

Comenius project 2013-2015

"Living our common ancestry"

Art school of Gerakas, Attiki
Hellas



March 2014

Heroic poetry

Digenis Akritas

Byzantine Empire

1000 years of history



Costantinoupolis



Heroic Poetry

Introduction

Following the Arab expansion at the end of the 7th century AD, the eastern Greek speaking provinces of the Byzantine Empire were dominated by a warlike style of life, for a very long time.





The multitude of battles over a number of centuries led to the development of folk, oral, narrative poetry which addressed people's interest to learn the details of the heroes' feats, real or even imaginary.



Among these narrations, the most significant are the poems that refer to the life and work of “Akrites”.

The word “Akrites” was used for the soldiers that had been placed at the eastern borders of the Byzantine Empire, i.e. at the edges (from the Greek word “akres”, meaning edges, borderline).



Their duty was to protect the Empire from the attacks of both Arab groups and groups of bandits living in the countryside. In return, they were allotted land and they were offered reduction of taxes.





The best known of these soldiers, a personification of all the “Akrites”, was **Vasileios Digenis Akritas**, a heroic figure conceived and created in the folk heroic poetry as a representation of their gallantry, bravery and deeds of valour.



This imaginary hero was given the name Digenis (meaning: of double descent) because his mother was the daughter of a Byzantine general and his father was Amiras”, i.e. an Arab from Syria. His physical strength and valour were tremendously impressive and his deeds were numerous.

Vasilios Digenis Akritas



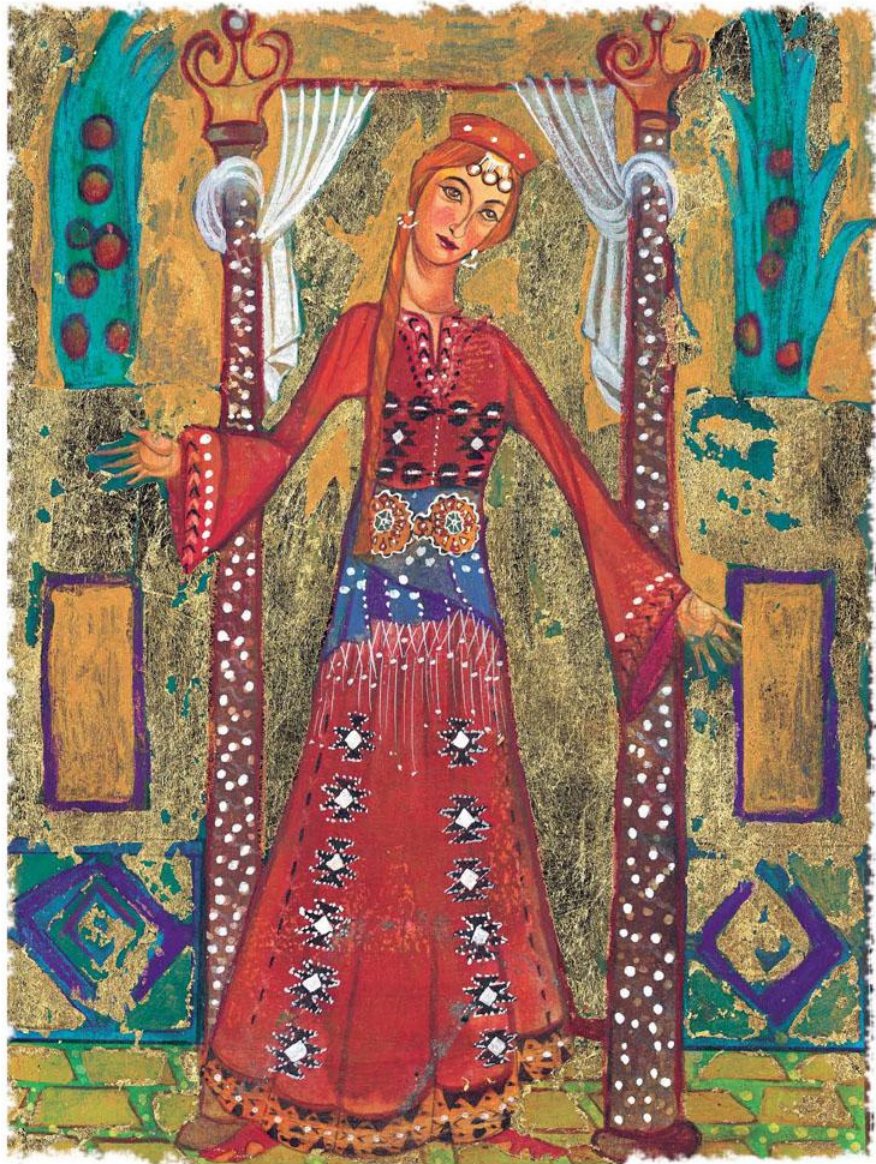
This was the reason why an extensive epic poem was written to honor his ancestors, his life and his death. The heroic poem was written by an unknown poet at the time of Emperor Constantine the IX , the so-called Monomachos, (AD 1042-1055). It describes romantic scenes that supposedly happened at the Byzantine-Arab border in the period AD 860 to 960.

Manuscript of Andros





The story starts with the
 expedition of the
 Saracen “Amiras” of
 Syria against the
 Byzantine area of Asia
 Minor.



In the expedition, Amiras captures a young Christian girl of the great Doukas family. He takes her, other captives and a lot of loot and returns to Syria.

- The girl's mother sends a message to her 5 sons, who were away at the time of the Arab attack, ordering them to act immediately and free their sister, otherwise she will curse them. The 5 young men meet Amiras, talk to him and decide to resolve the matter with a duel. One of the 5 brothers has to fight against Amiras and if he wins, his sister will be released.



The brothers encourage the youngest brother Constantine to be the one to duel. They advise him not to fear the fight, but only to be afraid of their mother's curse. At the same time, Amiras gets ready; he talks to his men, expressing his hope that he will be the winner.



- The duel starts. Both fighters are skillful but Constantine is better and his horse is faster. He attacks Amiras and hits him. The fight is long but Amiras surrenders; he raises his finger as a sign of recognition of the superiority of his opponent and asks for peace.

The 5 brothers demand their sister back. Amiras is furious and tells them to look for her in the camp. The brothers search but they can't find the girl. They threaten to slaughter Amiras, so he finally reveals that she is in his tent because she is his loot. Then he confesses that he is in love with her, he has respected her and he is willing to convert to Christianity, to marry her and to move to their country with her. So, the brothers accept this proposal and the couple gets married in the Eastern Byzantine Provinces. The couple soon has a child, Digenis.

- Amiras' mother, seeing that he is not returning, sends him a letter, accusing him of treason because he married a Christian woman. She sends men and horses to escort him back to his country and allows him to bring his wife. She declares that if he doesn't obey, his children and herself will commit suicide, or she will curse him on Mohamed's tomb.

- When Amiras receives his mother's letter, he is shocked and tells his wife that he intends to visit his mother in Syria and come back to her soon. When all the necessary preparations are made, he bids farewell to his wife and takes her ring. He arrives in his country, meets his mother, discusses the problem and confesses that being a Christian has revealed love and real faith to him. He asks her to convert too and follow him to his new country. She decides to do so and they soon leave for the Eastern Provinces, followed by his brothers and a lot of his men.



They all convert to Christianity.



Digenis is brought up with narrations of the feats of bandits and he wants to meet them.



When he does, he asks their leader to allow him to join the group. The leader asks him to perform some tasks to prove his bravery, but, Digenis finds them too easy and suggests more difficult ones.

- After a meal with the group, he manages to take all the spears of the bandits. He takes them to their leader as proof of his superiority.



Moreover, at the age of 12, he asks his father to hunt lions and bears, in honor of his parents. When he does take part in the hunting expedition with his father and his uncle Constantine, he kills a bear and a lion.





As a young man, Digenis, meets the daughter of a Byzantine General and falls for her. On a moonlit night he decides to elope with the girl and entices her with his song. She follows him but warns him to be careful so as not to die like other men who attempted to take her.



The girl's father, with his soldiers, chase them but Digenis manages to beat them all. He asks the General to allow him to marry his daughter and is willing to go through difficult tests.



στο ἔμπα χίλιος ἔκοψε πτό ἔβγα τρεῖς χιλιάδες

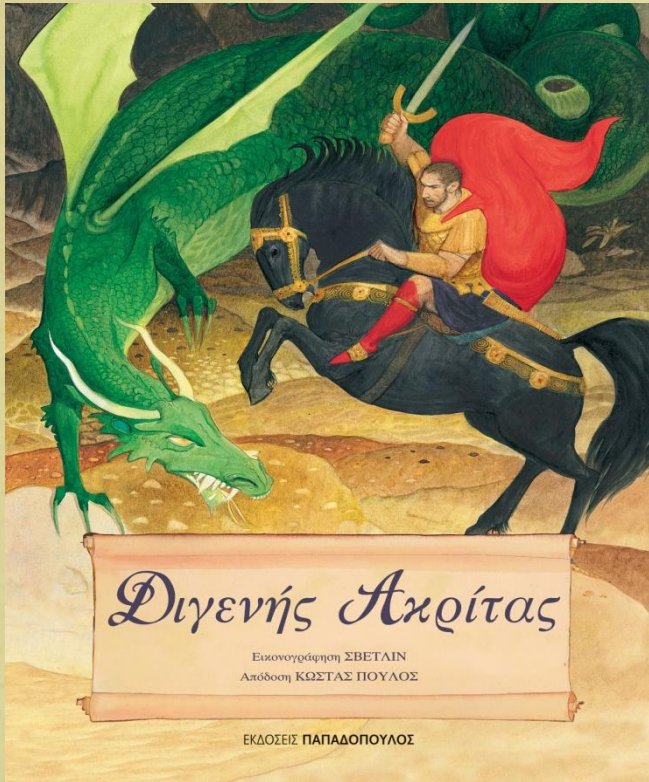
Στο ἔμπα χίλιους ἔκοψε,
στο ἔβγα δυο χιλιάδες



The General accepts and the wedding takes place at Digenis' home where his father and his relatives welcome the couple with music and songs. The girl's father provides her with dowry.



- The wedding feast lasts 3 months. Digenis and his wife live happily in beautiful places, shadowy woods and flowing brooks.



- One day, after his parents' death, Digenis is out with his wife for a walk. Suddenly, a Dragon attacks them, blocking the way.



Digenis challenges him to fight. The Dragon states that he doesn't want to fight; he only wants Digenis' wife. He is transformed into a supernatural being that has three heads. One head is that of a snake and the other two are human; an old man's and a young man's.



Digenis cuts off all 3 heads
and his wife starts laughing
happily.



However, a lion that is in the vicinity is annoyed and comes menacingly to the tent. Digenis kills the lion with his sword.



Then he plays music for his wife to come round.



A group of enemies attack Digenis



They want to take the girl but Digenis beats them all. Their leader challenges Digenis but when he loses, he suggests that Digenis be their new leader and follow them to their expeditions.



- Digenis refuses, stating that nothing can separate him from his wife. The enemies turn for help to a valiant woman, Maximou, because they seek revenge. Maximou accepts and organizes a battle with the support of 100 gallant fighters and their horses.

However, when she realizes that Digenis will be fighting alone, she changes her mind and decides to confront him alone. She is finally defeated and asks him to take her too, but he refuses



After spending a lifetime at the battle field, where he became renowned for his feats, Digenis decides to settle down in the fertile area on the banks of the river Euphrates.



He chooses a place with trees and a lot of water. He creates a big garden and plants lots of trees and flowers. He builds a large two-storey house with a yard where he also builds his grave.



However,
everything in
this world ends
one day and life
is succeeded by
death.

- Digenis lived gloriously, but he is finally taken ill. He talks to his men and encourages them to be brave and to have love for other people. He has a vision of the fiery death angel who is approaching, so he calls his wife and asks her not to forget him. She prays to God to save her husband or to take *her* life first, so that she doesn't see his death. While he's in the agony of death, she loses her senses and after a while dies at the same time with Digenis. So, they both leave this life together!!!



Performed by the students of the Art School of Gerakas:

- Kalipoliti Leda
- Kardami Christina
- Kondi Galateia –Maria
- Loupakis Ioannis
- Parnassa Aikaterini
- Rovoli Stavroula –Artemis
- Sakkoula Marita
- Sofronis Stavros
- Spyridaki Vasileia
- Chatzinikolaou Foteini.

- Text selection and adaptation : Efrosyni Pachiadaki,
Greek Language and Literature Instructor
- Translation : Paraskevi Florou,
English Language and Literature Instructor
- Drama instruction : Eirini Tsouramani,
Drama Instructor
- Ppt presentation: Terpsichore Giannopoulou,
French Language and Literature Instructor.

Bibliography

- L. Politis , *History of Greek Literature*, Foundation of the National Bank , Athens 1995
- *History of the Hellenic Nation* volume 9, Ekdotiki Athinon, 1980

References for pictures

<http://dimitris-a-skourtelis.blogspot.gr/>

[http://athirma.gr/folk byzantine painting
gr/](http://athirma.gr/folk_byzantine_painting_gr/)

www.antoine-helbert.com

- Slides 11,18,23,27,29,34,36,37,38,39,42,43,45 D.Skourtelis.
- Slides 6,7,14,17,28,30,31,41 *Skylitzes Manuscript* 11th -12th Madrid ,National Library.
- Slide 10 Tassos Alevizos (1914-1987) *Digenis*
- Slide 24 ceramic plate 12th century
- Slide 32 Svetain *Digenis and the dragon*
- Slide 33 Nikolaos Xidopoulos www.athirma.gr
- Slide 4 Antoine Helbert,

Passion Byzantine, Byzance Architecture