

Sigillographic Evidence for the Tourkopouloi in the Byzantine Empire

Christos Stavrakos*

The presence of Turks in the Byzantine Empire and the interaction between the two sides is a much-loved subject among Byzantinists and Medievalists, whether they are archaeologists or historians.

The Turks became a matter of concern for Byzantium almost from the first moment of their appearance on the World stage. Byzantine historiography offers a wealth of information regarding eminent Turkish persons which had either peaceful relations or animosity with the Byzantine Empire. Descriptions on the battlefields along with the delegations-embassies which were responsible for treaties or deepening of relations contribute to the detailed image we have of the relationship between Byzantines and Turks.

The Byzantine Empire, like the Roman Empire before it and the Ottoman Empire which replaced it, if viewed through the lens of modern historiography, could be described as a multi-national empire. Numerous Byzantinist scholars have studied the integration of several ethnic groups into Byzantine society and aristocracy. Studies regarding the Armenians and the Georgians, the Arabs, the Bulgars and the Westerners/Franks have been published. In addition to these, in recent decades, a multitude of studies have been published on the relationship of the Turks with the Empire. But the evidence provided by the byzantine lead seals was entirely neglected.

Each of the aforementioned groups exhibited multi-faceted issues which complicated their integration into byzantine society. However, there were also characteristics shared by these ethnic groups and the Byzantines which proved to be beneficial for this endeavor.

Contemporary scholarship has identified the following problems with the integration of the Turks (both Seljuk and Ottoman) into byzantine society: Greeks and Turks have very different languages; Islam was not an acceptable religion for a Byzantine; the lifestyle of the Turkish raider contrasted markedly with that

* Prof., Byzantine History at the University of Ioannina, Ioannina/GREECE, chstavra@uoi.gr

of the Byzantine subject; Turks would seem to have been mortal enemies of the Byzantines. However, events show that the enmity between Greeks and Turks was not a permanent fixture and was certainly not an insurmountable obstacle in the integration of the latter. Malik shah, the son of Alp Arslān, the victor at the battle of Mantzikert (1071) twice proposed a Byzantine-Turkish marriage to Emperor Alexios I Komnenos, with the express objective of cementing good relations between the two sides. Later, in 1161, during the reign of Manuel II Komnenos the sultan I. Kiliđj Arslān II paid a state visit to Constantinople¹.

Despite this, there are cases of Turks which were integrated into the Byzantine Empire; a select few of them rose to important positions within the Imperial Court. At this point I believe it prudent to stress two crucial issues. Byzantine historiography, despite offering a wealth of information regarding Turks of higher social strata which achieved lofty positions within byzantine society, does not contain information regarding the anonymous lower-class Turks which were either taken captive by, or migrated into, the Byzantine Empire².

Another scholarly matter is the use of the *terminus technicus* “*Τούρκος*” by Byzantine writers. This *terminus technicus* is used to describe a number of ethnic groups from the East, including, among others, the Magyars and Khazars³. In particular, the *terminus technicus* “*Βαρδαριῶται Τούρκοι*” was descriptive of the Hungarians⁴.

An exceptionally interesting Turkic group, which has been a subject of study for contemporary Byzantine Studies, is the *Tourkopoloι*. However, the sigillographic evidence containing information on this group has not been given the attention it deserves. The Byzantine lead seals (roughly 70.000 in the great Museums of the world and in private collections; their number is constantly increasing) are

1 Ch. Brand, “The Turkish Element in Byzantium, Eleventh-Twelfth Centuries”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 43, 1989, 1 (henceforth: Brand, Turkish Element); A. Savvides, *Οι Τούρκοι και τὸ Βυζάντιο. Α' Προ-οθωμανικὰ φύλα στην Ασία καὶ τὰ Βαλκάνια*, (2nd edition), Athens 2006 (henceforth: Savvides, Turks); R. Shukurov, *The Byzantine Turks 1204-1261*, Leiden 2016 (incorporates all previous bibliography) (henceforth: Shukurov, Turks); For the role of the Turks in the Eurasian politics in the 6th and 7th C A.D. see St. Kordoses, *Οι Τούρκοι ἀνάμεσα στην Κίνα καὶ τὸ Βυζάντιο (552-659 μ.Χ.). Ο ρόλος τους στην ευρασιατικὴ πολιτικὴ, διπλωματία καὶ στρατηγικὴ*, Athens 2012.

2 Shukurov, Turks, pp 244-248.

3 Savvides, Turks, pp. 11-21; St. Kordosis, “The Depiction of a Khazar Selling Caviar in the Monastery of Vlachernae, Arta”, In: *Inscriptions in the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine History and History of Art* (Ch. Stavrakos [ed.]), Wiesbaden 2016, pp.115-121 (with further bibliography).

4 N. Oikonomidès, “Vardariotes - W.l.nd.r- V.n.nd.r: Hongrois installés dans la vallée du Vardar en 934”, *Südost-Forschungen* 32 ,1973, pp. 1-8.

a particularly trustworthy historical source, due to being a form of guarantee of the identity of the sender, in addition to fulfilling their other roles (ensuring the security or quality of dispatches).

The value of the Byzantine lead seals as a historical source is multiplied if we know the locations of their discovery. In contrast to coins, seals always follow a single, particular route of transmission: from sender to recipient. In other words, they travelled exclusively from their place of origin, that is, only from the location of the sender, to that of their discovery⁵.

The term *Tourkopouloi* in the Byzantine Empire describes Turkish soldiers in Byzantine service and later lightly armed horsemen⁶. Some researchers believe that these *Tourkopouloi* were Turkish mercenary soldiers in Greek and Latin armies⁷. It is our belief that the word *Tourkopouloi* on the seals which we will present is used as a family name, due to its appearance in the same form which all family names assume on Byzantine sphragistical inscriptions: the family name at the end of the inscription with the definitive article (ὁ / ἡ / τὸ) preceding it. The word *Τουρκόπουλος* or *Τουρκόπωλος* is compound (*Τουρκος*=Turk + *-πῶλος*=the young foal, the young offspring) and means “the son of the Turk”⁸. The existence of

- 5 See N. Oikonomides, “Τὰ μολοβδόβουλλα ὡς ἱστορική πηγή”. In: *Πρακτικά τῆς Ἀκαδημίας Ἀθηνῶν* 62 (1987 [1988]) 240-255; J.-Cl. Cheynet (in collaboration with C. Morriison), “Lieux de trouvaille et circulation des sceaux”. *Studies in Byzantine Sigillography* 2, 1990, pp. 105-136 (= J.-Cl. Cheynet, *La société byzantine. L'apport des sceaux*, I, Paris 2008, pp. 85-113).
- 6 Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium (A. Kazhdan et al. eds.), Vol. III, New York-Oxford 1991, p. 2100; P. Wittek, “Yazijioghlu 'Alī on the Christian Turks of the Dobruja”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 14, (No. 3, Studies Presented to Vladimir Minorsky by His Colleagues and Friends), 1952, pp. 639-668; see also B. Skoulatos, “L'auteur anonyme des “Gesta” et le monde byzantine”, *Byzantion* 50/2, 1980, p. 510, 512; T. Richard, “Les causes des victoires mongoles d'après les historiens occidentaux du XIIIe siècle”, *Central Asiatic Journal* 23, 1979, p. 115; M. Bartusis, “On the Problem of Smallholding Soldiers in Late Byzantium”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44, 1990, p. 14; also C. Cahen, “Note sur l'Esclavage musulman et le Devshirme ottoman, à propos de travaux récents”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 13/2, 1970, p. 216; Sp. Vryonis, Jr., “Isidore Glabas and the Turkish Devshirme”, *Speculum*, 31/3, 1956, p. 433 (footnote 2).
- 7 See A. Savvides, “Late Byzantium and Western Historiographers in Greek and Latin Armies: The Turcoples/Tourkopouloi”, In: *The Making of Byzantine History. Studies Dedicated to Donald M. Nicol* (R. Beaton, Ch. Roueché [eds.]), Aldershot 1993, pp.122-136 (with reach bibliography); A. T. Hatto, “Archery and Chivalry: A Noble Predujice”, *Modern Language Review* 35, 1940, p. 43-44, 54.
- 8 See G. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica, Sprachreste der Türkvölker in den byzantinischen Quellen*, II, Leiden, 1983, 327-328: he associates this family with the Seljuks in service of the Byzantine Empire. A. Savvides, “Some Notes on the Terms Agarenoi, Ismailitai and Sarakenoi in Byzantine Sources”, *Byzantion* 67/1, 1997, pp. 89-96.

family names which denoted the ancestry of the family were not an uncommon phenomenon in Byzantium: *Φραγγόπουλος* (son of Franks), *Σαρακηνόπουλος* (son of a Saracen), *Ἀρμενόπουλος* (son of Armenian) e.t.c Initially, the word *Τουρκόπουλος* was most likely a nickname which revealed the origins of its particular recipient. Gradually, however, it evolved into a conventional family name⁹.

There are some extant byzantine lead seals of the *Tourkopoloι*:

1. Michael Tourkopoulos, *patrikios* (first half of the 11th C)¹⁰



Fig. 1: Michael Tourkopoulos, *patrikios* (I. Jordanov, *Corpus of Byzantine Seals from Bulgaria, Vol. II, Byzantine Seals with Family Names*, Sofia, 2006, n° 726).

On the obverse there is a depiction of the bust of an Archangel (probably of Michael because he bears the same name as the owner of the seal) facing with nimbus and wings. The piece is in poor condition and we cannot see any other details from the dress, the insignia and the inscription of the Saint.

The inscription of the reverse:

+ ΚΕΡ, - ΜΙΧΑΗΛ - ΠΑΤΡΙΚΙ, - ΤΩ .ΩΡ - ΚΟΠΩΛ,

+ Κ(ύρι)ε β(οή)θει - Μιχαήλ - πατρικί(ω) - τῶ [Τ]ουρ - κοπούλ(ω)

(+ Lord help Michael Tourkopoulos, *patrikios*).

9 See Al.-K. Wassiliou-Seibt, *Corpus der byzantinischen Siegel mit metrischen Legenden. I, Einleitung, Siegellegenden von Alpha bis inklusive My* (Wiener Byzantinische Studien 28/1), Vienna 2011, n° 1078 (henceforth: Wassiliou-Seibt, *Corpus* 1).

10 I. Jordanov, *Corpus of Byzantine Seals from Bulgaria, Vol. II, Byzantine Seals with Family Names*, Sofia, 2006, n° 726; Idem, *Corpus of Byzantine Seals from Bulgaria, Vol. III*, Sofia 2009, n° 478.

Michael Tourkopoulos bears the imperial title of *πατρίκιος*, which, while being a lofty position indeed within the hierarchy of noble ranks during the early Byzantine period, had, however been significantly downgraded in the 11th century¹¹. It is worth noting that this particular seal was discovered in Northeastern Bulgaria and is now kept in the National Historical Museum of Sofia.

2. Ioannes Tourkopoulos, *hypertatos protonobelissimos* (middle – final third of the 12th C)

From this Ioannes Tourkopoulos we are aware of two sigillographical types:



Fig. 2: Collection of Dumbarton Oaks (Washington DC), n° 58.106.5673.

a) Lead seal dated by A.-K. Wassiliou-Seibt to the years 1150 and 1163¹². On the obverse there is a depiction of the Archangel Michael; he is standing and facing, and he holds in his right hand a sword and in his left a sheath.

The inscription of the reverse:

+ - ΠΕΡΒΖΙ – ΤΑΙΣΣΑΙΜΧ -.ΡΩΤΟΦΑΤΑ ἸΩΑΝΝΗΝΜΕΤ.. - .ΔΡΚΟΠΔΛΟΝ - .ΚΕΠΟΙΣ

+ Πτέρυξι – ταίς σαίς Μιχαήλ – [π]ρωτοστάτα –

Ἰωάννην με τ[όν] – [Τ]ουρκόπουλον – [σ]κέποις

11 N. Oikonomidès, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IX^e et X^e siècles*, Paris 1972, pp. 294-295 (henceforth: Oikonomidès, *Les listes*).

12 Al.-K. Wassiliou-Seibt, *Corpus der byzantinischen Siegel mit metrischen Legenden. 2, Siegellegenden von Ny bis inklusive Σφραγίς* (Wiener Byzantinische Studien 28/2), Vienna, 2016, n° 1881 (with older bibliography), (henceforth: Wassiliou-Seibt, *Corpus 2*).

(+ Michael, archangel, protect with your wings me, Ioannes Tourkopoulos)

The inscription is metrical. It consists of two conventional verses in *dodekasyllabos* which exhibit *paroxytonon* at the end and *caesura* after the fifth syllable.



Fig. 3: Collection of Dumbarton Oaks (Washington DC), n° 58.106.5677.

b) The second sphragistical type (dated between 1160-1180) has a similar iconography to the former one: a depiction of the Archangel Michael; he is standing and facing and he holds in his right hand a sword and in his left a sheath¹³. The inscription is also the same:

Ο ... Α^ΧΡ // Μ^Χ

Ὁ Ἀρχ(άγγελος) // Μ(ι)χ(αήλ)

The reverse has the following inscription:

ΠΕΡΥΞΙ – ΤΑΙΣΑΙΜΙ – ΧΑΗΛΠΡΩΤΟΦΑΤ – Α .ΩΑΝΝΗΝΜΕΤΟΝΤΩΡ –
ΚΟΠΔΛΟΝΣΚΕΠΟΙΣ – ΠΕΡΤΑΤΟΝΤΕ – ΠΡΩΤΟΝΩΡΕ – ΛΙΣΙΜΟΝ

Πτέρυξι – ταῖς σαῖς Μιχ- – αἰλ πρωτοστάτ- – α [Ι]ωάννην με τὸν Τουρ-
κόπουλον σκέποις – [ὕ]πέρτατὸν τε – πρωτονωβε- – [λ]λίσιμον

(Michael, archangel, protect with your wings me, Ioannes Tourkopoulos, *hypertatos* and *nobelissimos*).

¹³ Wassiliou-Seibt, Corpus 2, n° 1882.

The inscription is metrical. It consists of three verses in *dodekasyllabos*. The first two verses exhibit *paroxytonon* at the end and *caesura* after the fifth syllable. These two verses directly match those of the preceding sphragistical type. However, here Ioannes has added a third verse containing his title, *ὑπέρτατος πρωτονωβελίσσιμος*. Due to this, a verse with *paroxytonon* at the end was impossible. The similarities in the iconographic depiction and the inscription of the obverse allow us to connect these two sphragistical types with the same person. The conjunction *τε* was included for metrical reasons; In reality, the *ὑπέρτατος* is an attribute of the *πρωτονωβελίσσιμος* and therefore the existence of the *τε* (= and) between the two words is redundant. The existence of this detail shows, however, that Ioannis Tourkopoulos commissioned an able and talented artist and poet of epigrams to create his seal.

Ioannes Tourkopoulos, *ὑπέρτατος πρωτονωβελίσσιμος* lived in the second half of the 12th C He was honored with the title of *ὑπέρτατος πρωτονωβελίσσιμος*, a high-ranking noble title in the hierarchy of imperial dignities during that period¹⁴.

This leads to one of two possible scenarios: i) the sigillographical type without any dignities is likely earlier than that where Ioannes appears as *ὑπέρτατος νωβελίσσιμος* or, less likely ii) both are dated to the same period but the one without dignities was used only in his personal correspondence.

3. Ioannes Tourkopoulos (first half of the 14th C)

14 Oikonomidès, Les listes 293; N. Oikonomidès, “L'évolution de l'organisation administrative de l'empire byzantin au XIe siècle (1025-1118)”, *Travaux et Mémoires* 6 (1976) 125-128; see also: J.-Cl. Cheynet, “Dévaluation des dignités et dévaluation monétaire dans la seconde moitié du XIe siècle”, *Byzantion* 53, 1983 pp. 453-477.



Fig. 4: George Zacos Collection (unpublished).

There are several parallel seals that belong to the same sigillographical type¹⁵. On the obverse John the Baptist (Ioannes Prodoromos) is depicted with a cross in his left hand.

The inscription:

ΟΑΓΙ.....// Ο.....Μ..

Ὁ ἅγι[ος Ἰω(άννης)] // ὁ [Πρόδρο]μ[ος]

As is common with seals of the 14th C , the depiction of John the Baptist is not characterized by artistic adroitness. In stark contrast to the previous seals, it appears to have been fashioned haphazardly.

The inscription of the reverse:

+ΙΩΑ – ΝΘΣΦΡΑ – ΓΙΣΜΑ Τ. – ΤΘΡΚΟΠ, – ΛΟΝ

+ Ἰωά(ν)- – νου σφρά- – γισμα τοῦ – Τουρκοπ(ού)- – λου

(+ Seal of Ioannes Tourkopoulos).

The inscription of the obverse is a conventional *dodekasyllabos* with paroxytony at the end and a *caesura* after the seventh syllable.

We are aware of an Ioannes Tourkopoulos from the same period (or shortly after), who was a copyist and writer of manuscripts¹⁶. There is no available evidence,

¹⁵ Wassiliou-Seibt, *Corpus* 1, n. 1078.

¹⁶ H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, I, Munich 1978, p. 192;

however, which would allow us to identify the owner of our seals as the copyist of the 14th C Here it is worth mentioning that we are aware of several Tourkopouloi from the Palaiologan period¹⁷.

Conclusions

The members of the Tourkopouloi family from the first half of the 11th C to the first half of the 14th C which we presented have adopted in full the motifs and the expressional sigillographical traditions of Byzantine society at large, at least in their lead seals. Their language is Greek and the symbols Christian. None of them was a soldier!

The use of depictions of saints bearing the same name as them allows us the assumption either that they were Christians in their convictions or that the family had adopted Christian mannerisms (less probable), such as seeking protection from their namesake saints.

These are members of Byzantine society with imperial titles and dignities at or near the summit of the hierarchy. This is proof of i) their complete integration into Byzantine society, ii) the trust of the Emperor and the Imperial Court in the family, iii) their capability to construct an enviable legacy, iv) their retention of a family name which denoted their Turkish ancestry, v) said ancestry not being an impediment to their progress within society and ascension of the social ladder and vi) their conscious adoption of Christianity, and knowledge of the use and significance of sacred symbolism.

Finally, the discovery of the lead seal in Bulgaria shows the extent of the network of contacts (either professional or personal) of Michael Tourkopoulos and reinforces the above conclusions. It reveals a man with connections extending beyond the narrow limits of the Capital.

Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit, Vienna, 1976-1996, n^o 29184 (henceforth: PLP).

17 PLP n^{os} 29176-29184.

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