reviews are compiled in the leaflet. The reviews of *Ta Nea* and *Eleftherotypia* can also be found in Yannis Soldatos, *Ιστορία του ελληνικού κινηματογράφου*, vol. 5: *Ντοκουμέντα (1970–2000)* (Athens, 2004), pp. 406–07. There are two more reviews from 1987, those of the cinematic magazines *Kinimatografika Tetradia* (Κινηματογραφικά Τετράδια 27–28, pp. 27–29) and *Othoni* (Οθόνη 31, p. 60), which praise Labrinos’s attempt to deal with the historical past.

6 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNltSQ875Ac>. Assessed 2016 Dec 7.

1 Historical Frame and Primary Sources

The film is set in the days of the civil war between Emperor Andronicus II and his grandson and future emperor Andronicus III.⁷ It is divided into two parts, the first taking place at the dawn of the civil war in 1321, the second covering the third and final phase of the clash, in 1327. However, neither Andronicus II, nor Andronicus III are ever shown on screen, apart from the final scene, which depicts the latter along with his entourage. Furthermore, the plot itself is centred around the territory and the vicinity of a small fishing village in the theme of Strymon,⁸ situated on the eastern bank of the river Strymon in eastern Macedonia, called “Doxobus” (or “Toxobus,” according to some sources).⁹ In other words, the capital Constantinople and the imperial court are entirely absent from the film.

In brief, the storyline is the following. Due to the outbreak of the civil war, Andronicus II decrees a raise on taxes. Struggling to meet his obligations, the bishop of Ezebai¹⁰ (Εζεβαί) in the theme of Strymon demands a higher contribution from the poor villagers of Doxobus. Meanwhile, the superior of the

7 Pre-1987 bibliography on the civil war that would have been available to the screenwriters includes Donald M. Nicol's classic *The Last Centuries of Byzantium, 1261–1453* (London, 1972), pp. 158–71; Angeliki E. Laiou, *Constantinople and the Latins. The Foreign Policy of Andronicus II, 1282–1328* (Cambridge, MA, 1972), pp. 284–300 and Ursula Victoria Bosch, *Kaiser Andronikos III. Palaiologos, Versuch einer Darstellung der byzantinischen Geschichte in den Jahren 1321–1341* (Amsterdam, 1965), pp. 7–52. For a short contemporary overview of the civil war, see Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (California, 1997), pp. 754–59.

8 For the geographical evolution of the theme of Strymon and its association with the themes of Boleron and Thessaloniki, see *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 3 (New York, 1991), “Strymon: Theme of Strymon,” p. 1968 and Paul Lemerle, *Philippes et la Macédoine orientale à l'époque chrétienne et byzantine. Recherches d'histoire et d'archéologie* (Paris, 1945), pp. 124–30. For the association of the theme of Strymon with the theme (and the city) of Serres during the reign of Andronicus II and until the end of the civil war, see Anastasia Kontogiannopoulou, *Η εσωτερική πολιτική του Ανδρονίκου Β' Παλαιολόγου (1282–1328). Διοίκηση-Οικονομία*, Βυζαντινά κείμενα και μελέται 36 (Thessaloniki, 2004), pp. 163–65.

9 A *chrysobullon* of Michael VIII Palaiologos from 1259 registers the village under the name of Τοξόμπους (Paul Lemerle et al., eds., *Actes de Lavra II, de 1204 à 1328*, Archives de l'Athos 8 (Paris, 1977), n. 71, p. 9, line 31). A *praktikon* dating from 1317 registers the name Δοξόμπους (*Actes de Lavra II*, n. 104, p. 164, line 16). As I will make clear, this *praktikon* was used as a primary source by the screenwriters of *Doxobus*.

10 For the bishopric of Ezebai, see Nikolaos Zekos, “Εζεβαί: Ένας βυζαντινός οικισμός στο κάτω τμήμα της κοιλάδας του Στρυμόνα,” in *Μνήμη Μανόλη Ανδρόνικου, Μακεδονικά* 6, suppl. (Thessaloniki 1997), pp. 77–95.

nearby Bebaia Elpidos¹¹ (*Βεβαΐας Ελπίδος*= “of certain hope”) monastery takes secretly the side of Andronicus III, whose final victory results in the ascension of the former to the episcopal see. The first action of the new bishop is to assign the administration of the village to his young protégé, a villager of Doxobus by the name of Xenos, thus replacing Mazaris, the former head of Doxobus and the stepfather of Xenos.

The story is narrated by the secretary (the *notarios*) of the bishopric. Early in the film, he informs the audience that “foreigners” inhabit Doxobus. Six of the villagers’s names are mentioned in the movie: a) Mazaris (Μάζαρις), who is the head of Doxobus, b) Stefanis (Στεφανής), a fisherman who is reported dead during the very first scene, c) Zorana (Ζοράνα), the wife of Stefanis, d) Xenos (Ξένος), the son of Stefanis and later the stepson of Mazaris, e) Pepelis (Πέπελης), and f) Liveris (Λίβερης). The surnames Mazaris, Xenos and Liveris (the accent now on the second, not the first syllable: Λίβερης) are testified as common names or surnames in 14th-century Doxobus in an inventory (*praktikon*) written by request of Andronicus II, in order to secure the interests of the monastery of Great Lavra in the village. The document dates to 1317.¹² It was edited in 1977 and therefore it can be deduced that the screenwriters used it as a primary source for the naming of the villagers.

The (sur)name Mazaris refers also to the early 15th-century satire *Mazaris’ journey to Hades*. In the second part of the satire, Mazaris, an inhabitant of the Despotate of Morea, states, “the Peloponnese is inhabited by a great number of ethnic groups, forming a mixed society.”¹³ According to the author, these

11 Probably inspired by the celebrated monastery in Constantinople that was founded in the late 13th-early 14th-century by Theodora Synadene, the niece of Emperor Michael VIII. See *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 1 (New York, 1991), “Bebaias Elpidos Nunnery,” p. 275. The *typikon* of the monastery survives (H. Delehay, ed., *Deux typica byzantins de l’époque des Paléologues* (Brussels, 1921), pp. 18–105, with a supplement by Ch. Baur, “Le Typikon du monastère de Notre-Dame des bebaia elpidos,” *Revue d’histoire ecclésiastique* 29 (1933), 635–36). For a full translation with an introduction, see “*Bebaia Elpis*: Typikon of Theodora Synadene for the Convent of the Mother of God *Bebaia Elpis* in Constantinople,” Alice-Mary Talbot, trans., in *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents: A Complete Translation of the Surviving Founders’ Typika and Testaments*, John Thomas et al., eds., *Dumbarton Oaks Studies* 35 (Washington D.C., 2000), no. 57, pp. 1512–78.

12 Edition: *Actes de Lavra II* (see above, n. 9): (Mihail) Mazaris (p. 169, line 148), Xenos (p. 166, line 76; father Xenos, p. 167, line 93; p. 167, line 94; Ioannis Xenos, p. 168, line 109; p. 169, line 136), Liveris (Georgios Liveris, p. 166, lines 59–60; p. 166, line 70). There is also a girl called Chrysanna (Χρυσάννα, p. 168, line 128), which may have served as inspiration for the name of Zorana that appears in the film.

13 *Mazaris’ Journey to Hades, or Interviews with Dead Men about Certain Officials of the Imperial Court*, Seminar Classics 609, State University of New York at Buffalo (Buffalo, 1975), p. 76, lines 18–20 (Greek text), p. 77 (English translation).

ethnic groups included Slavs, Italians and Albanians.¹⁴ Perhaps then the name Mazaris is used in the film in order to stress the fact that the villagers were not Greek speaking – and the same can be said for the name Xenos, as the common noun means “foreigner” in Greek. That the villagers were specifically Slavic speaking is additionally attested by the name of Stefanis's wife – Zorana is a common feminine name in Serbia today –, as well as by the fact that in the first scene of the film Mazaris refers to the father of Xenos as “tata,” a Slavic word for “dad.”

Furthermore, the film suggests that the villagers of Doxobus were heretics, probably Bogomils.¹⁵ In a scene in the second part of the movie, a feast is depicted where the villagers are shown dancing among ringed crosses in a graveyard. This type of crosses can still be found in Greece, in several locations in central Macedonia. Nikos Oikonomides noticed in 1988 that these crosses have much in common with others located in southern France, which are associated with the heresy of the Cathars.¹⁶ There is strong but not conclusive evidence that the Cathars were significantly influenced by the dualist heresy of the Bogomils,¹⁷ which emerged presumably in late 10-century

14 See *Mazaris' Journey*, p. 76, lines 21–22.

15 Pre-1987 bibliography on the Bogomils includes Dmitri Obolensky's *The Bogomils. A Study in Balkan Neo-Manichaeism* (Cambridge, 1948); Steven Runciman's *The Medieval Manichee. A Study of the Christian Dualist Heresy* (Cambridge, 1955), pp. 63–93, and Milan Loos's *Dualist Heresy in the Middle Ages* (Prague, 1974), pp. 50–102. For a more recent and concise introduction, see Janet Hamilton and Bernard Hamilton, eds., *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World, c. 650-c. 1450* (Manchester, 1998), pp. 25–55. Cf. also Maja Angelovska-Panova and Andrew P. Roach, “The Bogomils' Folk Heritage: False Friend or Neglected Source?,” in *Heresy and the Making of European Culture. Medieval and Modern Perspectives*, Andrew P. Roach and James R. Simpson, eds. (Surrey, 2013), pp. 129–49.

16 Sadly, only the summary of his paper is available: Nikos Oikonomides, “Βογομιλικά κατάλοιπα κοντά στη Θεσσαλονίκη,” in *Όγδοο συμπόσιο βυζαντινής και μεταβυζαντινής Αρχαιολογίας και Τέχνης. Πρόγραμμα – Περιλήψεις εισηγήσεων και ανακοινώσεων, Αθήνα 13, 14 και 15 Μαΐου 1988* (Athens, 1988), pp. 73–74. The full archaeological evidence of a graveyard in Bosnia-Herzegovina that is believed to be related with this heresy is presented by Oto Bihalji-Merin and Alojz Benac, in *The Bogomils* (London, [1962]). Although ringed crosses are not to be seen independently, one does appear as a symbolic ornament on a tombstone (p. XXIII).

17 On the Cathars, see Loos, *Dualist Heresy*, pp. 127–32. For a brief history of the Cathars in their early days, see Bernard Hamilton, “The Cathars and the Seven Churches of Asia,” in *Byzantium and the West c. 850-c. 1200*, James Howard-Johnstone, ed. (Amsterdam, 1988), pp. 269–95, esp. 271–72. On their association with the Bogomils, see idem, “Wisdom from the East: The Reception by the Cathars of Eastern Dualist Texts,” in *Heresy and literacy, c. 1000–1530*, Peter Biller and Anne Hudson, eds. (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 38–60, esp. 39–42 and 57–58. For the discussion on the existence of Cathars in Milan and its vicinities, see Faye Taylor, “Catharism and Heresy in Milan,” in *Heresy and the Making of European Culture* (see above, n. 15), pp. 383–401.

medieval Bulgaria¹⁸ and then spread rapidly in numerous regions of the Byzantine Empire. The heresy was so successful, that by the 12th century it had reached the noble houses of the capital, as well as the province. In the 14th-century Bogomils were even to be traced in Mount Athos. Moreover, in Thessaloniki, a few years before the fall of the city to the Ottomans in 1430, Archbishop Symeon still regarded Bogomils as a threat.¹⁹

The ringed crosses that are shown in the film may be a hint for the association of the villagers with Bogomilism, but the rest of their lifestyle is not applicable to what the sources tell us about these heretics, namely that they led an ascetic life and abstained from sexual intercourse.²⁰ It should also be added that neither the bishop nor the superior treat the villagers as heretics. On the contrary, Mazaris's action to bring Xenos to the monastery is regarded as a natural thing – although Zorana mentions that this was not a common practice among the villagers.

The Bogomil image fits better another group that appears in the film, a team of itinerant artists that arrive at the monastery in order to decorate its walls. There are many key scenes in the movie that demonstrate how their beliefs belong essentially to a dualist thought system, including the rejection of many orthodox sacraments, such as baptism and marriage, as well as the belief in an evil Creator,²¹ by the name of "Satanael."²² In addition, their lifestyle shows a tendency towards asceticism and celibacy, as they reside at the shore of the Strymon River, practically living inside ground holes without the company of women.

However, not even they can be surely identified as Bogomils. To begin with, they follow and venerate an old man on a raft, who is apparently dead. The raft is led by a young man who speaks on behalf of the senior, shouting from afar the holy words to his believers – once, the young man refers to the artists as "my Cathars" ("Καθαροί μου"). Then the artists fall into ecstasy, constantly bobbing their heads. This ecstatic state is reminiscent of what the earliest Byzantine source, that of Eythymios, a monk of the Periblepton monastery in

18 Probably modern northwest FYROM (see Angelovska-Panova and Roach, "The Bogomils' Folk Heritage," p. 132 and *ibid.*, n. 14 for alternative views).

19 See Hamilton and Hamilton, *Dualist Heresies*, pp. 31–43 for Bogomilism in the 11th- and 12th centuries, and pp. 53–55 for the popularity of Bogomilism in the last two centuries of the Byzantine state.

20 On the Bogomils's austere and chaste lifestyle, see Hamilton and Hamilton, *Dualist Heresies*, pp. 28–29 (the late 10th-century account of Cosmas the priest) and p. 33 (the mid-11th-century testimony of Eythymios of the Periblepton monastery).

21 See Hamilton and Hamilton, *Dualist Heresies*, pp. 28–30.

22 Indeed, Satanael is the creator of the visible world according to the Bogomils, as recounted by Eythymios Zigabenos in his 12th-century work *Panoplia dogmatike* (*Πανοπλία δογματική*, *Patrologia Graeca* 130, 1297 D-1301 A).

Constantinople, tells us about the daily liturgy of the Bogomils,²³ but otherwise the dead man on the raft is a feature unattested in the sources. And so is another heresy that is mentioned in the movie by the artists, called “The brotherhood of faith and love.” These data, in correlation with the above-cited statement of Labrinos on YouTube, show that the screenwriters blended history and fiction, as they were interested in catching the spirit of a medieval society that is characterized by multiplicity, instead of confining themselves within the boundaries of scholarly accuracy.

Of course, Labrinos has said that his film is not a “history book,” yet it is hard to ignore that he took a truly brave step in trying to depict the everyday life in a small Macedonian village, instead of the grandiose lifestyle of the Byzantine court, in a way that is reminiscent of the style encountered in documentaries. This style comprises silent, slow-paced shots, usually accompanied solely by the *notarios*'s recital, which constitute snapshots of the daily routine or of “real” life in general: the peasants who are fishing, feasting or covering their walls with lime as a means to avoid the plague, or the superior, who is constructing a watermill in order to increase the production and therefore the profits of the monastery.²⁴ It should be stressed that the last point (the increase of the monastic property value during the 14th century, via the possession of land and *paroikoi*, and the exploitation of natural resources in eastern Macedonia) is attested by a large number of imperial decrees and additional official documents, already edited before 1987, which most probably were used by the screenwriters as primary sources.²⁵

Moreover, Labrinos demonstrates how the lives of the peasants changed as a result of the emergence of a new type of leader, which is represented by Xenos, who, as already mentioned, replaces Mazaris as the headman of the village. Mazaris was the poor, submissive *protogeros*²⁶ (“the first of the seniors”) of the

23 See Hamilton and Hamilton, *Dualist Heresies*, p. 33.

24 Yorgos Koropoulos, in his essay “Is Fotos a good director?,” included in the book *Fotos Lamprinos*, edited by the Thessaloniki Film Festival on the occasion of the 11th Thessaloniki Documentary Festival (Thessaloniki, 2009), pp. 6–7 (Greek version) and 7–8 (English version), describes *Doxobus* as an “imaginary documentary, which brings to life a world and lets it come to the foreground, so that we suddenly see it and are dazzled by it” (p. 8).

25 The monastery of Saint-John Prodromos near Serres is a typical example of this evolution, see André Guillou, *Les archives de Saint-Jean-Prodrome sur le mont Ménécée* (Paris, 1955), pp. 9–10; cf. Angeliki E. Laiou-Thomadakis, *Peasant Society in the Late Byzantine Empire. A Social and Demographic Study* (New Jersey, 1977), pp. 34–35). The *praktikon* of *Doxobus* for the benefit of the monastery of Great Lavra (see above, n. 9 and 12) is part of the same picture.

26 The capacity of “protogeros” is attested in several late byzantine documents, although without any indication that people bearing this title were submissive. See on this Angeliki E. Laiou, “Priests and Bishops in the Byzantine Countryside, Thirteenth to Fourteenth

local community, now Xenos is a wealthy *archon* who enjoys the full support of the new bishop. The scenario is once more based on scholarly research: The gradual decentralization of Byzantine government, with the formation of small administrative units, mostly ruled by individuals strongly attached to the imperial family, called either *kephalai* (“heads”) or *archontes* (“archons”), is a feature of late Byzantine administration that had been adequately analysed by Byzantinists before 1987.²⁷ Some scholars even argued that the result of this evolution, followed by the rise of the landowning aristocracy, was the establishment of a quasi-feudalized economy.²⁸ Judging from the way Xenos is presented in the last scenes of the film, the screenwriters clearly shared this view.

2 Deconstruction of the “Byzantine Myth”

To catch the spirit of an era is one thing, but if we take a closer look, things become more interesting. As mentioned above, one of the primary aims – if not *the* primary aim – of the movie is to deconstruct several “myths” that are connected with the Byzantine Empire, when seen within the frame of nationalistic rhetoric (see below for an interpretation with regard to Labrinou’s attitude towards “Hellenism” and “Greekness”). If the official ideology of the

Centuries,” in *Church and Society in Late Byzantium*, D. Angelov, ed. (Kalamazoo, MI, 2009), pp. 43–57, esp. 44–45.

27 See primarily Georg Ostrogorsky’s celebrated *Geschichte des byzantinischen Staates*. The Greek translation, following the third edition of the German text, appeared between 1978 and 1981 in three volumes (trans. Ioannis Panagopoulos). The decentralization of the government in late Byzantium is treated in the third volume (Athens, 1981), pp. 169–71 (pp. 396–97 in the German text). In addition, Angeliki E. Laiou’s work on this subject, especially *Constantinople and the Latins*, pp. 256–60 and her contribution “Society and Economy (1204–1453)” (“Κοινωνία και οικονομία (1204–1453)”) in the ninth volume of the collective work *Ιστορία του ελληνικού έθνους (History of the Greek Nation*, Athens, 1979), pp. 214–43, esp. 214–25, may have been among the secondary sources that the screenwriters consulted.

28 See, for example, Ostrogorsky’s views (in the previous footnote) and Laiou, “Society and Economy,” pp. 214–15 and *Peasant Society*, pp. 48–49 (n. 60 on p. 49 provides further bibliography on the subject). For recent opinions on this much debated issue, see Averil Cameron, *Byzantine Matters* (Princeton, NJ, 2014), pp. 34–35 and 40, with further bibliography, and Dimitris Kyritsis, “Κράτος και αριστοκρατία την εποχή του Ανδρονίκου Β’: το αδιέξοδο της στασιμότητας,” in *Ο Μανουήλ Πανσέληνος και η εποχή του* (Athens, 1999), pp. 177–94. For a comparison between the Byzantine and Western medieval economy, see Angeliki E. Laiou and Cécile Morrisson, *The Byzantine Economy* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 235–47. For a comprehensive introduction to late Byzantine administration, touching upon all the aforementioned issues, see Angeliki Laiou and Cécile Morrisson, eds., *Le monde byzantin. Tome 3: Byzance et ses voisins, 1204–1453* (Paris, 2011), pp. 145–55.

Greek state promotes the idea of an all-Greek and all-Orthodox Byzantium, Labrinos's point of view is radically different; in *Doxobus*, we encounter heretics and Slavonic minorities,²⁹ whilst the representatives and the associates of the Orthodox Church are quite different from what one would expect. The bishop is cruel towards the peasants, in a desperate attempt to pay his dues to the demanding emperor; the superior, a former heretic, is an opportunist, only concerned with serving his personal ambition; finally, the secretary of the bishopric is a common flatterer.

In order to fully comprehend Labrinos's point of view, a historical perspective is required. To begin with, it has to be made clear that these characters, religious sects and ethnic groups act on a stage, where massive political and economic changes are taking place that lead to new social structures. *Doxobus* is primarily a narrative about power, oppression and the transition from one form of organized economy to another.³⁰ One may wonder why did Labrinos choose to deal with such complex issues, especially since there were not any cinematic precedents in Greece (neither *Kassiani*, nor *Imperiale* were movies of that kind). In other words, why was a movie such as *Doxobus* directed and released in 1987 and why were there no other post-Dictatorship (i.e. post-1974) or post-*Doxobus* movies based on Byzantine history and culture?

The history of Greek cinema of the 1950s and the 1960s goes beyond the purpose of this paper. What is of particular interest is the fact that from 1970 onwards a heterogeneous wave of young filmmakers emerged, called "New Greek Cinema" (Νέος Ελληνικός Κινηματογράφος: NEK) by contemporary, as well as

29 See Laiou-Thomadakis, *Peasant Society* pp. 130–35 for the discussion on the existence of national minorities in 14th-century Macedonia, and the theme of Strymon in particular, based on the evidence of names that can be traced in contemporary documents (such as "Alvanites," "Vlachos," "Armenopoulos," etc.). The author argues that: "Of course, it would be dangerous to try to draw firm conclusions about the ethnic composition of the Macedonian countryside in the 14th century merely on the evidence of names. However, this evidence should not be disregarded. Although it proves nothing, it suggests that the Slavic element of the rural population was rather weak in the theme of Thessaloniki, rather stronger in the theme of Strymon, and very strong in Strumitsa and its environs" (p. 133). It seems that the screenwriters turned Laiou's reservations into certainty, by suggesting that the population of *Doxobus* consisted entirely of "foreigners."

30 Karalis sees in *Doxobus* "an apt parable for the disintegrating pseudo-socialism of the country and of Eastern Europe" as well an exploration of the way "religion transformed people into irrational fanatics and hunted animals, destroying in them all the forms of ethical considerations behind responsible action" (Karalis, *Greek Cinema*, p. 223). As much as his first interpretation sounds intriguing, I have to disagree with the latter. In *Doxobus* it is the Church and monastic institutions and the men in them who hold power that are degraded, not religion itself. In my opinion, religion is only implicitly laughed at during the long, futile dogmatic discussions that occur between monks.

modern film critics. The directors of NEK were openly opposed to the so-called “commercial cinema” of the previous decades, now referred to as “Old Greek Cinema” (Παλαιός Ελληνικός Κινηματογράφος: ΠΕΚ) by film critics.³¹

Consequently, the 1970s and the 1980s resulted in a considerably high production of art and political films, whose purpose was to explore and reveal the social and economic rules that control man’s life, governmental oppression included. However, from 1981 onwards, films began to display a tendency towards introspection and introversion, as political reflections were gradually replaced by social considerations.³² The cinematic code became more abstract, thus resulting in the failure of communication between the director and the audience.³³ Despite the fact that there is a debate among scholars on the timeline of NEK,³⁴ this transition is generally considered as a turning point in the history of the “new cinema.”³⁵

Within this frame, *Doxobus* is a film that belongs clearly to NEK, but also one that fits better in the pre-1981 cinematic production. Despite the fact that Labrinos sets his storyline in an unexpected and until then unexplored territory, that of late Byzantium (and this is where its undisputed originality lies), *Doxobus* neither deals with private issues, nor does it show any signs of introversion. On the contrary, its general character is not alien to Angelopoulos’s political films from the period 1972–77 (*Days of ’36* [Μέρες του ’36], *The Traveling Players* [Ο θίασος], *The Hunters* [Οι κυνηγοί]). Therefore, one is tempted to speculate that Labrinos draws parallels between the oppressive celluloid episcopate and the modern Church of Greece, as well as between Greek monasteries then and now.³⁶

31 For a concise survey of NEK (and its opposition to ΠΕΚ), see Yannis Bakogiannopoulos, “Νέος Ελληνικός Κινηματογράφος (1967–1999),” in *Η ελληνική ματιά. Ένας αιώνας κινηματογράφου* (Athens, 1999), pp. 37–55. Cf. Stathis Valoukos, *Νέος Ελληνικός Κινηματογράφος (1965–1981). Ιστορία και πολιτική* (Athens, 2011), pp. 37–42.

32 See Karalis, *Greek Cinema*, p. 201.

33 This was also reflected in the commercial bankruptcy of NEK (see Karalis, *Greek cinema*, p. 217 and Valoukos, *Νέος ελληνικός κινηματογράφος*, p. 48).

34 Valoukos places the “death of NEK” in 1981 (*Νέος Ελληνικός Κινηματογράφος*, pp. 45–48), Karalis in 1986 (*Greek Cinema*, p. 217), while Bakogiannopoulos regards it as a continuum that spreads over the last years of the 1990s (“Νέος Ελληνικός Κινηματογράφος,” pp. 53–55).

35 For a general survey, see Karalis, *Greek Cinema*, pp. 198–213. For the scholarly debate on the periodization of NEK, see also the book review of Valoukos, *Νέος Ελληνικός Κινηματογράφος*, by Anna Poupou, in the first issue of *Filmicon* (September 2013), p. 162.

36 The critic of *Κινηματογραφικά Τετράδια* (p. 27) shares a similar opinion. Cf. Karalis’s standpoint in the previous note.

On the other hand, *Doxobus* is not a film that explores the cultural identity of Hellenism either, at least not in the sense of other movies from the 80s, such as Lakis Papastathis's *In the Time of the Hellenes* (*Τον καιρό των Ελλήνων*, 1981) and *Theophilos* (*Θεόφιλος*, 1987), or Dimos Theos's *Captain Meïdanos* (*Καπετάν Μείντάνος*, 1987), works set in the Hellenic past and dealing with expressions of popular lifestyle and folk art. In a way, Labrinos's deconstructive approach to the phenomenon of Byzantium, as described above, suggests that his movie is a step towards the reassessment of the official state ideology on the idea of "Hellenism" and "Greekness," but not the reassessment per se.³⁷

As cited above, according to Labrinos, *Doxobus* "tries to recreate an era, in the style of a documentary and persistently ignoring all the stereotypes of Byzantium, in order to indicate exactly that the obsessions and the phantasies, with which the Greek society has fed itself for the past 250 years, and reality are two different things." It is interesting to compare Labrinos's statement with what Lakis Papastathis had to say about his work in an interview in 1987 with the magazine *Othoni* (*Οθόνη*). Papastathis says that what interests him is the "modern Greek face" ("το νεοελληνικό πρόσωπο"), not "Greekness" ("ελληνικότητα"), because: "The official standpoint of the past 150 years in Greece is that of Hellenism, whereas what is Hellenic lies in the underground, it is often illegal, hidden and repressed."³⁸

As can be seen, both directors seek evidence of historical truth beyond and against the official national ideology, which, both agree, has remained practically unchangeable for more than a century or two. There is a contact point, but also a crucial difference: Papastathis attempts to substitute the official ideology with things that are oppressed, even prosecuted, and yet apparent. Labrinos seems to be primarily interested in demolishing the "phantasies" of Greek society. For him, Byzantium is considerably different from what the State wants its people to believe. However, that does not mean that he wishes to create a new image of modern Greek identity. Of course, he too juxtaposes authority and popular culture, as exhibited in the abovementioned scene that depicts

37 The issue of "Greekness" in ΝΕΚ is far too complex to be elaborated here. Valoukos (*Νέος Ελληνικός Κινηματογράφος*, p. 42) argues that every film of the "new cinema" that attempted to challenge established attitudes towards society and politics constituted an effort to reassess the idea of "Hellenism." It becomes apparent that to him "Hellenism" is a very broad term. The same view is shared by Nikos Kolovos (*Νεοελληνικό Θέατρο (1600–1940) – Κινηματογράφος* (Hellenic Open University, Patras, 2002), pp. 171–78). On the other hand, Bakogiannopoulos ("Νέος Ελληνικός Κινηματογράφος," pp. 45–47) distinguishes between a "Western" and an "hellenocentric" trend in ΝΕΚ. According to him, Papastathis's *In the Time of the Hellenes* and *Theophilos* fall into the second category.

38 *Οθόνη* 31 (December, 1987), p. 14.

the feast of the peasants in the graveyard. Yet, it appears that the point of his film is not to let elements of a forgotten, 'unofficial' Greek past to emerge, but to undermine those that have become the authoritative voice of the present.³⁹

Overall, Labrinos's film is a bold venture that corresponds to the evolution of Greek cinema and the emergence of ΝΕΚ. At the same time, it can hardly be said that it had any predecessors: the Byzantine past was treated in a considerably different way in *Kassiani* and *Imperiale*, in the first case as a religious teaching, in the second as a romantic adventure. Labrinos's attempt to discover and make good use of the Byzantine past, first by restructuring a world that no longer existed via the close examination of the primary sources, secondly by discussing the heritage of the Greek Middle Ages in a dynamic and modern way, could have set the standards for future Byzantine-themed movies or simply period dramas. Nevertheless, the audience thought otherwise.

Despite its four awards, *Doxobus* was mocked and ridiculed during its screening at the 28th Greek Cinema Festival, along with other contestants. Apparently, the young audience in the upper balcony of the theatre where the screening took place, once an ardent supporter of all that ΝΕΚ stood for, now decided that it had had enough of state-financed, slow-paced, art and/or political films that were regarded as the self-indulgent creations of elitist directors.⁴⁰ Even the word "Doxobus" sounded provoking to them.⁴¹ In the aftermath, some even expressed amazement that the film had been produced at all. In a contemporary interview, Nikos Perakis, a director who had been balancing successfully on the fine line between "art" and "commerciality" during the first half of the 1980s, confessed that "paradoxically" he had liked *Doxobus*,

39 Cf. Labrinos's answer to Eva Stefani's question about the placing of *Doxobus* within the discussion on "Greekness": "*Doxobus* uses a documentary-style reconstruction of a mythified [*sic*] age (the 14th century) to call into question established stereotypes and widely-held views that permeate Greek historiography on the 'Greekness' of the Byzantine empire" (*Fotos Lamprinos*, see above, n. 24, p. 13).

40 The reception of the films that were screened at the Thessaloniki Festival by the audience of the upper balcony throughout the years is a complex issue. In the mid- and late-70s, the upper balcony was exalting every single political film that was brought to the Festival, regardless of its artistic merits (*Soldatos, Ιστορία του ελληνικού κινηματογράφου*, 2 (Athens, 2010), p. 57). By 1987, the balcony was disfavoring the vast majority of the films produced, since they were regarded as tedious and incomprehensible. See the web chronicle of the 28th Festival, where it is argued that the audience would have adored the same movies, had they been presented a few years earlier, <http://www.filmfestival.gr/default.aspx?page=650&lang=el-GR&tiff=28>. Assessed 2016 Dec 7.

41 The word "doxobus" became the catchword of the festival, as it was constantly shouted by the young audience of the upper balcony during screenings (see the web link cited in the previous note).

but couldn't possibly understand why Labrinos had engaged in a motion picture on Byzantium.⁴²

If Byzantium itself was part of the problem – but not the whole problem⁴³ –, it really comes as no surprise that *Doxobus* failed to have an impact on the evolution of Greek cinema. Directors remained uninterested in the Greek Middle Ages,⁴⁴ with only one exception, Yorgos Stambouloupoulos's *Two Suns in the Sky* (*Δύο ήλιοι στον ουρανό*, 1991), an obscure low-budget film set in early Byzantium (i.e. "late Antiquity"), about the conflict between the old pagan religion and the ascendant Christianity.⁴⁵ Interestingly enough, Stambouloupoulos's point of view is highly favourable to the pagans and clearly condemnatory of the Christians. However, apart from the fact that his movie is another attempt at challenging (if not completely reversing) the rhetoric of the official State (and Church) ideology, it can hardly be said that Stambouloupoulos was influenced by *Doxobus* in particular.

Overall, its commercial performance or its future impact apart, *Doxobus* is one of the most intriguing films of post-Dictatorship Greek cinema, as it touches upon several key-issues that pertain to the reception of the Byzantine past in modern Greek cinema. If anything, it poses some interesting questions: Why is Byzantium largely absent from ΝΕΚ? Moreover, why and how is it present in a film that was produced in 1987? The present paper tried to explore these issues, by arguing that the director attempted a serious, quasi-scientific, approach to a specific period of the Byzantine era, which he treated in a manner that perfectly fitted the first period of ΝΕΚ (1970–81). The fact that it failed to relate with the audience was partly due to the commercial crisis of ΝΕΚ and partly the consequence of dealing with Byzantine history in the first place.

42 See Sotiris Kakisis, *Οι απέναντι. Συζητήσεις με πρόσωπα της ελληνικής οθόνης* (Athens, 2005), p. 266. Perakis adds that in his view it would have been more (but not entirely) justifiable, if Labrinos had made the choice to direct a movie about Justinian and Theodora.

43 It is true that *Doxobus*'s narrative style is occasionally confusing and too elliptical, as already noted in the contemporary review in the magazine *Κινηματογραφικά Τετράδια* (p. 29).

44 There are however more Greek films from the 80s, whose aesthetics and concerns touch upon questions and reflections that refer to the Byzantine cultural heritage, such as Theos's *Captain Meïdanos*, which has already been mentioned; Kostas Sfikas's experimental *Allegory* (*Αλληγορία*, 1986) and even Angelopoulos's *Megalexandros* (*Μεγαλέξανδρος*, 1980). On the latter, see Dan Georgakas, "Megalexandros: Authoritarianism and National Identity," in *The Cinema of Theo Angelopoulos*, Angelos Koutsourakis and Mark Steven, eds. (Edinburgh, 2015), pp. 129–40, esp. p. 130.

45 For a brief synopsis, see Soldatos, *Ιστορία του ελληνικού κινηματογράφου*, 3, 4th ed. (Athens, 2010), pp. 26–27.

But even if *Doxobus* and its fame are confined within the walls of the projection booths of art movie lovers, it is unquestionably a piece of work that deserves the attention of Byzantinists and film scholars. Further research could focus on topics that were not treated in this paper, such as the commercial performance of *Doxobus*, its reception by foreign audiences and the analysis of its aesthetics with regard to other medieval-themed movies.

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