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THE 12TH-CENTURY PHYSICAL LANDSCAPE AND CLIMATE OF BULGARIA: THE CASE OF GREGORIOS ANTIOCHOS*

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Since 1018, the Bulgarian region was subjected to direct Byzantine rule for more than a century and a half. Although this period was punctuated by a series of futile rebellions, Bulgaria remained under Byzantine control until 1185, when a new and eventually successful revolutionary response to the imposition of heavy special taxes led to the formation of the “Second Bulgarian Empire”¹.

Until then, the Bulgarian *thema* (θέμα)² was valuable as a geopolitical stronghold and a safe intermediate zone between the Byzantine capital and its northern frontier³.

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¹ After Basil’s II death in 1034 taxes were steadily increased and had now to be paid in cash rather than in kind. A predatory financial policy provoked the Slavs of the Balkans to break out in many unsuccessful rebellions (1040/41, 1072/73, 1078). As a reference for these events, see A. CHRISTOFILOPOULOU, *Βυζαντινή Ιστορία Β’2* (867–1081), Thessalonike 1997, 201–201, 204–206; P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium’s Balkan Frontier A political study of the Northern Balkans 900–1204*, Cambridge 2000, 130–138, 140–143. For the 1186 revolt, see R. GUILLAND, *Byzance et les Balkans sous le règne d’Isaac II Ange (1185–1195)*, in *Actes du XIIIème Congrès International d’Études Byzantines Ochride 10–16 Septembre 1961* 2, Belgrade 1964, 126–127; R. L. WOLF, The “Second Bulgarian Empire” Its Origin and History to 1204, *Speculum* 24 (1949) 180 (=IDEM, *Studies in the Latin Empire of Constantinople* (Variorum Reprints), London 1976, III). For the Byzantine administrative practices in the area, indicatively see I. BOŽILOV, L’ administration Byzantine en Bulgarie (1018–1186): Le cas de Paristrion – Paradounavon (Paradounavis), in *Βυζάντιο και Βούλγαροι (1018–1185)* (Εθνικό Ίδρυμα Ερευνών/ Διεθνή Συμπόσια 18). Athens 2008, 91–97.

² The Bulgarian *thema* refers to the administrative unit founded in 1018 and included Sirmium (Mitrovica) and the western region of the *Paristrion thema*. Byzantine scholars of the 11th and 12th centuries account “Bulgaria” or “Moesia” as the region of the Bulgarian *thema* including the area north of the Hemus range (the Balkan Mountains/Stara Planina). As a reference for these issues, see H. J. KÜHN, *Die byzantinische Armee im 10. und 11. Jahrhundert Studien zur Organisation der Tagmata* (Byzantinische Geschichtsschreiber 2), Bienna 1991, 223–228, 233–234. For the new meaning of the term *thema* from the middle of the 11th century on, see M. GREGORIOU-IOANNIDOU, *Παρακμή και πτώση του θεματικού δεσμού. Συμβολή στην εξέλιξη της διοικητικής και της στρατιωτικής οργάνωσης του Βυζαντίου από τον 10ο αι. κ.ε.*, Thessalonike 1985, 95.

³ The empire was able to maintain control over the major arteries of communication via the vital agricultural lowlands of the Thracian plain near the Byzantine capital. On the significance of Thrace as an agricultural region, see J. T. TEALL, The Grain Supply of the Byzantine Empire 330–1025, *DOP* 13 (1959) 87–139; cf. P. MAGDALINO, The Grain Supply of Constantinople ninth–twelfth centuries, in *Constantinople and its Hinterland Papers from the Twenty-Seventh Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies Oxford April 1993*, Oxford 1995, 36.

Furthermore, this province provided the advantage of exercising immediate action against northern foes and to any developments in neighbouring countries that were against Byzantium's interests. Consequently, this province was vital to the emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180), eager to restore authority over lost territories in the Balkan peninsula, in his plans to assume geopolitical control on the area.

With a view to annexing Byzantium's territory over Dalmatia and Sirmium in the Adriatic coast and enhance the sphere of influence over Hungary and Serbia, Manuel I led his troops victoriously against the Hungarian kingdom and the rebellious Serbs from the early 1150s. Furthermore, he interfered drastically in Hungary's dynastic conflict since 1162, proposing Béla, a man faithful to his command and hence educated and trained in the byzantine court. Eventually, the sudden death of Stephen III of Hungary in March 1172 resulted in favour of Manuel, who seized the opportunity to promote the accession of Béla. His enthronement was made in peace with the presence of byzantine officials, who accompanied him from Constantinople.

At the same time on the Serbian front, the byzantine emperor issued his final military campaign to uphold the imperial interests over the proven to be unfaithful to the byzantine throne leaders. Finally, the Grand Župan of Rascia Desa (Stephen Nemanja) was defeated in 1172⁴. Manuel's triumphal victory in Serbia and regaining Dalmatia from Hungary allowed Byzantium to maintain a major political role in the Balkan region for a few more years.

While these events evolved in 1172, a Byzantine scholar, who held the titles of *imperial secretary* (βασιλικὸς γραμματέας), then *judge of the velum* (κριτής τοῦ βήλου) and ultimately *mezas droungarios* (μέγας δρουγγάριος – since 1196), Gregorios Antiochos (ca.1135–ca.1200)⁵ found himself in the Bulgarian region as a member of an army sent to tag recent developments on the Hungarian and/or Serbian border; an action linked with the aforementioned efforts of emperor Manuel I Komnenos.

During this trip to Bulgaria, Antiochos sent two letters⁶ to his teacher Eustathios Kataphloron (ca.1115–ca.1195), *master of rhetors* (μαῖστωρ τῶν ρητόρων) in Con-

⁴ On these issues, see P. MAGDALINO, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180*, Cambridge 1993 (repr. 2002), 78–83; A. CHRISTOPHILOPOULOU, *Βυζαντινή Ιστορία* Γ' 1 1081–1204, Athens 2001, 134–135. For the Hungarian and Serbian relations with Byzantium during the reign of Alexius I (1081–1118) and John II Komnenos (1118–1143), see EADEM, 39–40, 144; M. ANGOLD, *The Byzantine Empire, 1025–1204, A Political history*, London–New York 1984, 136–149, 150–160; P. STEPHENSON, Manuel I Komnenos, the Hungarian crown and the “feudal subjection” of Hungary 1162–1167, *BSI* 57/1 (1996) 33–59; IDEM, Manuel I Komnenos and Geza II: A Revised Context and Chronology for Hungaro-Byzantine Relations 1148–1155, *BSI* 55/2 (1994) 251–277.

⁵ For his life and career, see J. DARROUZÈS, Notice sur Grégoire Antiochos (1160 à 1196). *REB* 19 (1961) 61–83 [=IDEM, *Littérature et Histoire des Textes Byzantins* (Variorum), London 1972, VII]; M. LOUKAKI, *Grégoire Antiochos Éloge du Patriarche Basile Kamatèros* (Byzantina Sorbonensia 13), Paris 1996, 3–28.

⁶ Antiochos, Ep. 1, ed. J. DARROUZÈS, Deux Lettres de Grégoire Antiochos Écrites de Bulgarie vers 1173, *BSI* 23 (1962) text 278–280; Antiochos, Ep. 2, ed. IDEM, *BSI* 24 (1963) 65–73.

stantinople at the time and, since 1175, Metropolitan of Thessalonica. Both of them depict the life of a devoted scholar as a member of a marching army, a contradictive to his nature assignment, and present environmental data for the region. The authority with which Antiochos was appointed in this trip cannot be clarified. He may be associated with the byzantine officials assigned for the enthronement of Béla III in Hungary in 1172, mentioned by Joannes Cinnamos and Nicetas Choniates⁷.

Antiochos's first letter was sent from Serdica (Sofia) and the other from an unspecified area a few days journey from this city, probably on the way to Naissos (Niš), the capital of the Bulgarian *thema*. It was written during the summertime of 1172 or most likely the following year, since he mentions fruit of late summer and winter harvest, which indicates that he should have been in the area at least for a half a year⁸.

The final destination of the Byzantine army cannot be clarified. It is likely that it headed to Serbia and/or Hungary, coming from Constantinople via the main road across the Thracian plain, known as the *Imperial road* (βασιλική ὁδός). This was the most important trans-Balkan artery, which traversed the Thracian plain, connecting Constantinople with Adrianople (Edirne), Phillippopolis (Plovdiv), Serdica (Sofia) and, onwards to the north-west, with Naissos (Niš) and Singidunum (Belgrade), towards the heart of Europe⁹. After reaching Serdica the army marched to the north-west, following the recent political developments of the time, presented shortly above.

All information concerning the climate is derived from Antiochos's first letter, although not entirely preserved, which relates the environmental characteristics of the

⁷ Joannis Cinnamos, *Epitome*, ed. A. MEINEKE (CSHB), Bonn 1836, 286.20–287.1; Nicetas Choniates, *Historia*, ed. J. VAN DIETEN (CFHB 11/1), Berlin 1975, 170.7. On his commentary, J. DARROUZÈS, (Antiochos, Ep. 1, 276–277) assumes that he was entrusted with judicial responsibilities, similar to his duties in the byzantine court. For Antiochos's relationship with Eustathios, see SIDERAS, *Der unedierte*, 155–158.

⁸ Antiochos, Ep. 2, 16–20; cf. the commentary of DARROUZÈS in Antiochos, Ep. 1, 277–278; 281, no. 5.

⁹ The *Imperial road* (βασιλική ὁδός or, for the Romans, the *Via Militaris*) with north-west/south-east direction, through the course of Hevros (Maritsa) river connected many cities in the Thracian plain. For the *Imperial road*, see A. AVRAMEA, Land and Sea Communications Fourth–Fifteenth centuries, in *The Economic History of Byzantium: from the Seventh to the Fifteenth Century* 1, Washington D.C. 2002, 65–66; C. ASDRACHA, *La Région des Rhodopes aux XIIIe et XIVe Siècles: Étude de Géographie Historique*, Athen 1976, 30–34; P. SOUSTAL, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos)* (TIB 6), Wien 1991, 57–58; D. OBOLENSKY, *The Byzantine Commonwealth, Eastern Europe, 500–1453*, London 1971, 17; K. BELKE, Roads and Travel in Macedonia and Trace in the Middle and Late Byzantine Period, in *Travel in the Byzantine World, Papers from the Thirty-Fourth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, April 2000* (Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies 10), Birmingham 2002, 74 no. 3, 87–90; M. NYSTAZOPOULOU-PELEKIDOU, Το Οδικό Δίκτυο της Χερσονήσου του Αίμου και η Σημασία του κατά τους Μέσους Χρόνους (Γενικές Επισημάνσεις και Πρόταση Έρευνας), in *Δρόμοι και Κόμβοι της Βαλκανικής από την Αρχαιότητα στην Ενιαία Ευρώπη, Πρακτικά, Αριστοτέλειο Πανεπιστήμιο Θεσσαλονίκης*, Thessalonike 1988, 157–158 (=ΕΑΔΕΜ, *Βυζάντιο και Σλάβοι – Ελλάδα και Βαλκάνια (6ος–20ος αι.)*, Athens 2001, no. 3, 53–54).

upper Thracian plain. Antiochos complained that the climate is considerably cold¹⁰, seasons are not distinguished one from the other, which was regarded as “season’s abnormal phenomenon”¹¹. Cold temperatures are generally prevailing, with glacial cold, foggy mornings and frequent rainfalls during the day, even at summertime¹². Serdica is generally portrayed as a *dyschemeri* (δυσχείμερη) region and is surrounded by what Antiochos interpreted as a barren land, because he could see neither trees, orchards and vineyards nor even songbirds¹³. “A country with no trees and gardens and a field of utter destruction,” he writes distinctively to Eustathios¹⁴.

These climatic characteristics are considered responsible for the lack of harvest and for what seemed to him as an infertile land. Antiochos complains that the provisions were scarce and shifted from distant parts of the region to meet the needs of the army and as a result they were bad and spoiled. The poor quality of the fruit provoked the rhetorical power of the byzantine scholar, who varied ironical, facetious comments for the value of apples, pears, grapes and figs on both letters.

The fruit was soft, ripped and rotten, the apples mellowed and wrinkled, the pears bruised, as if they exercised *pangration* in the baskets, the figs were dried and squeezed, losing any ‘sense of balance’, and grapes resulted in single berries and pressed almost in a must¹⁵.

Antiochos continued with derogatory and sarcastic comments on the nutritional quality of bread. Usually it was scarce but, if found, rocklike and, with no other alternative, they had to act “like pelicans” and avoid chewing. Despite that, it was musty, kneaded with inferior quality cereals, full of ashes, worthy of the dead and, in broad

¹⁰ Antiochos, Ep. 1, 11–14: “Ἐν τε γὰρ ἀκμαίῳ τῷ παρ’ ἡμῖν θέρει κρυμὸς ἐνταῦθα καὶ πάχνη καὶ πηγυλίς, καὶ χειμῶνος τὸ ψύχος ἀντικρυς Τάρταρος. Ὁ δ’ ὑπὲρ κεφαλῆς ἀήρ ἀεὶ συννεφῆς (...).”

¹¹ Antiochos, Ep. 1, 7–11: (...) καὶ μάλιστα τὸ περὶ αὐτὴν (τὴν Βουλγαρίαν) τῆς ὥρας ἀνώμαλον, ὡς εἰκέναι τοῦτο μόνον τῆς οἰκουμένης μέρος μὴ οἰκείσθαι θέρει καὶ μετοπώρῳ καὶ ἔαρ, μόνῳ μὲν οὖν χειμῶνι τῇ πικροτέρᾳ ὥρῳ καὶ ἀλγεινοτέρᾳ.

¹² Antiochos, Ep. 1, 16–24: Αἱ δὲ νεφέλαι, πολλάκις τῆς ἡμέρας εἰς τοκετοὺς ὑδάτων ῥηγνύμεναι (...) κἂν εἰ λάθῃ ποτὲ φανείσῃ ῥοδοδάκτυλος ἠώς, αὐτίκα μάλα, τοῖς ὀρώσιν ὡσπερ φθονοῦσα τῆς θεάς (...), ἐπεσύρατο νέφη χιτώνιον τοῖς δακτύλοις καὶ μέλασι φαρέεσι χροῖα καλὸν ἐκαλύψατο. For the same issue, see above no. 10, 11.

¹³ Antiochos, Ep. 1, 28–31; 52–59.

¹⁴ Antiochos, Ep. 1, 59–60: Ἄδενδρος γὰρ ἡ χώρα καὶ ἀκηπος καὶ πεδῖον μονουοχί, κατὰ τὸν προφήτην, ἀφανισμοῦ. Cf. Ep. 2, 21–25: μὴδὲ τοῖς ἐκδήμοις ἡμῖν φανείσαν ἀγαθὴν ξεναγόν (τὴν Βουλγαρίαν), ἀλλὰ τοῦναντίον καὶ τὰ πάντων διαθεμένην οἰκτρότατα, «ἀφανισμοῦ πεδῖον» (...).

¹⁵ Antiochos, Ep. 1, 39–50: Εἰ δ’ αὐτοῦ που καὶ ὀπώρας ἐντύχης, ἃς ἐκ τῶν πέλας ἡπείρων ὀπόσα καὶ αἰχμαλώτους εἰς τὴν χώραν ἀπάγουσιν οἱ ὀπωρίζομενοι (...) τὰ μῆλα δὲ ῥυτίδων ὄλα καὶ ὡς παρὰ δεσμωτηρίοις γεγρακότα ταῖς πήραις καὶ τοῖς φορμοῖς. (...) τοὺς ἀπίους, ἀτεχνῶς παγκρατιστὰς τῇ πρὸς ἀλλήλους συγκρούσει πύξ εἰκότας διαγωνίσασθαι (...) τὰ σύκα, ἔγγυς ἰσχάδας καὶ ὡς πρὸς τὴν ἀνυσθεῖσαν μακρὰν ὀδοιπορίαν ἰλιγιάσαντα, (...) τοὺς βότρυας, τὰς ῥάγας ἰσχνούς καὶ ἄτερ ληνοῦ καὶ ποδῶν τεθλιμένους (...). Ep. 2, 37–68: (...) μήτε σικυὸς ἡμῖν νεόδρεπτος εἰς χεῖρας ἀφίκτο (...) (μῆλον) ἀπὸ τῆς ἐνεγκούσης χώρας κικλήσκειται (...) οὔτε δὲ σύκον ἢ ῥόαν, ἀρτιδρεπὴ καὶ ταῦτα καὶ νεαρά (...).

terms, unfit for consumption¹⁶.

As for the wine, it was also insufficient, spoiled, sour, cloudy and difficult to digest¹⁷; while the baked, salted or smoked fish, which Archbishop of Bulgaria at Ochrid, Theophylact (1088/92–1108), used to send in generous quantities as an exquisite delicacy, a gift along with his letters¹⁸, seemed to Antiochos rather rotten¹⁹.

He is quite surprised that fish was not appreciated by the locals²⁰, mostly described as impoverished pastorals²¹, who valued cheese and dairy instead, for which Antiochos focuses not in their quality this time, but in the enormous quantities and their cheap price²². He distinctively mentions that he couldn't even concentrate, due to the continuous bleat of sheep and cattle or the grunts of piglets²³; a comment

¹⁶ Antiochos, Ep. 1, 63–65. Ep. 2, 26–33; 85–131.

¹⁷ Antiochos, Ep. 1, 65–67. Ep. 2, 33–36; 132–145. Local wines and bread are often criticised in Byzantine Correspondence. Indicatively see the comments of the Metropolitan of Athens, Michael Choniates, concerning the awful flavour of the wine and the inferior quality of the bread he tasted in Athens at the end of 12th century. See *Michael Choniates*, ed. F. KOLOVOU, *Michael Choniates Epistulae* (CFHB 41), Berolini et Novi Eboraci 2001, Ep. 19.14–19; Ep. 8.16–17. For the wine, cf. M. Choniates's poem *Theano*: S. LAMPROS, *Μιχαήλ Ακομινάτου του Χωνιάτου τα Σωζόμενα Β'*, Athens 1880 (repr. 1968), 378. 92.

¹⁸ For Theophylact's similar letters, see ed. P. GAULTIER, *Theophylacte d'Achrida, Discours, Traités, Poésies* (CFHB 16/1), Thessalonike 1980, 166–173, 388–393, 520–521, 550–551; cf. M. MULLETT, *Theophylact of Ochrid: Reading the Letters of a Byzantine Archbishop*, Birmingham 1997, 297, 298, 321, 335, 340–341.

¹⁹ Antiochos, Ep. 1, 67–68.

²⁰ Antiochos (see below no. 22) is very surprised, ignoring that this is a usual practice for people of mountainous areas. This comment reveals the great appreciation Byzantines had for fish and thus portrays a cultural comparison with the food practices in the Mediterranean littoral. Non consuming fish, despite its availability, is rather surprising to the Byzantine scholars. In the beginning of the 13th century, the Metropolitan of Athens, Michael Choniates, is amazed by the fact that the inhabitants of Kea, in the Cyclades islands, do not eat fish and complain that they rely on meat and cheese instead, as if they were highlanders. Michael Choniates, ed. F. KOLOVOU, *Michael Choniates, Epistulae*, 115. 66–68; 77–80. For the appreciation of fish by the Byzantines, indicatively see A. HARVEY, *Economic Expansion in the Byzantine Empire, 900–1200*, Cambridge 1989, 170–171.

²¹ Antiochos, Ep. 1, 25–28; 77–80.

²² Antiochos, Ep. 1, 71–76: Καὶ – ὁ δὴ χεῖριστον, ὅτι φαυλότατον – ἰχθύων πλείονος ἐκτιμᾶται ἢ βούς, τὸ τῶν τετραπόδων ἀδρότατον· τοῦτο μόνον εὐωνον κομίζειν οἶδεν ὁ τόπιος ὄλους μὲν γαυλοὺς καὶ κισσύβια πλήρη γάλακτος ἀποδοδομένα δραχμῶν, ὄλους τε ταρσοὺς τυροῦ πλήθοντας ἀρτιπαγοὺς καὶ σαλεύοντος ἀσσαριῶν τιμωμένους καὶ λεπτῶν κερμάτων καὶ ὀβολῶν, κινιβρώντας καὶ τούτους καὶ πολλῶ τῷ γράσῳ λυποῦντας τοῦ προσφερομένου τὴν αἴσθησιν.

²³ Antiochos, Ep. 1, 60–62: Κἄν τῷ ποτε συνείροντι λόγον ἀνεῖναι σε δέοι τὸ οὐς, ἔνθεν μὲν βληχὴ προβάτων παρενοχλεῖ, ἐκείθεν δὲ μηκασμὸς αἰγῶν καὶ βοῶν ἐτέρωθεν μύκημα καὶ ἄλλοθεν δελφάκων ἐκ σοφεοῦ γρυλιασμός. Living in the countryside was generally considered very diminishing for the life of Byzantine scholars. A similar note was made in 1229 by the Metropolitan of Naupaktos and Arta, Ioannes Apocaucos, in a letter addressed to the Archbishop of Bulgaria, Demetrios Chomatianos. Apocaucos was persecuted from the Bishopric and had to remain

which illustrates a striking image of the countries abundant livestock production. These extensive figures presented here (especially of expensive animals, such as cattle) indicate the region's economic and agricultural potential and would imply that the local markets were able to sustain a satisfactory, if not extensive, trade²⁴.

However, it's evident that these letters represent the widely known and variably expressed disappointment or frustration of the élite scholars of Constantinople, for any area outside the cultural environment of the capital, even for Byzantium's main provinces²⁵. Consequently, these comments should be regarded as a notable example of a comparative presentation of the cultural differences of the two countries, presented with an emphasis towards the superiority of the Byzantines along with nostalgia for the capital. In the case of Gregorios Antiochos these feelings are reinforced with dislike either for his involuntary and unfortunate expatriation²⁶ or even prej-

in the countryside of Aitoloakarnania in south-eastern Greece. He complains that he had to live among animals, forgetting his own name hearing their constant and loud outcries. See Ioannes Apocaukos, ed. I. DELIMARIS, *Άπαντα Ιωάννου Αποκαύκου*, Naupaktos 2000, 158; (ed. A. KERAMEUS, Συμβολή εις την Ιστορίαν της αρχιεπισκοπής Αχρίδος, in *Recueil de Mémoires en l'honneur de l'académicien B. J. Lamanskij* I, S. Petersburg 1907, 247–248). Cf. K. LAMBROPOULOS, *Ιωάννης Αποκαύκος Συμβολή στην Έρευνα του Βίου και του Συγγραφικού Έργου του*, (Ιστορικές Μονογραφίες 6), Athens 1988, 203.

²⁴ Bulgaria had a satisfactory, if not surplus, agricultural and livestock production and had been trading with Byzantium and its capital. The army, marching in their own territory, was obviously being supplied from local markets along the *Imperial road*. For the army's supply, see J. HALDON, Feeding the army: Food and transport in Byzantium ca.600–1100, in *Feast, Fast or Famine, Food and Drink in Byzantium* (Byzantina Australiensia 15), Brisbane 2005, 85; IDEM, *Warfare State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565–1204*, UK–USA 1999, 167. For Bulgaria's agriculture and livestock production, see D. ANGELOV, Die bulgarischen Länder und das bulgarische Volk inden Grenzen des byzantinischen Reiches in IX.–XII. Jahrhundert (1018–1185) (Sozial-ökonomische Verhältnisse), in *Proceedings of the XIIIth International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Oxford 5–10 September 1966*, London–New York–Toronto 1967, 163–164. For the significance of cattle in an agricultural community, indicatively see A. E. LAIOU, *Peasant Society in the Late Byzantine Empire: a Social and Demographic Study*, Princeton – New Jersey 1977, 59–60; 161–162; 254–255.

²⁵ All comments mentioned above are made as a part of the presentation of Antiochos's life "in exile". These letters have the same characteristic style with many others sent either from foreign lands or Byzantium's main provinces. Scholars often complain about being sent away from the capital, *the promise land* (τὴν τῆς ἐπαγγελίας γῆν) as pointed by Antiochos himself (Ep. 2, 397) and away from their beloved friends. They often mention the deterioration of their lives or the intellectual, cultural and economic poverty of their sees for many reasons (indicatively, see above no. 17, 20, 23). For these issues, see M. E. MULLET, In Peril on the Sea: Travel Genres and the Unexpected, in *Travel in the Byzantine World*, Aldershot 2002, 259–284 (=EADEM, *Letters, Literacy and Literature in Byzantium* (Variorum Collected Studies), Ashgate 2007, XIV); EADEM, Originality in the Byzantine Letter: The case of Exile, in *Originality in Byzantine Literature Art and Music*, Oxford 1995, 39–58 [=EADEM, *Letters, Literacy and Literature*, IV]; cf. MAGDALINO, *Manuel*, 135–136; IDEM, Literary Perception of Everyday Life in Byzantium: Some General Considerations, *BSI* 47 (1987) 28–38, for Antiochos's case 30–31.

²⁶ A. KAZHDAN–S. FRANKLIN (*Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Cen-*

udice for the Bulgarians²⁷, but most of all because of the condition of the country rather than the hardships of his life abroad.

Nevertheless, the extent to which these environmental observations hold reliability is yet to be revealed. Denuded from Antiochos's offensive personal criticism, these comments about the landscape and climate are, in fact, quite realistic. What the byzantine scholar interpreted as lagging intermediate seasons, with the winter as the only one prevailing, is indeed what the general climate of the upper Thracian plain and the mountainous outskirts of Serdica would seem to a Mediterranean resident.

Bulgaria is located at the boundary between the Continental and Mediterranean climate, representing a transitional zone in the Thracian plain. Moving onwards to the north-west from the coastline, in the upper part of the plain, the climate is transitional-Continental and the influence of the Mediterranean climate in the district is too weak²⁸. Typical of this region is dry, hot summers and considerably mild win-

turies, Cambridge 1984, 223) attribute Antiochos's complaints about the deterioration of his life to a series of involuntary choices he had to make on his attempt to elevate in the imperial administration. Quite rightly Kazhdan points out that "his whole life, like most of his writings, stands as a monument to compromise and conformity". C. GALATARIOΤΟΥ [Travel and Perception in Byzantium, *DOP* 47 (1993) 240] takes this matter further and has presented an interesting psychological approach on Antiochos through these two letters. She claims that he was "projecting on the external world his own internal desolation and despair" and thus the factual reality of his writings is rather limited. Despite all, in this paper we will attempt to prove that his reports are much more realistic than they seem.

²⁷ For the perception of Bulgarians in Byzantine sources, see A. KOLIA-DERMITZAKI, Η Εικόνα των Βουλγάρων και της Χώρας τους στις Βυζαντινές Πηγές του 11ου και 12ου αιώνα, in *Βυζάντιο και Βούλγαροι (1018–1185)* (Εθνικό Ίδρυμα Ερευνών/Διεθνή Συμπόσια 18), Athens 2008, 59–89; E. ΠΑΠΑΓΙΑΝΝΙ, Οι Βούλγαροι στις επιστολές του Θεοφυλάκτου Αχρίδας, in *Πρακτικά Ι΄ Πανελληνίου Ιστορικού Συνεδρίου (Μάιος 1989)*, Thessalonike 1989, 59–72; cf. M. MULLETT, Byzantium and the Slavs: The view of Theophylact of Ochrid, *ΓΣΥΛΙΣΒΠ* 6 [87] (1994) 55–70. For the perception of Byzantines about foreigners in 12th century, see A. ΛΑΙΟΥ, The For-eigner and the Stranger in 12th century Byzantium: Means of Propitiation and Acculturation, in *Fremde der Gesellschaft Historische und sozialwissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zur Differenzierung von Normalität und Fremdheit*, Frankfurt 1991, 71–97; *Strangers to Themselves: the Byzantine Outsider* (Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies 8), Aldershot–Burlington 2000.

²⁸ The Hemus range (the Balkan Mountains/Stara Planina) run across the Bulgarian land and act as a natural barrier between the two climatic zones. This mountain range forms a physical boundary of the air masses from the north, while the Rila-Rhodope Mountains in the southern part of the region are the northernmost point of the Mediterranean climate. The intermediate zone created between the two mountain ranges, the Thracian plain, which extends to the east towards the Black Sea and south-east to the Sea of Marmara, is formed by the two climatic sites. In the southern parts and near the coastline, in the lower Thracian plain, the climate is Mediterranean whereas gradually becoming Continental through the upper part and in hinterland. It is worth noting that the northern limit of the olive tree is in the central Thracian plain. Cf. ASDRACHA, *Rhodopes*, 18; SOUSTAL, *Thrakien*, 57–58; OBOLENSKY, *Commonwealth*, 6–8; cf. M. F. HENDY, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c. 300–1450*, Cambridge 1985, 21–25.

ters, which could occasionally become severe, on increasing altitudes or due to the proximity to the mountains. Frequent rainfalls, morning fogs and mists and intense temperature variations as night falls are a result of the predominating cold air masses from the mountains; phenomena pronounced considerably during summertime.

As for the image of the landscape, it can be certain that Antiochos describes what he saw along the *Imperial road* towards Serdica, through the upper Thracian plain: open expanses of lowland alternating with low hills, slight slopes and mountain country, cut by the river gorge of Hevros (Maritsa) and its tributary streams. The higher parts of the mountain slopes in the Hemus and the Rila-Rhodope range are usually covered by coniferous trees. The contemporary landscape alongside the Hevros river (and, subsequently, the *Imperial road*, which follows its course through the Thracian plain) is formed by the low hills of the Sredna Gora range, which are mainly weathered, often cleared of tree cover, therefore extensively eroded and used mainly for livestock.

Sredna Gora, which runs in parallel to the south of the Balkan Mountains and along the course of Hevros river, are a series of lower mountain ranges dissected by individual valleys. To the south-west, they are bounded with Rila-Rhodope Mountains. At this point, the Imperial Road, following the course of Hevros to the north-west, leaves behind the open expanses of the upper Thracian plain, crosses a narrow and mountainous pass, the defile called *Sukeis* (a fortress known as *Trajan's Gate* or *claustra Sancti Basilii*), to meet an upland, oval basin in which Serdica lies²⁹. Thus, the landscape, if not the climate, of this particular area could be unsuitable for cultivating or even hosting migratory songbirds, such as the nightingales and swallows he mentions; surely a colourful and vivid anamnesis of Constantinople's beautiful surroundings.

According to the Byzantine envoy, the state of the rivers of Bulgaria is described as "muddy swamps", seemingly suitable only for the breeding of frogs and leeches. The lakes and rivers of Bulgaria are referred to as "filthy and full of clay", however it is noteworthy that the soils of the riverside and valley of Hevros are, indeed, heavy and covered with alluvial meadows with a high content of organic material, such as clay and humus (the type of "dark-black earth"). In wintertime, due to intensive water flow, these soils are poorly drained and result in swamps. In summertime, they gradu-

²⁹ For the landscape in these areas, see: AVRAMEA, *Land and Sea*, 65; OBOLENSKY, *Commonwealth*, 20–21; ASDRACHA, *Rhodopes*, 3–18; SOUSTAL, *Thrakien*, 52–55. For detailed physico-geographical analysis of the landscape, based on modern and palaeobotanical data, see R. DENNELL, *Early Farming in South Bulgaria from the VI to the III Millennia B.C.* (British Archaeological Reports/ Supplementary 45), Great Britain 1978, 76–80; B. I. GAYDARSKA, *Landscape, Material Culture and Society in Prehistoric South East Bulgaria*, (British Archaeological Reports 1618), Great Britain 2007, 43–54; T. ПОПОВА, *Plant Environment of Man between 6000 and 2000 B.C. in Bulgaria* (British Archaeological Reports 2064), Great Britain 2010, 51. These three studies include an extensive presentation of the country's climatic, geological and physical characteristics and, therefore, are quoted in this paper, even though they are focused in pre-historic settlements in the region.

ally dry up and crack open, due to the extensive water evaporation, a typical result of the opposition of the two climatic zones. In these areas water usually forms flooded terraces covered with swamp vegetation, which were seen and recorded by the Byzantine scholar along the way to Serdica as lakes full of *vorvoros*³⁰.

In the second letter, written some time after the first, Antiochos continues in similar style, mentioning the same aspects of the aforementioned “depressing” nutritional diet, which he had to bear. Moreover, in this letter there is an interesting and sharp description of the landscape, which may suggest an attempt to define more accurately the area represented.

The byzantine envoy complained that he had to endure continuous mountain interchanges and valleys switching to ravines and canyons. Human presence was limited to a few villages built in the steep mountain slopes. The land was covered with low vegetation, probably a scrub land, and seemed unproductive³¹. Furthermore, he records acute water shortage in some places, which led to water being transported from other areas to supply the marching army³².

Leaving Serdica and heading to the north-west, the traveler leaves behind the upland basin in which Serdica lies, and then the mountainous element becomes stronger and after three elevated narrow mountain-passes, he is met by the course of the Nišava river. The appearance of the landscape until then is as before: weathered in the lower altitudes and hills, covered with low vegetation, whereas forested towards the mountain peaks of the big massifs of mount Vitoshka and the Rila-Rhodope, seen from afar. Reaching the wider hinterland of Naissos, along the course of Nišava, the landscape becomes gradually densely wooded, quite different from the one presented

³⁰ Antiochos, Ep. 1, 68–71: Εἰσι δὲ καὶ λιμνῶν καὶ ποταμῶν νεαλῆ βροβόρου πλήρη καὶ ταῦτα καὶ ἰλυώδη καὶ χάζειν ποιοῦντα τὸν προσφερόμενον. In these places there are no lakes. Antiochos had probably in mind the lakes of the south-western part of the region near Ochrid. Its worth noting that in the upper Thracian plain there is a unique natural feature of the land forming hills of mud, which modern scientists refer to as ‘mud-volcanoes’. The present day landscape along these areas and generally the valley of Hevros river has been altered due to the mining activities of the large energy complex situated in the area, the Maritsa-Iztok. For a detailed analysis on these issues, see POPOVA, *Plant Environment*, 52–53; GAYDARSKA, *Landscape*, 43–54.

³¹ Antiochos, Ep. 2, 213–127: κἀντεῦθεν καὶ τραχεινοῖς χωρίοις ἐμπεριπατοῦμεν καὶ ἀποκρήμνοις (. . .); 220–231: Καὶ ὡς ἐπὶ πελάγους ἀστατοῦμεν, ἄλλοτε ἄλλη μετασκηνοῦμενοι καὶ ὁσημέραι μεταφερόμενοι καὶ οὐ μόνον τὰ ἐκατέρωθεν τῆς τριβομένης ὁδοῦ πελάγους δίκην κυμαίνοντα πυροφόρα ἢ χορτοφόρα λήια παραμειβόντες, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς κατὰ τόπους ὑψοῦ κορυφουμένοις ὄρεσι καὶ βουνοῖς καὶ ταῖς εἰς βᾶθος διηρημέναις κοιλάσι καὶ χαράδραις καὶ φάραγγιν, ὅσα καὶ κύμασιν ἐς αὐτὰς νεφέλας μετεωρίζομένοις καὶ αὐτὰς ἐξ αὐτὰς ἀβύσσους χασματουμένοις (. . .).

³² Antiochos, Ep. 2, 146–162: Εἰσι γάρ τινες τῶν χωρῶν σὺν γε τῇ λοιπῇ σφῶν ἀκαρπία τε καὶ λυπρότητι οὕτω καὶ δυστυχίασαι λειψυδρεῖν, ὡς μηδεμιᾶ τὸ παράπαν διοικεῖσθαι φλεβὶ καὶ τὸ πολυδίψιον Ἄργος ἀποκρύπτειν εἰς ἀνικμότητα. (. . .) Ὅθεν οὐτε αὐτόχθον αὐτοῖς ἀποβλύζει τὸ ὕδωρ καὶ ἰθαγενὲς καὶ ἐγγώριον ἀπὸ γνησίων φλεβῶν, οὐτε ἄλλοθεν ἦκει ξένον καὶ ἔπηλυ, ἐπ’ ἄλλοδαπῆς μὲν ἴσχον τὰς ἐκβολὰς κάκειθεν πρώτως ἀναπιδύον, αὐτοῖς δὲ παροδεῦον καὶ παρεπιδημοῦν καὶ μέτοιικον ἐπερχόμενον καὶ τὸ οἰκείον νᾶμα τούτοις κυχρῶν καὶ δανείζον εἰς χάριν οὐμενοῦν ἔντοκα.

in this letter³³.

In the second text Antiochos is supposed to have outlined an area a few miles to the north-west of Serdica towards Naissos. Therefore, it should be considered as a valid indication of Antiochos's whereabouts, when he states that he is being "around Serdica" (περὶ τὴν Σαρδικὴν)³⁴ when he writes this letter.

Nevertheless, from another point of view, these observations could refer to a wider area, from of the upper Thracian plain described above until this north-western suburbia of Serdica. Hence, the second letter may illustrate a broader description of the Bulgarian land and not necessarily reveal the exact location that was written. Albeit, these details would still be accurate, and would explain his reports about the water shortage in these areas during the summer. The surface water in the climatologically transitional area aforementioned reaches its minimum flow in August, due to extensive evaporation, and consequently some places could, indeed, experience water inadequacy³⁵.

The region between Singidunum (Belgrade) and Serdica, through Naissos, has been mentioned in the texts of the First (1096), the Second (1147) and the Third (1189/90) Crusade. This zone is referred to as deserted, probably due to the enormous and troublesome crusade march or even for political purposes to discourage intruders³⁶. Odo of Deuil, who is the most descriptive, accounted dense and extensive forests and places suitable for vineyards and cereal crops, for which it was commented that they could be watered from nearby streams³⁷. Obviously, this is a quite different

³³ This densely wooded area is suggested by the twelfth century Byzantine toponymic *Dendra*. HENDY, *Studies*, 38; cf. STEPHENSON, *Balkan Frontier*, 267. For the image of the landscape, see OBOLENSKY, *Commonwealth*, 19–20.

³⁴ For Antiochos's reference, see above no. 8.

³⁵ GAYDARSKA, *Landscape*, 57.

³⁶ MAGDALINO (*Manuel*, 134–136) assumes that the events of the 1150s in the Balkan front could result in "maintaining a deep intermediate zone between the Danube and the Mediterranean littoral for at least the northern part" to discourage invaders. He suggested that the second letter depicts these conditions and concludes that "it is unlikely that this zone extended any further south than Niš" probably estimating that the second letter was written around this area, which was depicted in the Crusader texts (for their references, see below no. 37). Cf. HENDY, *Studies*, 38. Based on Antiochos's report and the points made here, maybe this zone should include at least the southern wider suburbia of Niš and could even extend further to the south.

³⁷ Odo of Deuil, *De profectione Ludovici VII in Orientem*, ed. V. G. BERRY (Records of Civilization: Sources and Studies 42), New York 1948, 30–32: (...) Quod de illa superest, ut ita dixerim, pratum est nemorosum vel nemus pabulosum (...) Non plana iacet, nec montibus asperatur; sed inter colles vineis et segetibus habiles rivis et fontibus lucidissimis irrigatur. Carret fluviis; cf. William of Tyre, *Willelmi Tyrensis Chronicon*, ed. R. B. C. HUYGENS (Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievals 63–63A), Turnhout 1986, 166; E. A. BABCOCK–A. C. KREY, *A History of Deeds Beyond the Sea* 1, New York 1943, 100. For the conditions accounted by the Crusaders in these areas, also see Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana*, ed. S. B. EDINGTON (Oxford medieval texts), Oxford 2007, 10–11, 26–27; for the Anony-

description from the one Antiochos presents.

It seems that the two reports present the contradictive elements of the physical structure of the landscape between Serdica and Naissos mentioned above. The Crusaders, marching on the same road and the same season as Antiochos, although from Singidunum (Belgrade) to the south-east, recorded the dense forest cover of these areas. Antiochos, following the opposite direction, to the north-west, witnessed the stripped of forest and mountainous surrounding landscape of Serdica before meeting the wooded plains of Naissos. Conversely and as already mentioned, it is possible that the generic depiction of the landscape in Antiochos's letter involves an extensive area to and from the upland basin of Serdica, which could also support a hypothesis that the second letter may have been written on the way back to Constantinople.

In any case, we should keep in mind that this second letter is quite extensive (a little less than 400 lines) and could not have been written at once under the conditions of a marching army and the preoccupations the author had during the journey. So Antiochos could have, more or less, intended to give to Eustathios the general idea of what is referred to as Bulgarian land, more eager to show his way of living and demonstrate his rhetorical skills, rather than write an actual travelogue.

It's a wonder that in the second letter he starts reviewing the fruit, the bread and the wine and, shortly thereafter, returns to the same issues, using bigger and more elaborate rhetorical schemes. It seems that the letter was written partially, if not at once, during a camp or in a more civilized environment³⁸. The text structure creates the impression that after finding a more convenient place and time, Antiochos decided a more caustic return on the same issues. Besides, he mentioned that he could not get involved with his scholarly activities during the campaign and was about to go mad dealing all day with the stubborn horses and mules of the army³⁹.

As for his comments about the nutritional aspects of "the malicious diet"⁴⁰, which he had to tolerate, in all likelihood have nothing to do with the prosperity of the land. These soils in the Bulgarian region are considered very fertile, though quite thick to cultivate by hand and for this reason they probably used cattle. Cereals, oat and barley can be produced adequately in the area described, especially in the valleys and upland basins, where the earth is more stable than in the river beds. Further-

mus called Ansbert, *Historia de expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, ed. G. A. LOUD (Monumenta Germaniae Historica), 27–71; cf. G. A. LOUD, *The Crusade of Frederick Barbarossa. The History of the Expedition of the Emperor Frederick and Related Texts* (Crusade Texts in Translation 19), Ashgate 2010, 65. On the political events during this period, see C. TYERMAN, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades*, London 2006, 97–98, 317–18, 422–423; F. DUNCALE, *The First Crusade: Clermont to Constantinople*, in *A history of the Crusades* 1, Philadelphia 1955, 259, 261–261, 484; E. N. JOHNSON, *The Crusades of Frederick Barbarossa and Henry VI*, in *A history of the Crusades* 2, Philadelphia 1962, 94–95.

³⁸ Cf. the commentary of DARROUZÈS in Antiochos, Ep. 2, 75, no. 3.

³⁹ Antiochos, Ep. 2, 226–227. For his life during the campaign, see Antiochos, Ep. 2, 163–205; 235–395.

⁴⁰ Antiochos, Ep. 1, 63–65: Τό γε μὴν μοχθηρόν τῆς διαίτης κομιδῆ σχετικώτερον.

more, the climate and the rich in organic material land can produce apples, pears, grapes and figs of excellent quality.

However, it is quite possible that the poor condition of the food provisions could have been caused by a number of reasons; as in the case of fruit, the quality of such products is compromised when exposed and transferred by pack animals through rather difficult mountainous passes. Apart from that, it may have been a circumstantial occurrence, suggestive of a recent physical catastrophe, or may even illustrate the lack of extensive trade of some agricultural products, as an after effect of the political, fiscal or military circumstances of the past⁴¹.

Even so, these comments reveal a certain bias for the Bulgarians and their country, which is reflected in extensive rhetorical comparisons on the nutritional facts and cultural practises of the two countries. After all, the Bulgarian land has been considered fertile and with products renowned for their quality in Byzantium⁴²; a fact which Antiochos himself seems not to ignore and was willing to state, even in an ironic tone, by using an expression of a certain proverbial meaning when mentioning “the goods of Serdica” (τὰ ὠραῖα τῆς Σαρδικῆς), which fall pray to the cold and the excessive ice of these lands⁴³.

To sum up, despite a rather critical review, Antiochos illustrates a true picture of the environmental and climate data of the region at the time of his visit. The Byzantine scholar describes the climatic characteristics of the transitional zone formed in the

⁴¹ KOLIA-DERMITZAKI (Η Εικόνα των Βουλγάρων, 84, 86–87) very reasonably suggests that the 11th century revolts, the raids of the Petsenegs on the 11th and Cumans on the 12th century, the march of three Crusades from the region as well as the continuous recruitment of the byzantine army with Bulgarians probably diminished the agricultural quality and potentiality of these lands. On the other hand, A. P. KAZHDAN–A. W. EPSTEIN, (*Change in Byzantine culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Berkeley 1985, 31–32) suggest that the Bulgarian towns in the 11th and 12th centuries generally “prospered under byzantine rule” and despite the raids of steppe tribes. In any case, a few years later these conditions probably changed or became clear. In 1218, the Metropolitan of Naupaktos and Arta, Ioannes Apocaucos, wrote to the *chartophylax* (χαρτοφύλαξ) Georgios Vardanes, who had refused the proposal to become bishop of Vonitsa. This letter highlights the advantages and disadvantages of the Bulgarian dioceses of Ochrid. Vardanes preferred to remain in the diocese of Grevena, because the dioceses of Ochrid were not inhabited purely by Greek-speaking populations. Apocaucos believes that the Bulgarian bishoprics benefit in financial annuity and geographical position, although lacking in ethnic homogeneity and linguistic unity, and advises him to accept the offer. See Ioannes Apocaucos, ed. DELIMARIS, *Απαντα*, 109; [ed. J. VASILJEVSKIJ, *Epirotica saeculi XIII, IV 3* (1896) 251–252]: (...) κατὰ τε προσόδους κατὰ τε τοπικὰς θέσεις καὶ ὑψηλολογούμεναι καὶ μεγαλιζόμεναι (...). Cf. LAMBROPOULOS, *Απόκωνκος*, 188–189; MAGDALINO, *Manuel*, 132–136.

⁴² Indicatively, see above no. 3, 18, 24.

⁴³ Antiochos, Ep. 1, 51–52: Οὕτω κατέφαγε τὰ ὠραῖα τῆς Σαρδικῆς οὐ πῦρ φλογίζον, ὡς λόγος, ἀλλὰ τὸ ἀντίθετον ψύχος καὶ τοῦ κρυμοῦ τὸ πολὺ. Cf. Ep. 2, 17: (...) (περὶ τὴν Σαρδικὴν) γῆν ἐκείνην Βουλγάρων αὐχῆμα (...); 78–79: Ἐμέλλομεν δὲ ἄρα μεμνήσασθαι γῆς ἐκείνης καὶ τῶν ἐκείθεν καλῶν καὶ γῆν μακάρων οὐ τί τοι Βουλγάρων ταύτην μεταμαθεῖν.

upper Thracian plain: low barometric temperatures during winter, when the Continental climate dominates, wet and dry conditions during summer, generally unknown to the Mediterranean climate, when the contrasts of the two climate zones are becoming more intense.

Antiochos describes elements of certain areas of the Bulgarian countryside: the lack of forest cover and the erosion of the lower altitudes; the water shortage of some areas, due to extensive evaporation during summer; the alluvial meadow type of soils by the river of Hevros along the *Imperial road*; all resulting from the characteristics of the transitional climatic zone in the area, as experienced by a Mediterranean coastline inhabitant.

Moreover, these writings include exaggerations and are subjected to philological genres, along with other texts of scholars, who were expatriated for a while and feel quite uneasy, to say the least. These letters, beyond the eloquent expressions and the apparent convergence towards some standard rhetorical patterns, are based on real incidents, for which, under careful examination, the extent of subjectivity and sarcasm cannot really affect the actual circumstances.

Regardless, in this case, Antiochos's exaggerations are mostly concentrating on the diet and the food products, illustrating a picture of minimum agriculture potential and maximum livestock production. The latter can be an undoubtful characteristic of a mountainous country, whereas the former seems to be contradictive to the environmental nature of this area as well as the historical data from other sources.

Above all, these writings express Antiochos's personal perceptions and critical comments filtered by his involuntary alienation from the scholarly environment of the capital⁴⁴. Among extensive rhetorical schemes often implying a comparison to Constantinople, he reviews critically the climate, the landscape, the agricultural potential and the local population of an otherwise hostile land. Although the strained relations and latent antipathies between Byzantines and Bulgarians emerge through Antiochos's account, these letters present valuable and considerably reliable information about the climate and the geophysical image of the Bulgarian countryside in the late 12th century.

⁴⁴ Antiochos, Ep. 1, 2–7: ἀποξένωσις, Ep. 2, 21–25: ἐκδημία; 296: ἀποδημία.