

Later Epic

Heroes of the Past and Future

Digenis Akritas, Book 4.1-762

The Akritic Tradition

- Coming full-circle:
- A living tradition of stories and songs about heroes from the Byzantine border lands
- <https://www.domnasamiou.gr/?i=portal.en.albums&id=37>

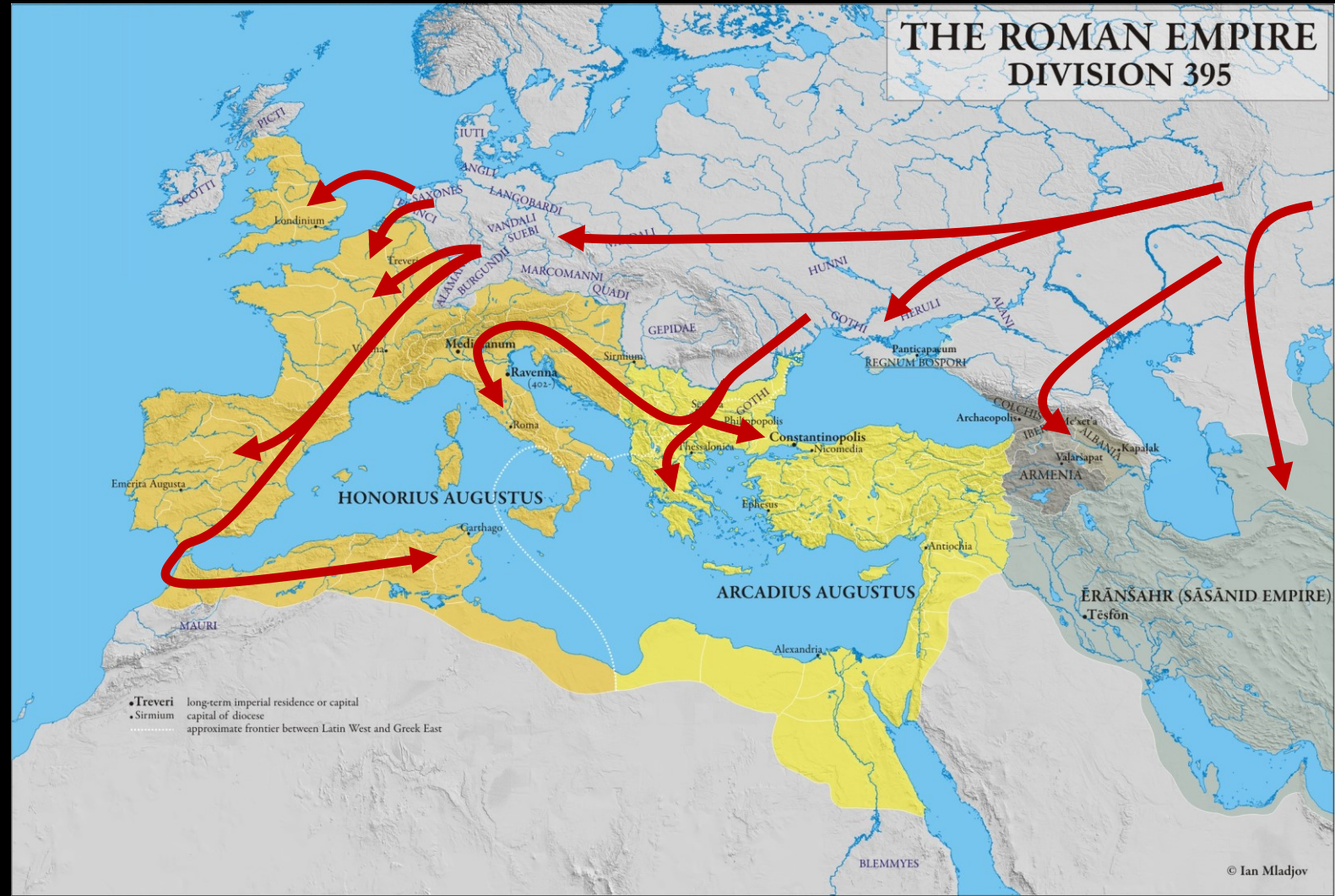
Epic Songs of Warriors and Heroes

Collection - musical supervision Domna Samiou



Changes and Transitions

- Remember there were two “Roman” empires
- Instabilities weakened and transformed the western Empire



Changes and Transitions

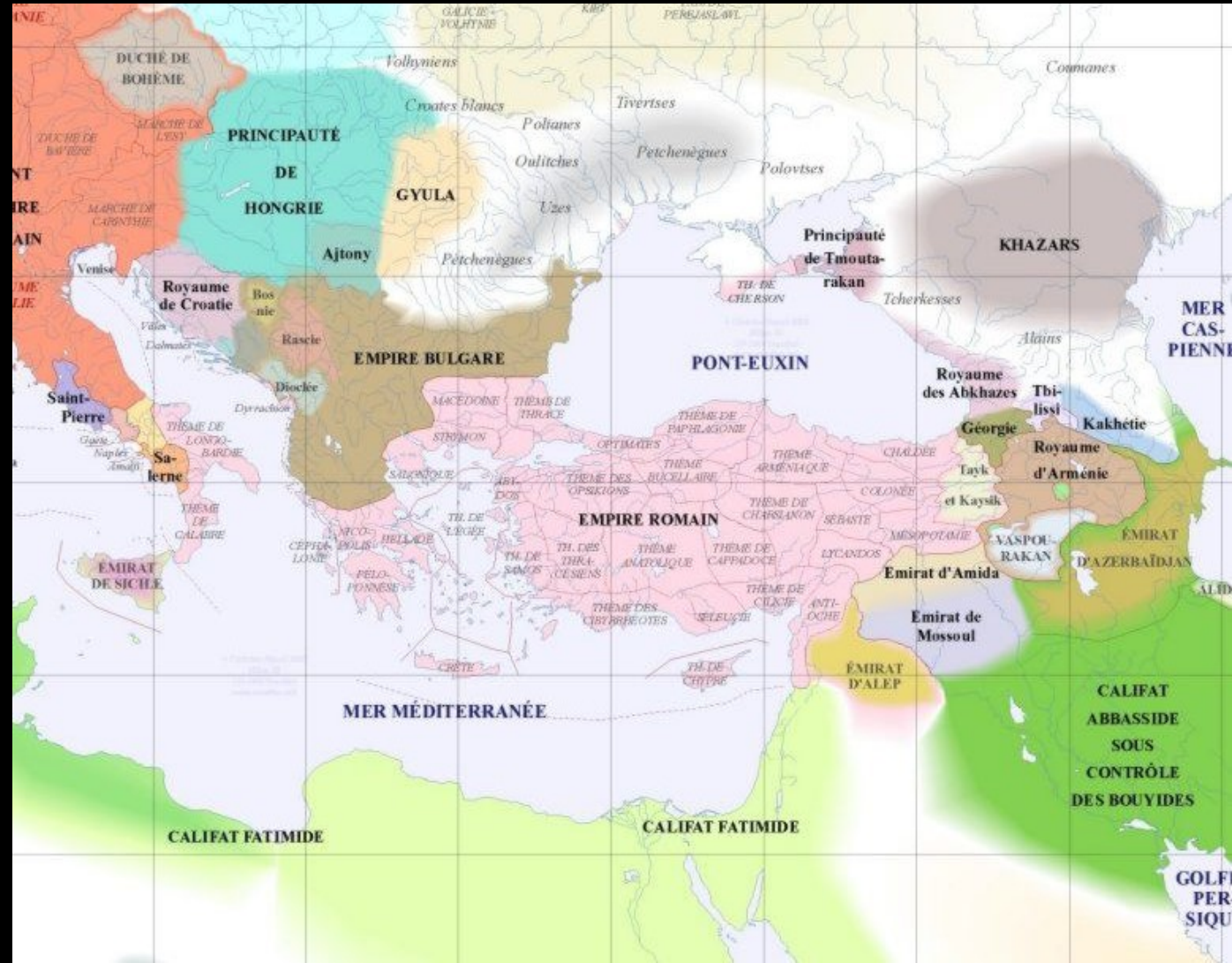
The (Eastern) Roman Empire, aka Byzantine Empire, ca. 600 CE

- Cosmopolitan empire, with capital at Constantinople
- The Eastern Empire had its own pressures



■ The (Eastern) Roman Empire,
aka Byzantine Empire,
ca. 1000 CE

- The long contraction of borders is the setting for *Digenis Akritas*



Digenis Akritas

- Set in 9th – 10th centuries
 - Byzantine Empire was cosmopolitan, but effectively controlled by Greek nobility with Greek traditions
 - Education in (Classical) Greek culture and history was essential for political mobility
 - Military organized into feudal system with hereditary land holdings
 - Borders (*akritai*) maintained by local nobles and their troops

Digenis Akritas

- Unstable borders all around were a perennial problem for the Byzantines
 - Ca. 1000
 - Ca. 1200
 - Ca. 1300



Digenis Akritas

- 6 versions, all from different (oral) sources, same general story, but variations between versions
 - This version from a Greek monastery in Grottaferrata, Italy
 - 3700+ lines in 8 books
 - Written in the 1300s, but based on older tradition
 - Assumed the stories began around 1100 about people living in the 900s

The Narrative

Remember in Nonnus where Dionysus doesn't appear till Book 8?

- Build the world before populating it

- Book 1:
 - A Syrian (Muslim) emir kidnaps the daughter of a Byz. general and agrees to convert
- Book 2:
 - Basil (Digenis) is born; the Emir returns to Syria
- Book 3:
 - The Emir returns to Byz. territory with his convert mother and others

The Narrative

- Book 4:
 - Basil comes of age and proves himself
 - Basil tries to elope, but is caught by her family
 - Basil gets married and settles on the border as a border-lord (the *digenis akritas*)
 - The Emperor Basil comes to meet Digenis/Basil
 - The beginning of the book repeats itself with animal combat to impress the emperor

He's 12!

The Narrative

- Book 5:
 - Basil wanders in Syria (?!), commits adultery
- Book 6:
 - Basil builds his home on the Euphrates and defends his wife from a dragon, a lion, a marauding army, 3 outlaws, and an Amazon (who he also sleeps with)
- Book 7:
 - Description of Basil's house; death of his parents
- Book 8:
 - Basil gets sick taking a bath; recounts life on deathbed to his wife; B. falls asleep and she thinks he died, she dies, he wakes up and blesses her, dies; a catalogue of people who travel to pay respects and bury B.

Remember the letters in the Alexander Romance?

The Analysis

- The Narrator's Voice
 - Kind of???
 - “At once I will recall for you [a story] about Desire (/uncontrollable/irrational Love)” (1)
 - Basil sings his own song in Books 5-7
- Discounts earlier stories (27 ff.) to play up Basil/Digenis
 - The singer of the tale isn't the important one here...

The Analysis

- Language and Performance
 - A return to oral epic
 - Sentences short and phrases confined to lines
 - Formulas (“all/covered with mosaic” 268/270)
 - Maybe not the most riveting style

The Analysis

- The Literary Background
 - Classical influences
 - Homer
 - “Record not Homer; nor Achilles’ tales, / nor Hector’s; they are false” (27-8)
 - Epic similes, that aren’t really all that epic anymore
 - D. on a horse: “how like an apple on a tree he sat.” (245)
 - D. singing: “when those within the house heard the sweet song, / they were bemused as was Odysseus once / when on his ship he heard the Sirens’ song.” (259-61)

The Analysis

- The Literary Background
 - Type-Scene
 - Animal Combat (102 ff.) with allusions to Herakles?
 - Folk Traditions
 - Akritic tradition
 - Alexander the Great (“The Macedonian... was master of the world with God’s help” (29-30))
 - Songs about outlaws (the Philopappoi (33-4))
 - Lots of love songs throughout

The Analysis

- The Idea of the Hero
 - Educated (for 3 years)
 - Young (12-15 years old)
 - Fearless, strong, fast, good at fighting
 - Clever (tricks his enemies)
 - Enjoys God's favor and grace
 - *Kalos k'agathos* (blonde, big eyes, white complexion, dark hair)
 - Boastful and prideful, bad at controlling his impulses
 - Somewhat lawless (if it suits him)
 - Motivated by shame and desire for personal glory



The Analysis

- The Idea of the Hero
 - The old ideals (Homer) are culturally important, but not in real terms
 - The epic hero = the folk hero
 - Akritic tradition fills the gap between old ideals and new realities



The Analysis

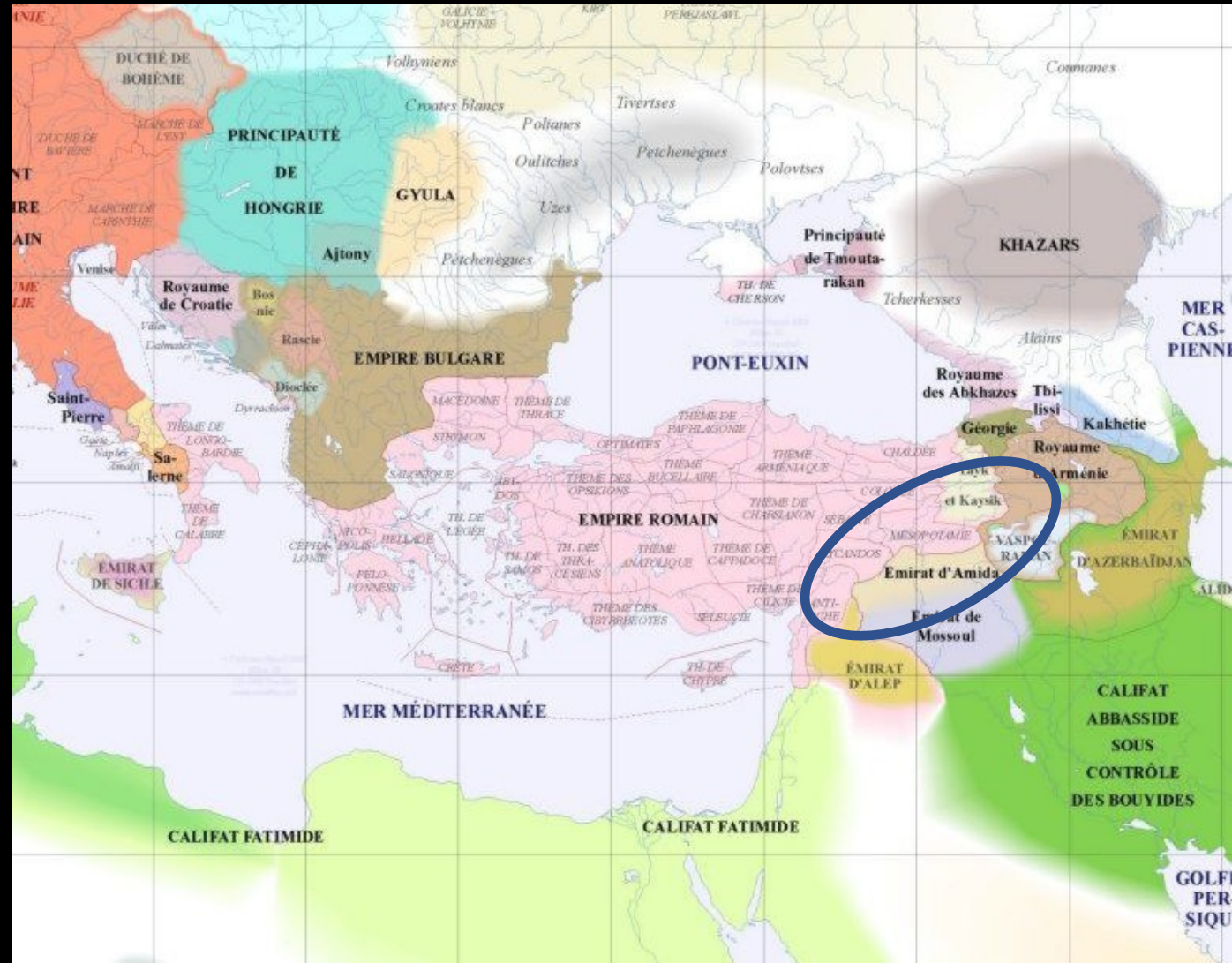
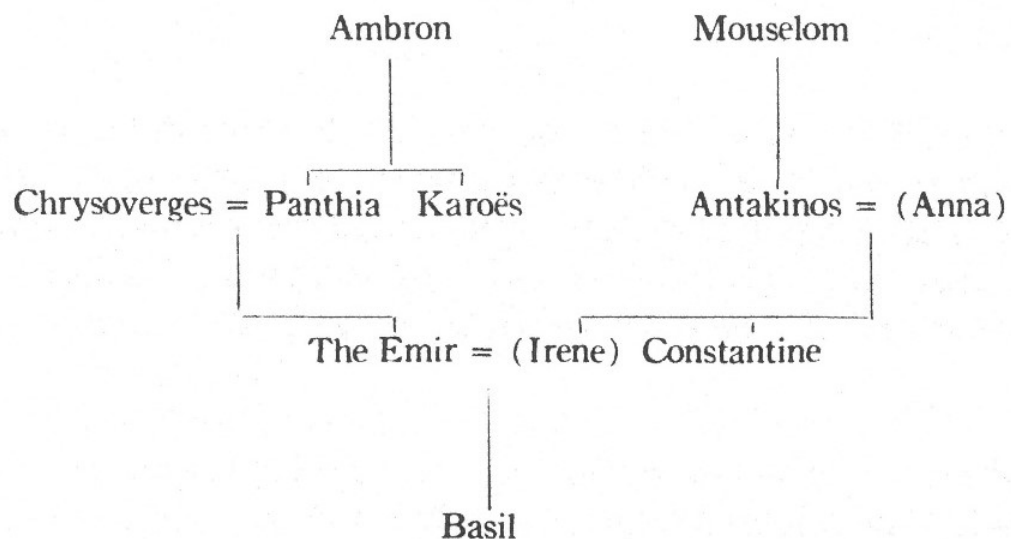
- The Social Background
 - Religion can't be missed
 - Everything good and bad comes from God
 - Shame and religion seem to have been connected
 - Lots of irreligious things happen, but they don't seem to matter (mass killings like at 637 ff.)
 - Life on the border (men's roles)
 - Lawless, unstable, determined by loyalty to a superior feudal lord and personal prowess
 - Women's roles (what's D.'s wife's name?)
 - Secluded and used to seal connections between families (486 ff.)
 - Noble marriage was a business arrangement, clad in romance (701 ff.)
 - D. upsets this

The Analysis

- The Social Background
 - Commoners' lives
 - Not worth much, 1,000s can die and no one cares (637 ff.)
 - “Forgive me, master. Do not censure me. / Your troops are clods the way they strike and parry (fight), / and therefore most of them have gone to Hell.” (676)
 - Servants, slaves, soldiers, free farmers all transferred with property during wedding arrangements
 - Feudal nobility (landowners / *akritai*) were the important ones

Digenis Akritas

- Genealogies important because all (most?) based on real people from both sides of the border



Digenis Akritas

- Genealogies important because all (most?) based on real people from both sides of the border
- Stories arose when the border was “stable”
- Spread as territory was being lost
- Written down as things were becoming bleak



Final Thoughts

- Can't judge *Digenis Akritas* based on Classical definitions, it's too different
 - Operating with/within the older tradition but not really a part of it
 - Culture and context so far removed from the ancient world that the epic functions very differently
 - As a Medieval epic (because it is one)

“Final” (Exam) Thoughts

- Same format
 - Must sign honor statement on all sections
- Don't leave anything blank
- Writing only the minimum number of sentences doesn't guarantee full credit