

The popular perception of Byzantium in contemporary Turkish culture*

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The aim of this article is to present the sources available to the ordinary Turkish citizen for forming an opinion about Byzantium. These sources range from the written (school curricula to newspapers) to the visual (cinema to television), and I categorize them on the basis of a set of criteria such as accessibility, control over the audience, and intellectual depth. I aim to show how non-state actors have been laying the groundwork for a more informed perception of Byzantium. Movies, theatrical productions, and cartoons in humorous magazines satirizing the essentializing view of the Byzantine past through parody, are shown to play a deconstructive role in this process.

Keywords: popular culture; reception of Byzantium; modern Turkey; media; politics

The present article offers an attempt to understand how an ordinary Turkish citizen today develops a perception of Byzantium. Such a perception, I shall argue, is filtered through a variety of conflicting discourses and shaped by a range of perspectives in popular media and literature. I employ the term ‘perception’ in order to shift the focus away from the intentional memory-building policies of state institutions or collective bodies (as in the official celebrations of the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 or in the creation of a discourse on Byzantium in school textbooks) as also from relatively permanent representations created by individuals (as in how artists and writers present Byzantium). By ‘contemporary’ I denote the first two decades of the twenty-first century, a period roughly corresponding to the growth of the internet and social media, and to the mandate of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) as the

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governing party in Turkey. Turkey under AKP has witnessed the rise of an Islamist and neo-Ottomanist type of nationalist discourse in the political and cultural sphere, set against the traditionally dominant modernist and Kemalist version of nationalist discourse in the twentieth century.¹

My focus is on the active meaning-making process by the individual on the receiving end, be they consumer, reader, or viewer; and my aim is to provide an extensive list of the inputs available to receptive individuals. These inputs result from a combination of the memory produced by previous generations – that is, public memory² – and newer impressions produced in recent times, as well as from an amalgamation of popular and academic/official perceptions, the extent of which depends on the individual's social and cultural milieu. My approach is new in two respects. First, I focus on the perception rather than the representation of Byzantium, exploring the options available to the consumer. Second, I attempt to give a bird's-eye view by combining different methods of acquiring information on Byzantium, while previous studies have limited themselves to specific media such as cinema, textbooks, or novels.

The state of research

There is a growing number of works on the history of Byzantine studies in Ottoman and early republican Turkey. For the Ottoman period, they focus on themes such as the representation of Byzantium in Ottoman-period textbooks and studies,³ the role of locals (the Greek-speaking population and the state institutions such as the Istanbul Archaeological Museums)⁴ and the role of Europe in the birth of Byzantine

1 For varieties of nationalisms in Turkey, see U. Özkırmı, 'The topography of nationalism in Turkey: actors, discourses and the struggle for hegemony', in R. Kastoryano (ed.), *Turkey between Nationalism and Globalization* (London 2013) 71–86; A. Çınar and H. Taş, 'Politics of nationhood and the displacement of the founding moment: contending histories of the Turkish nation political science', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59.3 (2017) 657–89; J. White, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks* (New Jersey 2014). On neo-Ottomanism, see M. H. Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (London 2003) 225, 235–7; Y. Çolak, 'Ottomanism vs. kemalism: collective memory and cultural pluralism in 1990s Turkey,' *Middle Eastern Studies* 42.4 (2006) 583–98; H. Ö. Ongur, 'Identifying Ottomanisms: the discursive evolution of Ottoman pasts in the Turkish presents,' *Middle Eastern Studies* 51.3 (2015) 416–32; Special Issue: *Ottomanism Then & Now*, ed. S. Taglia, *Die Welt des Islams* 56.3–4 (2016); see especially Taglia's introduction.

2 For 'the changing nature of Turkish relationships with the past', see E. Özyürek, 'Introduction: the politics of public memory in Turkey', in E. Özyürel (ed.), *The Politics of Public Memory in Turkey* (New York 2007) 1–15.

3 C. Bekar, 'Hezarfen Hüseyin'in Evrensel Tarihinde Yeni Bir Bizans ve Konstantinopolis Algısı', in *XVIII. Türk Tarih Kongresi / XVIIIth Turkish Congress of History* (Ankara 2018) 17–38; Ş. Kılıç Yıldız, 'Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Entelektüellerin Gözüyle Bizans İstanbul'u', *Doğu Batı Dergisi* 68 (2014) 103–26; M. Ursinus, 'Byzantine history in late Turkish historiography', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 10 (1986) 218–19.

4 On the Greek-speaking population's relationship with Byzantium, see F. M. Sümertaş, 'From antiquarianism to urban archaeology: transformation of research on 'old' Istanbul throughout the

archaeology and the preservation of Byzantine monuments in the Ottoman Empire.⁵ A 2017 conference organized by the Istanbul Research Institute, *Discovering Byzantium in Istanbul: scholars, institutions, and challenges (1800–1955)* and the upcoming 2023 International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Symposium, entitled *A century of Byzantine studies in Turkey (1923–2023)* represent the culmination of the growing interest in the birth of Byzantine studies in Turkey. The 2021 exhibition, entitled *From Byzantium to Istanbul 1800–1955* at the Pera Museum in Istanbul, shows how public events tied to academic pursuits can reach a large audience.⁶ The focus of the studies on the development of Byzantine studies in the republican period (1923–) has been the history of how Byzantium came to be studied in universities, especially in Istanbul and Ankara.⁷ The development of Byzantine archaeology in Turkey is a favourite subject, with particular attention to the role that archaeology played in constructing Turkish national identity and the cooperation between foreign research institutes and Turkish academics.⁸

There is also growing interest in the representation of Byzantium in contemporary Turkey, and especially how the Byzantine legacy is represented in high-brow literature or in the wider popular culture. The special issues on Byzantium in the arts and literature magazines *Sanat Dünyamız* (1998) and *Kitaplık* (1999) as well as in the quarterly periodical *Cogito* (1990) are examples of the first (with articles on Byzantium in Turkish literature and on different aspects of Byzantine culture), while numerous contributions focus on the popular representation of Byzantium in media such as cinema, newspapers and novels. Prominent topics are Hagia Sophia together with Istanbul,⁹ representations

nineteenth century’, PhD thesis, Boğaziçi University 2021. On Ottoman authorities, see E. Eldem, ‘Byzantium in Istanbul: the Byzantine collections of the Istanbul archaeological museums’, in B. Pitarakis (ed.), *From Byzantium to Istanbul 1800–1955* (Istanbul 2021) 258–69; Ş. Kılıç Yıldız, *Byzantium Between «East» and «West»: perceptions and architectural historiography of the Byzantine heritage* (Istanbul 2021); Z. Çelik, *About Antiquities: politics of archaeology in the Ottoman empire* (Texas 2016); Ş. Kılıç, ‘Byzantine Studies in Turkey: a bibliography project’, in *Türkiye’de Bizans Çalışmaları: Bir Bibliyografya (19. Yüzyıl–2020)* (Istanbul 2021) 79–92.

5 P. Üre, *Reclaiming Byzantium: Russia, Turkey and the archaeological claim to the Middle East in the 19th century* (London 2021); J. Bardill, ‘Ernest Mamboury’s contribution to the archeology of Byzantine Constantinople’, in Pitarakis (ed.) *From Byzantium to Istanbul*, 486–581; R. Ousterhout, ‘The rediscovery of Constantinople and the beginnings of Byzantine archaeology: a historiographic survey’, in Z. Bahrani, Z. Çelik, E. Eldem (eds), *Scramble for the Past: a story of archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753–1914* (Istanbul 2011) 181–211.

6 Pitarakis (ed.), *From Byzantium to Istanbul*.

7 For an extensive review of Byzantine studies in Turkey, see Kılıç, ‘Byzantine studies in Turkey’.

8 See the various articles in S. Redford and N. Ergin (eds), *Perceptions of the Past in the Turkish Republic: classical and Byzantine periods* (Leuven 2010); Ş. Kılıç, ‘A review of Byzantine studies and architectural historiography in Turkey today’, *METU Journal of the Faculty of Architecture* 28.2 (2011), 63–80 (39–53).

9 The issue *Ayasofya: Kimlik, Hafıza ve Mekân Üzerine Bin Beş Yüzyıllık Bir Tartışma = Toplumsal Tarih* 254 (2015); İ. M. Özekmekçi, ‘Türk Sağıında Ayasofya İmgesi’, in İ. Ö. Kerestecioğlu and G. G. Öztan (eds), *Türk Sağıı Mitler Fetişler Düşman İmgeleri* (Istanbul 2012) 283–306; Y. N. Acar, ‘Kolektif Hafızanın Derin Dehliz Mabedi: Ayasofya’, *Stratejik ve Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi* 5 (2021) 219–31. For Istanbul, see the issue *Günüümüz İstanbul’unda Bizans = Toplumsal Tarih* 308 (2019).

of the capture of Constantinople in 1453¹⁰ and of Byzantine women.¹¹ However, only two works offer a birds-eye view of the popular representation of Byzantium: the issue entitled *Tanıdık Yabancı* ('familiar stranger') of the history periodical *Toplumsal Tarih* (2013) and the exhibition *İstanbul'da bu ne byzantinizm!* ('What Byzantinism is this in Istanbul!'), Pera Museum (23 November 2021–6 March 2022).¹²

Venues for the encounter with Byzantium in Turkey

Leaving aside the growing field of Byzantine studies in Turkey, let us focus on the numerous venues in which those who may have no active interest in the subject of Byzantium receive passive exposure to it. To this list one may add other venues that may be sought out by individuals interested in becoming acquainted with Byzantium in an amateur way. The venues available to the Turkish public may be categorized in terms of their physicality (through contact with material remains or indirectly through various media); their accessibility (exposition *en masse* through school curricula, movies, television/internet; or smaller groups visiting exhibitions, theatres, museums and archaeological sites); their control over the audience (a captive audience as in the case of school curricula and state-sponsored TV series, or voluntary consumers buying books and history magazines); their aim (pedagogically oriented means such as academic books, or novels and movies using Byzantium as a décor) and their depth (reception of a detailed and historically accurate image of Byzantium or bombardment of the reader with inaccurate clichés).

Starting with the first category, we can place opportunities to meet Byzantium on a scale ranging from the personal and physical to the distant and indirect. Since the material remains of Byzantium can be found almost everywhere in Turkey, a considerable number of people are exposed to the traces of Byzantium on a personal level. Yet people may be unaware of the Byzantine identity of a city wall or a converted church in their neighbourhood; they may be confused about the identity of Byzantine remains,

10 G. D. Brockett, 'When Ottomans become Turks: commemorating the conquest of Constantinople and its contribution to world history', *The American Historical Review* 119.2 (2014) 399–433; H. Değirmenci, 'Bizans'ın Çöküşü, Osmanlı'nın Yükselişi: Tarihsel Romanda Fetih Öncesi (1875–2020)', in *Söylem, Filoloji Dergisi* 5.2 (2020) 501–19; N. Orta, 'Toplumsal Bellek ve Sinema: Popüler Sinema Örneği Olarak Fetih 1453', *Selçuk İletişim* 12.2 (2019) 1094–1126; H. Kara, 'The literary portrayal of Mehmed II in Turkish historical fiction', *New Perspectives on Turkey* 36 (Spring 2007) 71–95.

11 The 'Byzantine Collection' issue in *Kitaplık* 35 (1999); D. Y. Maktal Cankö, 'Abdullah Ziya Kozanoğlu ve Murat Sertoğlu'nun Romanlarında Bizans Kadını Algısı', *International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Art* 8.8 (2019) 45–56; B. Kitapçı Bayrı, 'Imagining Byzantium and the Byzantines in modern Turkish popular literature and cinema', in P. Marciniak and M. Kulhanova (eds), *Byzantium and the Modern Imagination: the reception of Byzantium in popular culture*, forthcoming; D. Y. Maktal Cankö, 'Türk Edebiyatında Bizans imparatoriçeleri ve Selim İleri'nin "Hepsi Alev" Romanı', *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi* 16 (2019) 308–18.

12 With the catalogue edited by curator Emir Alışık, *İstanbul'da bu ne byzantinizm! / What Byzantinism is this in Istanbul!* (Istanbul 2021).

because of the presence of multiple layers of historical periods, the continuation of Byzantine culture in the Ottoman world as *Rum* (Greek-speaking Roman identity), and the low degree of historical readership among the Turkish population. An additional reason for widespread confusion and ignorance derives from the policies of governmental or municipal authorities regarding Byzantine remains. In many cases authorities are unwilling to post information that would indicate the Byzantine identity of buildings; in others, they intentionally hide the Byzantine character of a structure. According to Anestis Vasilakeris, the calculated positioning of the modern statue of Mehmed II ‘the Conqueror’ and the Panaroma 1453 History Museum, which immortalizes the moment of Constantinople’s capture, near the most visible section of the land walls of Istanbul in the Topkapı neighborhood, turns the Byzantine walls into a symbol of Turkish victory.¹³ Likewise, the objects displayed and the information presented in the Tekfur Sarayı Müzesi (Tekfur Palace Museum) in Edirnekapı largely conceal the Byzantine phase of its history as part of the Blachernai Palace and highlight the building’s function as a glass and ceramic workshop in the late Ottoman period. In other words, both the Walls and the Tekfur Palace are claimed by the Turks.

A second categorization of the popular means of encountering Byzantium can be made on the basis of their accessibility, distinguishing between what is accessible to large sections of the population and what is available to a relatively small segment of Turkish society. School curricula, news media through which people are exposed to the statements by political figures, and internet sources – especially social media – are the major venues where millions of people experience Byzantium, if only occasionally. As I have shown in my examination of Turkish high school history textbooks, Byzantine history was covered in relative detail in the textbooks until the 1980 *coup d’état*. Since then, Byzantium has been confined to a few paragraphs.¹⁴ The twenty or so pages of discussion on Byzantine political, social and cultural history out of 296 pages in Emin Oktay’s *History II* that was in circulation from the 1950s to 1980s seems like an encyclopedia compared to the half-page presentation of Byzantium in *History 9* by Y. Okur et al. (2008). Through mechanisms of exclusion, over-emphasis, distortion and above all, abridgment, the high school textbooks of the last forty years do not present Byzantium as a culture in itself, but include it only superficially for some direct or indirect impact on Turkish and Islamic history. The impression the student is supposed to derive is that Byzantium was a weak and morally corrupt state that could not satisfy its subjects and had no legitimate claim over Anatolia, which supposedly had begun to be populated by the Turks long before the arrival of the Seljuks in the eleventh century. It is no wonder that this approach corresponds to the post-1980 *coup* period when the Turkish state authorities were ‘eager to use the Turco-Islamic synthesis in order to counter the leftist/international political

13 A. Vasilakeris, ‘İstanbul’daki Bizans Anıtları: Anı ve Şimdiki Varlığı’, *Toplumsal Tarih* 229 (2013) 68–70.

14 K. Durak, ‘The representation of Byzantine history in high school textbooks in Turkey’, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 38.2 (2014) 245–64.

movements, and to control the masses through ideological indoctrination in which concepts of nation and religion were used as a means of subjugation to the power of the state.¹⁵

Alongside school curricula, news media (from the traditional forms of newspapers, radio and television to the internet) supply millions of viewers with information about Byzantium, typically related to the current political, economic and cultural developments in Turkey. Although an extensive examination of the presence of Byzantium in the news media is still lacking, a cursory look at the national newspapers detects three major types of news items related to Byzantium: a) illegal excavations and trade of cultural property; b) failed restoration attempts, which have become quite frequent in Turkey in the last decades; and c) new archaeological finds, together with recommendations for the tourism of historical sites and routes. However, this tripartite presence is not peculiar to Byzantium, but applies to the representation in Turkish news media of almost all other periods and cultures, such as the Greco-Roman or Seljuk legacies. Alongside its (stolen, restored, and visited) material reality, Byzantium also commonly appears in the news as a metaphor for ‘intrigue’, ‘perfidiousness’ and ‘corruption’. The term Byzantine becomes, in the pens of newspaper columnists and the mouths of politicians, a negatively charged word used to bemoan a situation or to denigrate an opponent. For instance, *Akit* – a conservative newspaper – claimed in 2018 that Turkish membership in CERN (the European Organization for Nuclear Research) was under threat due to the veto power of some countries like Serbia, and called the whole situation ‘Cern’de Bizans oyunu’ (‘Byzantine intrigues in the CERN’), and *Cumhuriyet* – a Kemalist and staunchly secular newspaper – described in 2021 the internal political fighting within the religious community of İsmailağa as ‘İsmailağa’da Bizans oyunları’ (‘Byzantine intrigues in İsmailağa’).¹⁶

The term ‘Byzantine’ has a similarly negative connotation in contemporary political discourse. In 2015, Haluk Koç – the Deputy Chairman of the CHP, which defines itself as a social democratic party – accused AKP, the governing party, of ‘becoming Byzantine, which is known for its political machinations’.¹⁷ In another instance, an AKP MP, Gülseren Topuz, in a 2014 tweet described those who are against the teaching of Ottoman Turkish in high schools as ‘Bizans tohumları’ (‘seeds of the Byzantines’).¹⁸ Sometimes such words are carefully chosen to create a link with the discourse of the past. For instance, the previous leader of MHP – the largest ultranationalist party in Turkey –, Alparslan Türkeş (1917–1997), once said (or was claimed to have said),

15 E. Copeaux, *Türk Tarih Tezinden Türk İslam Sentezine* (Istanbul 1998) 54–77.

16 <https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/cernde-bizans-oyunlari-turkiyenin-isi-daha-da-zorlasacak-575340.html>; <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/turkiye/ismailagada-bizans-oyunlari-1895270> (retrieved 2021.11.18).

17 <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/haluk-koc-zamane-neronlarina-karsi-uyanik-olalim-2012904> (retrieved 2021.11.18).

18 <https://t24.com.tr/haber/eski-akpli-vekilden-osmanlicayi-elistirenlere-nerede-bizans-tohumu-varsa-belliedecek-kendini,279516> (retrieved 2021.11.18).

An affliction passed from Byzantium to the Turkish nation: looseness, levity, gossip, sedition, depravity, impudence, antipathy, inability to keep a secret, talking randomly ... You have this affliction too. You should cure yourself of it ... This affliction had brought the Turkish nation, Byzantium, and the Ottoman Empire into ruin.¹⁹

These claims have their origins in a letter that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish republic, wrote to the novelist Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu in 1924. Atatürk revealed his contempt of Istanbul, the former capital of the Ottoman Empire, and defined the city as Byzantium. He added: ‘The Republic will definitely heal Byzantium that lost its inestimable value, its true color, its natural state, because she fell into the habit of contamination, hypocrisy, and deceit.’²⁰ While leaders of the nationalist MHP party are among the politicians who most frequently employ the term ‘Byzantine’ in a pejorative way, Altan Tan – an MP from the BDP, a pro-Kurdish party – criticizes the Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs) as being under the control of the state. He defines this control as a ‘Bizans modeli’ (‘Byzantine model’), most likely having in mind the antiquated term ‘Caesaropapism.’²¹ It is interesting to note that Byzantium is employed as a negative term by politicians and newspapers across the entire political spectrum, even by those who call themselves progressive or leftist.

Any topic on social media such as Twitter and Facebook can engender vicious bickering and become a platform for misinformation and shallow observations, but at the same time social media can also facilitate extensive communication and spreading of knowledge that was impossible just a few decades ago. The topic of Byzantium is no exception. There has been a proliferation of virtual book clubs on Facebook and WhatsApp, which helps its participants to find books and articles on Byzantium online; meanwhile, Twitter acts as a platform for spreading news on academic activities to wider audiences. For instance, *Bizantolog*, a social media platform to bring together Byzantinists of Turkey, was established on Twitter in 2019 by a group of graduate students specializing in Byzantine culture.²² It has been actively sharing information from academic circles and organizing talks and workshops online.

On a much smaller scale than the media forms discussed so far, which present Byzantium to millions, we find museums, exhibitions, and archaeological parks that provide such experiences to a relatively limited number of people. There is still no Byzantine museum or city museum in any town in Turkey that exhibits the Byzantine phase in detail. Moreover, important Byzantine monuments that gained the status of museums in the republican period, have now lost this status and been converted to mosques in recent years due to government policy (Ayasofya/Hagia Sophia and

19 N. Kocabaş, ‘Başbuğ’ *Yeni Ufuk* (19 May 2021).

20 T. Bora and K. Can, *Devlet ve Kuzgun: 1990’lardan 2000’lere MHP* (Istanbul 2004) 284 n.13.

21 <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/baskani-devletin-emrindeki-kukla/siyaset/siyasetdetay/02.04.2012/1522764/> (retrieved 2021.11.18).

22 <https://twitter.com/bizantologtr>.

Kariye/Chora in Istanbul, Ayasofya/Hagia Sophia in Trebizond, Ayasofya/Hagia Sophia in Iznik). Reconversion of buildings into mosques should be seen as another stage in the contestation of public space between the old vanguard of the regime and the new political elite. According to its opponents, the Kemalist nationalist clique implemented a policy of silencing the Islamic in daily life and public space, eradicating the Ottoman legacy from historical and cultural consciousness. The new political elite, religiously conservative and charmed by the bygone glories of the Ottoman past, is pursuing a reversal of this almost century-old attitude and reinstating the Islamic and Ottoman identity of many buildings at the expense of their Byzantine character. Hagia Sophia in Istanbul is at the centre of this ideological battle. Many Turks see its museum status as a mark of a secular Turkey and a humanist project that signals Turkey's position in international values and cooperation, while those with a religiously conservative agenda see the building's reconversion to a mosque as the return of the right of conquest in 1453, and as mending Turkish society's relations with its Ottoman and Islamic past. The current perception of Hagia Sophia among conservatives is shaped by imagery created in previous decades and reflects the aspirations and myths of Islamist intellectuals and politicians during the republican period.²³ On the other hand, the increasing number of exhibitions that put Byzantium on center stage (such as the 2010 exhibition at Sakıp Sabancı Museum, *From Byzantium to Istanbul: 8000 years of a capital*) and museums that highlight their Byzantine collections (such as Istanbul Archaeological Museums, Pera Museum, ANAMED, and Küçükyalı Arkeopark) attract more visitors every year, reflecting the rising interest of civil society in Byzantine history. The plans to establish an open-air Byzantine museum at the Bukoleon palace, currently under restoration by the Istanbul Municipality, is a felicitous development. It is important to note that most of the museums and exhibitions on Byzantium are in Istanbul, confining opportunities for 'visiting' Byzantium to Istanbulites.

Control over the audience forms the basis of a third categorization. While some people are actively searching for Byzantium, others are exposed to it involuntarily. Involuntary exposure takes place mostly through state-enforced means. School curricula provide the most obvious example of how a captive audience of students undergoes compulsory exposure to Byzantium. Among the venues supported and promoted by the state, one can count state- or municipality-sponsored museums such as the Panaroma 1453 History Museum, which students visit on school excursions, and state-sponsored historical TV series on TRT (the national public broadcaster). The best-known recent examples of historical series are *Diriliş: Ertuğrul* ('The resurrection: Ertuğrul', 2014), which tells the story of the father of Osman, the founder of the Ottoman Empire, and *Uyanış: Büyük Selçuklu* ('The Awakening: The Great Seljuks', 2020), which portrays the life of the Seljuk ruler Malik-Shah I and his struggle against

23 Y. Z. Bölükbaşı, 'Etno-Seküler Tasarımdan Etno-Dinsel Tasavvura: Mahzun Mabedden Camii Kebire Ayasofya'nın Dönüşümü', *Milliyetçilik Araştırmaları Dergisi* 3.1 (2021) 47–78; U. Azak, 'Muhafazakâr Milliyetçiliğin Bitmeyen Davası: "Mahzun Mabed" Ayasofya', *Toplum ve Bilim* 131 (2014) 236–63.

the Byzantine Empire in the late eleventh century.²⁴ As modern historians of Ottoman history will recognize, the plot of *Diriliş: Ertuğrul* brings together certain groups or individuals who did not have any contact in the thirteenth century, such as the constant confrontation of the early Ottomans by the Templars; and it is insinuated in *Diriliş: Ertuğrul* that the *Aksakallılar* ('the Elders') brought the early Ottomans to the Byzantine border in Bithynia as part of a strategic plan, acting almost like a modern intelligence service.²⁵ The depiction of a western enemy (the Templars) and the presence of a strong state tradition (*Aksakallılar*) reflect a set of presentist concerns rather than historical realities. *Diriliş Ertuğrul*, as a 'Turkish-Islamic ideological fantasy', is in line with AKP's political rhetoric, which seeks to appropriate the people's side against the cultural elite associated with Westernist-Kemalist discourse.²⁶ In this staging of the good Ottomans versus their enemies – Byzantines, Crusaders, Templars, and Mongols – and their internal collaborators, Byzantium's position is one of belonging to the Other, aligned with the West and with those among 'us' who are insufficiently Turkish and Muslim.

At the same time, there is also a vast cultural sphere in which the consumer may seek Byzantium actively. In addition to museums, archaeological sites and exhibitions, books and magazines focusing on Byzantium provide opportunities to the interested reader for a more academic view. The increasing number of books on Byzantine history by Turkish authors as well as translations of the works of European and American Byzantinists,²⁷ almost all produced by private publishers including the publishing houses of private/foundation universities, show the rising interest of the Turkish public in Byzantine history. Additionally, there is a flourishing scene in popular history magazines such as *NTV tarih*, # *Tarih*, *Atlas Tarih*, *Derin Tarih* and *Yedikıta*. In the absence of an in-depth study on the representation of Byzantium in these publications, one may make the preliminary observation that Byzantium is most often present in pieces on archaeological discoveries, and that Byzantium-related characters and events are presented in relation to medieval Anatolian or Turkish historical events. For instance, a 2003 piece in *Hürriyet Tarih*, a history supplement of the *Hürriyet* national newspaper, had the following title: 'İlk amiralimizdi Bizans'ı dize getirdi "Çaka

24 For a good analysis of the presentist and populist historical TV series of the last two decades in Turkey, see the issue *Yeni Türkiye'nin Tarih Dizileri = Toplumsal Tarih* 306 (2019).

25 A. Şimşek and N. Çencen, 'Usta Tarihçilerin Bakış Açısı ile Diriliş Dizisi', *International Journal of Human Sciences* 12.2 (2015) 1385–87; A. Türker and A. M. Kırık, 'Tarih Dizilerinde Gerçeklik Algısının Oluşumu:Diriliş Ertuğrul Dizisinin Göstergibilimsel Çözümlemesi', *TRT Akademi* 4.8 (2019) 503–4; J. Carney, 'Resur(e)cting a spectacular hero: Diriliş Ertuğrul, necropolitics, and popular culture in Turkey', *Review of Middle East Studies* 52.1 (2018) 93–114.

26 B. Özçetin, "'The show of the people' against the cultural elites: populism, media and popular culture in Turkey," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22.5–6 (2019) 942–57 (947).

27 A glance at the recent publications of Yapı Kredi Publications concerning Byzantine history shows growing interest among readers.

bey” (“Our first admiral who brought Byzantium to heel, “Çaka beg”).²⁸ One may add that the ideological outlook of a magazine plays a role in the way Byzantium is presented: magazines with a more nationalist/Islamist/neo-Ottomanist agenda see Byzantium only in the light of the more prejudiced twentieth-century scholarship and through the lenses of medieval Turkish and Ottoman history, while magazines with a more secular/leftist/progressive agenda attempt to understand Byzantine history in its own right and accept Byzantium as part of Anatolian and Balkan history.

Another distinction between different means of encountering Byzantium in contemporary Turkey can be made between cultural products and venues that aim to provide historical information about Byzantium (pedagogically oriented agencies) versus products and venues that make use of Byzantium to tell another story (instrumentalizing Byzantium). School curricula, television and internet news, museums, archaeological sites, exhibitions, books and popular history magazines fall into the former category. Cinematic and literary production fall into the latter category, in addition to the TV series and statements of politicians discussed above. Representation of Byzantium in Turkish cinema has a long pedigree going back to the 1951 production *İstanbul'un Fethi* (‘The Conquest of Istanbul’) directed by A. Arakon, and has been shaped by wider political and cultural developments in Turkey up to the present. In much of the second half of the twentieth century, the viewer was bombarded by productions that portrayed individual Turkish heroes as adventurers (Malkoçoğlu, Kara Murat, Battal Gazi) fighting against Byzantium, inspired by historical characters from the medieval period. Devoid of any historical reality, Byzantines in these productions are presented as infidels and cruel enemies who are perfidious, hypocritical, and constantly scheming.²⁹ As Buket Kitapçı Bayrı puts it, set on a stage without any historical accuracy, Byzantium stands as the Other, opposed to the noble, brave, artless, and honourable (male) Turk; this Greek-speaking, Orthodox Christian culture is seen as in cooperation with the Papacy, the Vikings or the Crusaders, turning it into a representation of ‘the West with a capital W’ against which Turkish national identity has so often positioned itself, especially in periods such as the Republic of Turkey’s intervention in Cyprus in 1974.³⁰ In addition to the nationalistic discourse, some of these films are imbued with a leftist/populist discourse, affected by the political movements of the 1960s/70s. For instance, *Battal Gazi Destanı* (‘The Legend of Battal Gazi’, 1971) posits a dichotomy between the urban and rich Byzantines, residing in ‘Istanbul’, against the poor and oppressed Turks, reflecting modern tensions between the urbanized and bourgeois Istanbulite elite

28 H. Öksüz, ‘Cumhuriyet’ten Günümüze Popüler Tarih Dergileri’, PhD thesis, Marmara University 2005, 580.

29 For the list of movies, see G. Scognomillo, ‘Türk Sinemasında Bizans Oyunları’, *Sanat Dünyamız* 69–79 (1998) 155–6; E. Akbaş, *Türk Sinemasında Ortaçağ Tarihi Algısı (1943–2014)* (Istanbul 2018).

30 B. Kitapçı Bayrı, ‘Contemporary perception of Byzantium in Turkish cinema: the cross-examination of Battal Gazi wilms with the Battalname’, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 37.1 (2013) 81–91.

versus the poor and culturally less westernized masses in Anatolia and in the shantytowns of big cities. In Buket Kitapçı Bayrı's words, Battal Gazi of medieval times becomes 'the "Turkish Robin Hood" fighting against "Western" Christians in Istanbul'.³¹

The last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed the decline of the nationalist/Republican grip over public space. This development, combined with liberal economic policies and cultural decentralization, has provided a space for the rise of parodies of historical movies of the previous period. *Kahpe Bizans* ('Perfidious Byzantium', 2000) and *Bizans Oyunları* ('The Intrigues of Byzantium', 2016) are comedies that establish an imaginary past with very vague references to Byzantium and medieval Turkish Anatolia (through costume, buildings and Greek-sounding names of characters), drawing the viewer to the world of later twentieth-century movies of Yeşilçam (Turkish Hollywood) described above. As Özge Akdoğan observes, these two movies are parodies of the stereotypes present in Yeşilçam historical movies, ridiculing not only Byzantium but also what are deemed to be Turkish characteristics, such as heroism, masculinity, and sacrifice.³² These films demonstrate that Byzantium in the popular psyche in Turkey cannot be fully understood without studying the dialogue between current perceptions and those of previous generations. Another group of movies from the last twenty years, among them *Fetih 1453* ('The Conquest 1453', 2012) and *Fatih'in Fedaisi: Kara Murat* ('Kara Murat, the Bodyguard of Sultan the Conqueror', 2015), can be seen as reflections of the Islamist/Neo-Ottomanist wave that became the dominant discourse in public space in Turkey under the AKP government, especially in recent years.³³ In these movies, which tell stories from a growing Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century, we see a politically divided and weak Byzantium pitted against the powerful and united Turks, who look much more Muslim and much less oppressed than in the Yeşilçam-period movies of the twentieth century.³⁴

The other major genre that instrumentalizes Turks' knowledge and image of Byzantium is literature, which we can divide into 'popular literature' and 'high literature', although such a distinction is not always easy to draw. Among the high-literature examples is Bilge Karasu's *Uzun Sürmüş Bir Günün Akşamı* ('The

31 Kitapçı Bayrı, 'Contemporary perception of Byzantium, 89.

32 Ö. G. Akdoğan, 'The parody of Byzantium in the Turkish cinema: the perfidious Byzantium and Byzantine intrigue', *Research & Reviews in Social, Human and Administrative Sciences* (Ankara 2019) 87–102.

33 For the examination of *Fetih 1453* and its comparison to the historical TV drama, *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* ('Magnificent Century', 2011–14), which attracted a lot of criticism from the state officials and the conservative segments of the Turkish Society, see C. Y. Erdem, 'Ottomentality: neoliberal governance of culture and neo-ottoman management of diversity,' *Turkish Studies* 18.4 (2017) 710–28. According to Erdem, the negative reaction against *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*, which focused mostly on the private life and the harem of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent, shows that the conservative circles both at public and state level are in pursuit of a morally-religiously colored type of neo-Ottomanism.

34 M. Şahin, *2000 Sonrası Türk Sinemasında Tarihi Filmlerde Milli Kimliğin Yeniden İnşası*, MA thesis, Anadolu University 2014, 84–92.

Evening of a Very Long Day', 1970), which explores the issues of faith and individual choice through two Byzantine monks and their views on Iconoclasm, and Lale Müldür's *Bizansiyya* (2007), an autobiographical fiction in which she constructs a modern Istanbul stretching between the East and the West and the past and the present. In Bilge Karasu's work Byzantium appears as a vague background to represent a persecuting society of Iconoclasts. In Lale Müldür's work Byzantium becomes a cosmopolitan Istanbul.³⁵ On the other hand, popular literature presents a much more caricaturized image of Byzantium in its attempt to entertain large audiences. Popular historical novels by Kemal Tahir, Tarık Buğra, and Erol Toy from the mid-twentieth century set up a dichotomy between 'us' (an eternal identity of Turkishness) and 'them' (a large category comprising Catholic Westerners, Byzantines, Chinese and Mongols, who are almost always painted with the same negative characteristics). In this essentializing scheme, 'infidel' Byzantines are on the evil side, although some Byzantine characters are good in nature, and join 'us' by converting to Islam. As Murat Belge documents, the writers mentioned above have no qualms about making up totally unrealistic Greek-sounding names for Byzantine protagonists who serve cognac (sic) to their guests. Not caring to do even a little bit of research for the sake of historical accuracy, the writers in question show their presentist concerns and ideological inclinations. In these novels with a nationalistic agenda and militaristic discourse, Byzantines appear as 'corrupt, money loving, riotous, intriguing people, whose women are immoral, waiting its Turkish and Muslims saviors'. The differences between Orthodox Byzantines and Catholic Europeans are almost nil. We encounter a Byzantine character named Şövalye ('Knight') Lagan Mişöp' in Necati Sepetçioğlu's novel *Her Bizans'a Bir Fatih* ('A Conqueror for Every Byzantium', 1972). In these anachronistic settings with characters with fabricated names, Byzantium's fate is to be conquered and that of the Turk is to conquer.³⁶

Byzantium in modern Turkish theatre finds a place only as a parody of the past and the present. Both *Bin Yıl Önce Bin Yıl Sonra* ('A Thousand Years Ago, a Thousand Years Later', premiered in 1985) and *Köhne Bizans Operası* ('The Opera of Old-fashioned Byzantium', 1993) stage the lives of a conspiratorial and promiscuous Justinian and Theodora. Both plays make the audience laugh by either repeating stereotypes and occasionally turning images upside down, or by establishing parallels between Byzantium and the contemporary Turkish society. *Bin Yıl Önce Bin Yıl Sonra* constructs an autocratic Justinian who delights in subjects' praise, a womanizer but afraid of his wife; a firm and self-willed Theodora who hangs out with a

35 Ş. Karaca, 'Bilge Karasu'nun "Ada" Hikâyesinde Arayış', *Söylem, Filoloji Dergisi* 4.2 (2019) 205–15; A. Evis, 'Bilge Karasu'nun Uzun Sürmüş Bir Günün Akşamı Öyküsünde Din ve Bireyleşme', *Turkish Studies* 7.2 (2012) 481–94; E. Ayan, 'Lâle Müldür'ün *Bizansiyya* Adlı Romanı Üzerine Bir İnceleme', *Littera Turca* 7.4 (2021) 899–911 (908).

36 M. Belge, *Genesis. Büyük Ulusal Anlatı ve Türklerin Kökeni* (Istanbul 2008) 11–2, 38, 95, 127, 299, 302; G. Korat, 'Edebiyatımızda Bizans İmgesi', *K24*, 27 August 2015.

stereotypically effeminate eunuch, and who also has a weakness for sex, this time with gladiators; and contrasted with these two characters surrounded by half-naked female palace servants, the legendary medieval Turkish warrior – Tarkan – who criticizes the Byzantines for being urban, rich, and cultivated but immoral and lascivious. The audience cannot associate themselves with Tarkan, though, because he talks and acts like a country bumpkin. The parallels to today can be traced in a few instances. The Byzantines speak Turkish with a discernable Greek accent, making them appear endearing to the Turkish audience by invoking nostalgia for the culture of the old Greek population of Istanbul. Moreover, Justinian's tirade about improving Constantinople's municipal services and his claim that the Golden Horn is as blue as his eyes due to cleaning efforts is a direct reference to the mayor of Istanbul between 1984 and 1989, Bedrettin Dalan. He had invested in the infrastructure of Istanbul and is best remembered by his promise: 'the waters of the Golden Horn will be the same colour as my eyes'.

Köhne Bizans Operası, staged by Ferhan Şensoy and his company in the 1990s, is a good example of subverting the conventional wisdom about Byzantium. Evolving around the story of Justinian and Theodora, this comedy seemingly contains almost every modern prejudice about Byzantium: its monarchical regime, corrupt government, poor masses, emasculated men, and oversexed women. The 'ridiculous' world of Byzantium is represented through a so-called Byzantine language made up from the combination of Turkish words with Greek endings, and visually through exaggerated costumes. However, the audience immediately realizes that the whole piece is a critique of the idealized Turkish past and modern Turkey. The poor Byzantines in the play stage a funny dance while singing, parodying a section of the Central Asian Alp Er Tunga epic, known by almost every student in Turkey. Likewise, the faction of the Greens in Constantinople trying to topple Justinian are actually the leftist revolutionaries in modern Turkey, while the corrupt Byzantine leaders are mirror images of contemporary Turkish politicians. The presentism of this play is different from that of classical Yeşilçam historical movies or historical novels: the presentist concerns, placed in the plot, criticize both the idealized image of Turkishness and Muslimness and the caricatured perception of Byzantium in modern Turkey.

Finally, among venues of instrumentalizing Byzantium, one can make a distinction between those that provide an in-depth image versus those who treat Byzantium very superficially. In-depth treatment can be found in some literary works and cinematic productions. The detailed description of daily life in Byzantine Constantinople in Mehmet Coral's novel *Bizans'ta Kayıp Zaman* ('Extinct Times in Byzantium', 1998) and the presentation of various pieces of information on Byzantine culture in Selçuk Altun's *Bizans Sultanı* ('The Sultan of Byzantium', 2011) show that some novelists in Turkey successfully pass on information about Byzantium to their readers. Selçuk Altun in *Bizans Sultanı* (2011) tells the story of a young 'Turkish' professor from a cosmopolitan and Levantine neighbourhood in modern Istanbul who is told by a secret organization that he is the Byzantine emperor in line after Constantine XI. In

this fantasy tale, Altun appears to be using mystery novel techniques in order to ‘educate’ his readers about the history of Byzantium and its various regions and cities. In the cinematic world, the 1997 movie *Kuşatma Altında Aşk* (‘Love under Siege’) is a romance, concerned with a love affair between a young Byzantine man and the daughter of a high-level Byzantine official during the 1453 siege of Constantinople. The plot is structured around characters based on real historical characters from the period.

On the other hand, the rare references to Byzantium in TV commercials, tweets, and humour magazines as well as sports events are superficial, stereotypical, and caricatured. This is to be expected, because such genres aim at entertainment with limited opportunities for staging a complex scene. Both in TV commercials and humour magazines with cartoons, the reader is exposed only to one aspect of the Byzantine world: its military encounter with the Ottomans. In a commercial by TIVIBU, a private television service available through the internet, one sees a still of a scene from the blockbuster movie *Fetih 1453* and reads ‘1453’ten beri ilk defa’ (‘For the first time since 1453’), referring to the conquest of Constantinople. The cartoons in magazines such as *Penguen*, *Uykusus*, and *Leman* make fun of the way the nationalist discourse depicts 1453, the idealized valor of the Ottoman armies as well as sultans, and the supposed corruption and femininity of their Byzantine counterparts, as presented in modern Turkish popular media. Here too, the current perception is coloured by the twentieth-century perception of Byzantium, and those who are not familiar with this legacy would find it hard to make sense of the references. In clashes between football teams in the national league, polarization between teams based in Istanbul (Fenerbahçe, Galatasaray, Beşiktaş) and teams from Anatolia (such as Trabzonspor and Gençlerbirliği) is expressed in way that derides Byzantium. Supporters of the Anatolian teams see themselves as being on the periphery and think that their teams do not have the same opportunities of the more central Istanbul teams. Therefore, they posit Istanbul teams as Byzantine teams. This discourse based on the oppositions of center/periphery and rich/poor is read together with the early republican discourse that denigrated Istanbul as a cosmopolitan, corrupt imperial capital and constructed an image of Ankara as the young national capital of the republic. The hostility towards Istanbul teams is shown in posters or scarves inscribed with slogans like ‘Perfidious Byzantium’ and ‘Our struggle is against the Byzantine mentality’.³⁷

Conclusion

My examination of the sources that form ordinary people’s perspective on Byzantium shows that local or national state involvement characteristically aims at effacing and distorting the Byzantine legacy in Turkey. The image of Byzantium is highly negative

37 E. Özer, ‘Anadolu Kaplanları Kahpe Bizans’a Karşı: Türk Futbolundaki Anadolu-İstanbul Gerilimine Merkez-Çevre İlişkileri Ekseninde Bir Bakış’, MA thesis, Bilgi University 2006.

in the nationalist and religious circles that have held political power in Turkey in the last two decades. However, this negative view is not limited to right-wing and conservative parties – it spans the whole political spectrum. The modernist/Kemalist and leftist circles see Byzantium less as a Christian and western enemy than the Islamist/neo-Ottomanist discourse does, but more as an earlier and more corrupt version of the Ottoman empire, a multiethnic society without a national consciousness and an elitist regime raised on the shoulders of its subjects. Byzantium is envisioned as a past culture, long gone, that acted as the Other to the Turkish and Muslim historical identity. An interesting question to explore is how far Turkish prejudices against Byzantium, across the political and cultural spectrum, are indigenously ‘Turkish’ and how far they have been imported from Europe in the nineteenth century onwards. This is a complicated issue that deserves a separate treatment.

My examination also shows that the Turkish consumer encounters Byzantium as a figure of speech in the mouths of politicians, and as a background for fictional worlds in cinema, TV series, and literature. The Byzantine period is more present in the public arena than some other pre- or non-Turkish historical periods such as the Iron Age, Classical or Hellenistic Asia Minor, because it ‘belongs’ to the Other: it is Christian and western. In other words, people in Turkey have strong opinions about Byzantium while knowing almost nothing about it. The history of Byzantium is abridged, distorted, or almost entirely excluded from school textbooks; it is a made-up world in literature; its physical remains are absent or obscured; it is reduced to an image of a rich but corrupt Istanbul in cartoons and football rivalries; and it is part of the larger Christian enemy in the movies. After enough exposure to this ‘information’ on Byzantium, people are supposed to believe self-assuredly that Byzantium had lost its claim over Anatolia, over the walls of Constantinople, and over Hagia Sophia a long time ago.

Nevertheless, there is no monolithic and stable image of Byzantium in Turkey. Against these negative forces, the activities of non-state actors as well as civil society’s interest as a consumer in things Byzantine present a positive picture, as shown by the rising number of exhibitions and publications, and increasing awareness in the news media, social media, and history magazines. However, we should notice that most of this dynamism is limited to Istanbul and to intellectual circles frequenting exhibitions and museums. Under these circumstances, urban and more educated Turks have a greater chance of breaking down the prejudices about Byzantium imposed on them via state-orchestrated means and the nationalist ideological discourse.

Perceptions of Byzantium can only be understood if examined in the larger political and cultural context of modern Turkey. Byzantium’s depiction in school curricula and even the very functions of Byzantine monuments change (from mosque to museum, then back to mosque) when the dominant political discourse shifts in Turkey. Blockbuster movies reflect the changing political climate very well. In the early 2000s, *Kahpe Bizans* mocked both Turkish movies of previous decades and the nationalist depiction of the Turkish and Byzantine past, at a time when the Turkish economy and society were opening up to the world. In the 2010s, the new wave of historical movies

such as *Fetih 1453* became part of a discourse that glamourized the Ottoman past, a decade of inward-looking politics and cultural conservatism in Turkey. As a highly politicized topic, talking about Byzantium is an instrument to signal political positions and ideologies. As shown above, history magazines and historical movies differ in their coverage of Byzantine history depending on their ideological positioning. Byzantium acts as a stage for the presentation of Turkish nationalist discourse, which acquires modernist/Kemalist, leftist, or Islamist/neo-Ottomanist overtones depending on the period concerned. Actors signal their political positions by depicting Byzantium in a certain light. Celal Şengör, a geology professor and a popular television figure who shares his opinions on a wide variety of subjects, had no qualms in claiming that he would prefer the Byzantine Empire over the Ottoman Empire, because the former valued science more than the latter, and because at times religion forbade scientific inquiry. Here Byzantium becomes once again a prop for a modernist discourse.

In addition to different discourses vying for dominance over the territory called Byzantine history, the constant dialogue between past views and contemporary needs contributes to the formation of Byzantium's perception in Turkey. Alparslan Türkeş's description of Byzantium as a state of affliction in the later twentieth century has its inspiration in Atatürk's view of Istanbul in the earlier twentieth century. To give another example, the centuries-old Eurocentric view of Byzantium as an autocratic and over-bureaucratized regime ruling a rich but corrupt society, a view that had already penetrated the minds of the late Ottoman and republican intellectuals, has combined with a distinctly Turkish prejudice that sees Byzantium as part of a larger Christian, western bloc that threatened the Muslim Turkish homeland in the early Ottoman period. Turkish perception particularly associates Byzantium with anything western and with Istanbul. This so-called common enemy composed of Byzantine and Crusading forces is comfortably placed side by side with Greek and Imperialist western powers invading Anatolia in the late Ottoman period. Along similar lines, the current mass of opinions about Hagia Sophia in the conservative/Islamist camp is influenced by the current internal and international political developments as well as the cultural and sociological trends under the AKP government. However, the arguments for the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, the language of the discourse on the building, as well as the nostalgic tone in which the arguments find their form are solidly based on a tradition that goes back to 1950, when demands for reconversion were first voiced after one-party rule ended.

That said, there is another representation of Byzantium that draws its inspiration from the past discourse but turns it upside down to make a parody of the highly self-assured and essentializing view of Byzantium described above. Plays like *Bin Yıl Önce Bin Yıl Sonra* and *Köhne Bizans Operası* that mock both Byzantium and Turkey in the past as well as contemporary Turkey in the present, movies like *Kahpe Bizans* that make fun of the Yeşilcam historical movies, and cartoons in humor magazines that satirize the romanticized picture of the victorious Ottomans are direct attacks against the disparaging discourse on Byzantium. As parodies, they seem to be imitating

modern Turkish perceptions about Byzantium in a comedic format, but a closer look shows that these cultural products function as satirical works, offering a criticism of the way the historical self (Muslim and Turkish) and the historical Other (Byzantium) are constructed. Together with the positive developments in the academic circles and an increasing amount of books, museums, exhibitions, and social media attention that reach more and more people, these parodies-cum-satires pave the way for a more balanced and informed perception of Byzantium in the Turkish popular mind.

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