

Alexander the Great and Alexios III of Trebizond: Culture as Politics

Abstract: The *Greek Alexander Romance* Codex Gr. 5 of the Hellenic Institute of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Studies in Venice is one of the finest examples of Byzantine illuminated manuscripts. It recounts the saga of Alexander the Great (323-356 C.E.) and was commissioned for Emperor Alexios III (1349-90) of Trebizond in the 14th century. Trebizond, which was once a small outpost of the Byzantine empire, became an independent empire in 1204. Alexios III (1349-90) was an astute political operator; he understood the precarious position of his rule and Trebizond's existence as an independent empire. Codex Gr.5 acted as a tool of diplomatic and imperial propaganda meant not only to promote and legitimize Alexios III as a great and powerful emperor but also to establish him as heir to an ancient empire. The analysis of select miniatures and iconographic elements presented in the manuscript along with key historical details supports the thesis that Codex Gr.5 is more than a gift of courtly splendor; it is also an artistic instrument of imperial propaganda employed to create the illusion of power.

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Introduction

The Greek Alexander Romance of the Hellenic Institute of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Studies in Venice, which is known as Codex Graecus 5 (Codex Gr. 5) commissioned by Alexios III (1338–1390), is one of the finest secular Byzantine manuscripts. An examination of Codex Gr. 5. and its visual imagery shows that Alexios III used it as a tool for executing courtly power by creating an artificial legacy and ties to the ancient power of Alexander the Great (356-323 C.E.). It is clear that just as Alexander favored the mythical hero Achilles as a princely model, Alexios III favored this mythical version of Alexander as his princely model.

Just like the emperors of Trebizond (a small outpost of the Byzantine empire founded in 1204 in the Black Sea region along the Pontos) who preceded him, Alexios III (1338-90) was in a difficult position. Trebizond acted as an alternative court to Constantinople but had none of the power or historical prestige to rival the seat of the Byzantine empire. By using the quasi-mythical history of Alexander the Great, Alexios III sought to legitimize his rule and create a link to the ancient king. In theory, by depicting Trebizond as a continuation of Alexander the Great's reign and empire, Alexios III may have been attempting to promote his own lineage and ties to Alexander the Great and his legacy— hence, the creation of a specific version of a Trebizond/Byzantine Alexander.

Based on my visual analysis and historical research, I hypothesize that this manuscript was created as a tool of political propaganda in the court of Trebizond. In this paper, I theorize that Codex Gr. 5 not only legitimizes Alexios's rule by portraying him as the embodiment of Alexander the Great but also acts to support the underlying claim that Alexios III is heir to the ancient empire of Alexander. Codex Gr. 5 also served the dual purpose of elevating and propagating important ideals of Alexios's reign and courtly life. In this essay, I will examine

certain iconographic elements, i.e., the globe, dress, bird, and garden motifs along with scenes depicting diverse figures portrayed as working together. These elements underline the themes of peace, prosperity, expansion, and renewal which were central to the success and longevity of Alexios III's reign. These visual subjects, analyzed in comparison to other Trebizond/Byzantine visual material, support the argument that this use of symbolism designates Codex Gr. 5 as a piece of imperial propaganda and a tool of political discourse. After a brief discussion of the historical background of Alexander the Great, *The Alexander Romance*, Codex Gr. 5, Trebizond, and Alexios III, an analysis of select miniatures and iconographic elements in comparison with other Trebizond/Byzantine visual culture will show Alexios III intended for this manuscript to function as a form of political propaganda in addition to an example of courtly splendor.

Alexander the Great: The Man and The Myth

Alexander III of Macedon, commonly referred to as Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.), was well known throughout the ancient world and is still renowned in modern times.¹ He was born on July 20, 356 B.C. in Pella, the capital of Macedonia, a region in the northeastern Balkan Peninsula.² He was the son of King Philip II of Macedonia and Olympias, a princess from the neighboring kingdom of Epirus and was said to be a descendent of Achilles.³ Alexander is famous for his military prowess, particularly for his most decisive victory at the Battle of the Persian Gate at Gaugamela in 331 which resulted in him taking the city of Persepolis and all its treasure as part of his conquest.⁴ This momentous military operation acted as the launching pad

1. Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, 2.

2. Stoneman, 2.

3. Fox, *Alexander the Great*, 18-21.

4. Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, 3-4.

for his complete conquest of the Persian empire, leading to his self-proclamation that he was king of Asia and heir to the Persian empire.

It is said that the Greek hero Achilles from the Homeric epic the *Iliad* greatly influenced Alexander's own actions as a warrior.⁵ He was so enthralled by Achilles that his tutor Lysimachus nicknamed him Achilles.⁶ Alexander's identification with Achilles increased his mystique and served as a propaganda piece. His use of the *Iliad* and Achilles as a princely mirror an important precedent to Alexios III (R.1349–90), the emperor of Trebizond who commissioned Codex Gr. 5. Alexios III like Alexander saw the value in drawing parallels between himself and the great warriors/rulers of the past as they would help elevate his status and political power.

The *Greek Alexander Romance* is the pseudohistory of Alexander the Great. The romance acts as a fanciful retelling and embellishment of his achievements and origins. The Greek Alexander Romance originated in the 3rd century and is attributed to a Hellenized Egyptian scholar but it was previously attributed to the Greek scholar Callisthenes, which is why they are often referred to as the Pseudo-Callisthenes Romances.⁷ In addition to being translated in to multiple languages such as Latin, Greek, Armenian, French, and Syriac, the Romance has also produced a number of versions; two well-known examples are *The Paris Alexander Romance*, commissioned in 1420-1445 (attributed to the artist or school of the Master of the Royal Alexander) and the 15th century Armenian Alexander Romance.⁸

5. Gergel, *Brief Life and Towering Exploits*, 9.

6. Fox, *Alexander the Great*, 59.

7. Stoneman, 8-9.

8. Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, 8-9.

The Greek Alexander Romance greatly contributed to creating the cult of Alexander by elevating him to a divine hero status just as Alexander's own hero Achilles was glorified in the Homeric epic of the *Iliad*. Because of the Romance, Alexander is able to walk the fine line between mythical hero and great king/military figure of antiquity, which marked him as an ideal figure for Alexios III's aspirations. Alexios must have sought to capitalize on these ideals to solidify his own position of power as emperor.

Trebizond: Alexios I (1118-1185) - Alexios III (1338-1390)

Alexios I was the grandson of the deposed Emperor Andronikos (1118–1185) and son of Manuel (1145–1185).⁹ Taking advantage of the fall of Constantinople in 1204, Alexios I (R. 1204–1222) and his brother David seized the opportunity to create a new empire of Trebizond with the aim to eventually re-take Constantinople and place themselves at the seat of imperial power.¹⁰ This attempt was soon crushed due to David's military defeats in 1211–1214 at the hands of Nicea's Emperor Theodore Laskaris (1211) and then the Seljuk Turkish Sultan Kaykaus I (1211–1220).¹¹ These defeats ended the Komnenoi dynasty's hopes of reclaiming Constantinople and reduced Trebizond to a satellite state that paid tribute to Turkish factions.¹²

Alexios III Mega Komnenos (1338–1390) is the assumed commissioner of the Greek Alexander Romance Codex Gr. 5 and emperor (R. 1349-1390) of the territory of Trebizond.¹³ Originally named John, he was raised at the court of Constantinople along with his brother

9. Vasiliev, "The Foundation of the Empire," 8-9.

10. Finlay, *A History of Greece*, 337.

11. Eastmond, *Byzantium's Other Empire*, 49.

12. Eastmond, *Art and Identity*, 21.

13. Trahoulia, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, 33.

Alexios, the original heir to the throne, who died prematurely, leaving the post of emperor to Alexios III (John).¹⁴ Alexios III came to rule the satellite state of Trebizond when he was twelve, and initially, he relied on the support of his mother, Empress Irene, to help guide his reign.¹⁵ While Trebizond only occupied a small strip of the coast, it exerted great political influence due to its booming commerce and coveted port position.¹⁶ This is apparent from the discovery that Trebizond's currency was widely circulated in the Black Sea region, based on the coins that have been recovered from both its Christian and Muslim neighbors.¹⁷ Alexios III, throughout his reign, attempted to strengthen Trebizond's independence and longevity.¹⁸ This was achieved through diplomatic strategies resulting in economic alliances, which were solidified through politically advantageous marriages within his family.¹⁹ For example, his son and heir Manuel III (1364–1417) was betrothed to a Georgian princess, and all of Alexios's daughters (Trapezuntine Princesses) married various Turkman emirs or sultans.²⁰

The Greek Alexander Romance: Codex Gr. 5, the Trebizond Manuscript

Codex Gr. 5 was produced in the fourteenth century as a large manuscript (320 x 240 mm) featuring 250 illustrations in 193 folios on bombycine or oriental paper that is made from

14. Finlay, *A History of Greece*, 372.

15. Finlay, 372-73.

16. Finlay, 466-68.

17. Georganteli, "Trapezuntine Money in the Balkans," 107.

18. Finlay, *A History of Greece*, 466.

19. Bryer, *Greeks and Türkmens*, 135-137.

20. Bryer and Winfield, *Byzantine Monuments and Typography*, 281.

plant pulp and cotton fibers.²¹ It is attributed to three differing artists and credited to Georgian or Laz scribes due to the Georgian style script featured in the captions.²² In addition to the text folios, the opulent illuminated pages feature both Greek and Turkish captions, with the latter thought to be additions after the manuscript came into Turkish hands in 1461.²³ This later inscription furthers the idea that the manuscript was displayed during court and diplomatic gatherings.

The Greek Alexander Romance Codex Gr. 5 works as a form of propaganda much as it celebrates courtly wealth and power. The audience of Codex Gr. 5, in addition to Alexios III himself, would have most likely consisted of the Trebizond court, the aristocracy, and foreign dignitaries. Alexios III not only sought to render himself and Alexander as heirs of Byzantium in artistic portrayals, but he also built on the legacy of his forefathers by appropriating Classical, Byzantine, Ottoman, and Georgian styles along with new aesthetic designs to create a unique visual culture that would be purely Trebizond.²⁴ Codex Gr. 5 functions as an example of the paradigm that Alexios envisioned through this exhibition of aesthetic propaganda. This is a further example of how he sought to reinforce and promote the idea of a Trebizond empire and create an artificial legacy of grandeur by binding himself/Trebizond to Alexander the Great.

Part Two Miniatures: Alexios III's Illusion of Power

21. Trahoulia, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, 37-38.

22. Trahoulia, 37-39.

23. Trahoulia, "The Venice Alexander Romance," 145.

24. Eastmond, *Art and Identity*. 15.

All the miniatures in Codex Gr. 5 feature a uniform design of a thick red border framing the gold-gilded background. It features both red Greek inscriptions appearing above and below the borders with the later black Turkish inscriptions placed along the margins.

The dedication page of the manuscript (fig. 1 Folio 1r) features a detailed and elaborate portrait of Alexios III along with a favorable Encomium. The red Greek inscription directly above his portrait features the title “Alexios Mega Komnenos III in Christ God, Faithful Emperor and Autocrat of All the East and Per...” (Trans by Trahoulia, F.1r, Codex Gr.5)

“Στο Χριστό Θεό, πιστός αυτοκράτορας και αυτοκράτορας όλης της Ανατολής και ...”, (Original Greek inscription, F.1r, Codex Gr.5).²⁵ In addition to the title, the miniature also features a damaged inscription by Alexander addressing and acknowledging his great reign.

“I, O Brave Emperor Alexander, Most Excellent of all crowned men and ruler of all the world, having contemplated your great toils and [works], and your kingship which is victorious overall, I had the desire ...” (Trans. Trahoulias, F.1r.)

“Εγώ, Ο γενναίος αυτοκράτορας Αλέξανδρος, ο Άριστος από όλους τους στεφανωμένους άντρες και ηγέτης όλου του κόσμου, έχοντας μελετήσει τις μεγάλες δουλειές και τα έργα σου, και τη βασιλεία σου που είναι νικηφόρα σε όλα, είχα την επιθυμία...”(Org. Greek Inscription, Codex Gr. 5, F.1r.)

Its speculated that a now-lost miniature of Alexander the Great would have accompanied it.²⁶ Alexios’s admiration for Alexander the Great is evident in this fabricated exchange between Alexander and Alexios III. Alexander’s panegyric of Alexios praising him as a victorious and

26. Trahoulia, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, 39.

triumphant king implies that Alexander would have recognized, reward, or commend Alexios's actions implying that he would have made a worthy heir to his legacy. Alexios's well-known desire to emulate Alexander may be further supported by the fact that the 14th century court historian Stephenos Sgouropoulos often compared Alexios III to Alexander.²⁷

In Folio 1r. (fig. 1), we see Alexios standing as an imposing regal figure that dominates the space in which he is depicted. The illumination features a dark red squared border which outlines the miniature while creating spatial depth within the scene. The miniature features a gilded background from which an architectural setting emerges and frames the scene, giving it an imperial aura. The architectural framework is composed of columns with Corinthian-style capitals supporting pointed arches. This architectural setting separates the miniature into two frames, with the left and largest one enclosing the portrait of Alexios III and the right and smallest one containing the textual dedication. The top portion of the miniature features an elaborate background of ornate gold with flower and vine-like motifs, which are an important theme in Byzantine visual culture and imperial propaganda. Firstly, garden metaphors were often used by Byzantine orators to reference the emperor as virtuous. For example, Theodore Prodromos (1100–1165/70), described John Komnenos II (1118–1143) as “capable of bringing a bloom to every heart.”²⁸ The second idea that is promoted through imperial garden symbolism and metaphors is that the emperor was the creator and facilitator of prosperity and abundance.²⁹ Alexios III would not only been familiar with these motifs (Fig.1a) and themes from his time at Byzantine court, but it's feasible to hypothesize that Alexios III might have also sought to adapt

27. Trahoulia, 33.

28. Maguire, “Imperial Gardens,” 182, 193, 197.

29. Maguire, 190-91.

and incorporate this subtle form of visual propaganda into his own courtly splendor. Not only do these elements draw on universal themes, they also hold a religious context as well (Garden of Paradise, etc.). Multilayered symbolism present throughout the manuscript furthers the speculation that Alexios III was not only attempting to re-create and revitalize the legacy of Trebizond by creating connections between himself (Trebizond) and Alexander the Great, but it also highlights that Codex Gr.5 was used as a vehicle of soft power for Alexios throughout his reign. Thus, reinforcing the idea that Codex Gr.5 acts as careful crafted piece of imperial propaganda for both domestic and foreign viewers.

Alexios III's dedication page (fig. 1b) also features bird iconography in the second arched column above Alexander's panegyric. The bird can be interpreted as a peacock or phoenix, which would represent and reinforce the ideas of paradise or rebirth.³⁰ Through my careful visual analysis, I theorize that the bird featured in the arched column is a phoenix, as this motif would be recognized as an ancient symbol of imperial renewal³¹ and this interpretation is especially fitting given it's placement above the inscription were Alexander praises Alexios III and his reign. This icon and it's placement furthers the speculation that Alexios III considered his reign to be a continuation of Alexander's. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes so to would Alexios III usher in a rebirth for Trebizond bringing it into a golden age. The speculation that the bird placed above Alexios III is a phoenix can be further supported by comparing it to a piece of medieval Byzantine Imperial visual culture: the Troyes Ivory Casket commissioned in the 10th or 11th century during the Macedonian dynasty featuring elaborately carved ivory reliefs. The Troyes Ivory casket is significant because it not only supports the idea of Trebizond/Byzantine

30. Maguire, 182, 193, 197.

31. Maguire, 193.

imperial legacy, but it also reinforces the idea of imperial renewal,³² which is a concept propagated throughout Codex Gr. 5.

Though the neck of the bird in the dedication page is not as long as the motif on the ivory casket, it is clear from other features such as feet, feather shape, and plume that this bird shares many similarities with the phoenix. If the bird featured here is a phoenix, it further supports the hypothesis that Alexios was attempting to renew Alexander's empire and legacy through Trebizond and build a great empire. The phoenix combined with the foliage elements, would have functioned as a subtle reference to the themes of paradise, prosperity, and imperial renewal which were key elements of Alexios III's reign.

The imperial propaganda theory is further advanced in the figural portion of the portrait of Alexios III (fig. 1) standing elevated on a red cushion, which amplifies his position and signals his importance. Alexios is clothed in a magnificent purple robe, and the garment is elaborately detailed with a loros, signaling his royal position. The golden crown that adorns Alexios's head is dotted with rubies and hanging pearl pendilia. These visual elements in addition to identifying his status as a Byzantine emperor it also invites further comparisons with Alexander the Great, who in the romance received similar imperial crown upon conquering the Romans,³³ in addition to receiving the title "King of the Romans and All of Earth,"³⁴ A variation of this title is also featured above Alexios's portrait again inviting comparisons and drawing parallels between Alexios and Alexander, while implying that he is the heir to his empire and establishing an artificial legacy by using a variant of Alexander and Roman titles.

32. Maguire, 192-193.

33. Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, 74.

34. Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, 74.

Alexios III (fig.1) is depicted in a frontal position, facing the viewer, which signals his status and hierarchy. His eyes are glancing to the side, where the alleged portrait of Alexander the Great would have been on the facing page opposite Alexios III's dedication page. His right arm is bent ninety degrees, with his hand and fingers outstretched towards the now lost miniature. His left hand, which extends out towards the viewer, holds a globe, signaling his authority and imperial power while also hinting at his future aspirations. While globe iconography is common in Byzantine visual culture, the use of this icon may also hold special weight in this context since Alexander the Great was renowned for conquering the entire known world during his reign. Alexios III's holding of the globe out towards the viewer may signify his future aspirations of conquest, but through diplomatic means. The globe icon may also signal Trebizond's status and importance as an economic center and trading hub, Trebizond was considered the western entry point for the eastern and Asian trading routes.³⁵

In addition to these elements, the globe iconography was especially significant for Alexios III who like other Trapezuntine Emperors featured this iconographic element on his coins, even though it was an element long out of favor with their Byzantine contemporaries.³⁶ Two examples of coins (excavated in Cherson) and minted under Alexios III portray him standing holding a globe in one hand, a bearded scepter in the other. The reverse side features a double headed eagle (imperial symbol of Trebizond fig.3a) or a star and cross motif featuring the letters O |Є |Г |И.³⁷ Coins were another important form of political propaganda used by the Trapezuntine empire as they would have spread far and wide across borders and fallen into the

35. Georganteli, "Trapezuntine Money in the Balkans," 95-96.

36. Georganteli, 105.

37. Guruleva "Trebizond Coins in Crimea," 403.

hands of many dignitaries. It is clear from the abundance of globe iconography in Alexios's reign that this symbol was of great importance to him as a tool of political propaganda. It also worked as a key signifier for Alexios III and as such was a symbol which would have brought instant recognition to the viewer. This key visual signifier offers another vehicle of imperial propaganda additionally, coins would have passed through almost every level of social hierarchy in various regions. His choice of using this standard image of himself in his portrait indicates a desire to reinforce these elements. Based on these findings, it's logical to conclude that the explicit use of Byzantine iconography that promotes renewal, prosperity, longevity, and expansion supports the theory that Alexios III sought to create a powerful empire or at least the perception of one; but where Alexander used primarily military conquest, Alexios's empire was to be forged through diplomacy and bonds of commerce, trade, marriage, and political alliances.

While the speculative use of this manuscript implies that it operated as a princely mirror, transforming Alexander into a Trapezuntine emperor, i.e., Alexios III (1349–1390), it also served to create the illusion of legacy, and gave imperial heritage to Trebizond. Trahoulia's scholarship has also speculated that it may have been used in courtly productions, a perspective I fully support based on the scale and detail of the miniatures.³⁸ The elaborate illustrations would have been prominently displayed while the Court orators recited the triumphs of Alexander adding a performative action hence bringing the illuminations to life. In addition to this performative aspect, it's feasible to speculate that elaborate pantomimes of the Romance may have been presented at court for nobles and visiting dignitaries. These performative functions of the manuscript further support this thesis that Codex Gr. 5 was used as courtly propaganda to impress foreign dignitaries. Since this manuscript would have been displayed to foreign

38. Trahoulia, "The Venice Alexander Romance," 179.

ambassadors, it had to give the illusion of historical, divine, and mystical power to reinforce and strengthen the emperor it represented.

By blurring the lines between Alexander the Great's ancient and mythical rule and Alexios III's present and historical legacy, Codex 5 attempts to build an illusion of courtly power by portraying him as the new Alexander and the heir to the Alexandrian legacy.



Fig.1b. Close up of arched capital of Fig.1 Alexios Dedication page, featuring detail of bird iconography.



Fig.1 Folio1r. Dedication page featuring full-size portrait of Alexios III, with Greek and Turkish inscriptions.

Fig.1a. Byzantine fragmented hand painted cotton textile, depicting vine motifs from Indian subcontinent, second half of the 10th–15th c. Courtesy: Dumbarton Oaks Archive





Fig.2. Troyes, Cathedral Treasury, Ivory casket featuring phoenix detail on side panel.

Alexander's Building of An Empire and Alexios's Vision of Trebizond

Like other great emperors who predated him, Alexios III understood the importance of public projects and the use of courtly splendor as public propaganda, not only domestically, but also to impress emissaries from abroad. He followed in the footsteps of other great Trebizond emperors who also built churches such as the Hagia Sophia in Trebizond, the Church of St. Eugenios, and the Panagia Chrysokepos.³⁹ Alexios III continued this form of imperial propaganda by restoring/rebuilding the Theoskepastos Nunnery, the Dionysiou Monastery (as referenced by the Chrysobull he issued; see fig. 3),⁴⁰ and the Soumela Monastery.⁴¹ All these buildings were sumptuously appointed, featuring marble facing and golden mosaics.⁴² The court of Trebizond was a cosmopolitan one, and its architectural monuments were meant to impress and reflect its status as an international trading hub and intellectual center. Much like Alexander did by creating Alexandria, Alexios III sought to solidify Trebizond's position as a cultural and imperial icon. This form of political propaganda also served to further Alexios III's identification with a good emperor like Alexander, who also transferred wealth to the people in the form of city beautification projects.⁴³

39. Eastmond, *Byzantium's Other Empire*, 51.

40. Eastmond, 51.

41. Miller, *Trebizond, The Last Greek Empire*, 62.

42. Eastmond, *Byzantium's Other Empire*, 51.

43. Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, 154.



Fig. 3. “Chrysobull” issued by Alexios III depicting him with his wife Empress Theodora (Note detail of double-headed eagle adorning Theodora’s robe) in commemoration of the founding/restoring of Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos. Courtesy Public domain.



Fig.3a. Byzantine? textile of unknown origin dated 11th-12th century. Featuring a double headed eagle, The imperial symbol of Trebizond. Courtesy: Dumbarton Oaks Archive

This theme of imperial restoration is further highlighted in the Romance through Alexander's conquering and subsequent rebuilding of Egypt. Many illustrations are dedicated to the journey and arrival, but none are so magnificent as the miniature commemorating Alexander's founding and building of a great city in Egypt (Fig. 4).⁴⁴ In the tale, Alexander continues his conquest into Africa. Upon reaching Egypt, he receives a vision from the Pharaoh/God Ammon, who tells Alexander that he is his father and that Alexander is the heir to all of Egypt.⁴⁵ This vision also recounts the prophecy of the old king returning as a young king and restoring Egypt to its former glory.⁴⁶ The tale would have been a narrative Alexios was keen to capitalize on. Alexios III, like Alexander in the tale, returns to his true place of origin (from Constantinople to Trebizond) where he renews and rebuilds his rightful kingdom. Alexios's return from Constantinople to Trebizond parallels the return of Alexander to Egypt, i.e., the return of a rightful heir to his true kingdom. This sequence of elaborate miniatures centered around the return of the rightful heir reinforce Alexios themes of divine right and legacy. It also hearkens to themes of imperial legacy and renewal other key elements of Alexios's propaganda campaign. While numerous illustrations are devoted to this narrative none are so splendid as the full-page miniature found in Folio.98r. (Fig. 4), which features an illustration of the founding and the rebuilding of a great city in Egypt. In the tale, it prophesizes that Alexander will build a great city, though it will not be too big so as to avoid conflict, but it will be a prosperous one that will feed

44. Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, 68.

45. Stoneman, 68.

46. Stoneman, 68.

many people.⁴⁷ This acts as a not-so-subtle reference to Trebizond's position in the 14th century and Alexios III reign.

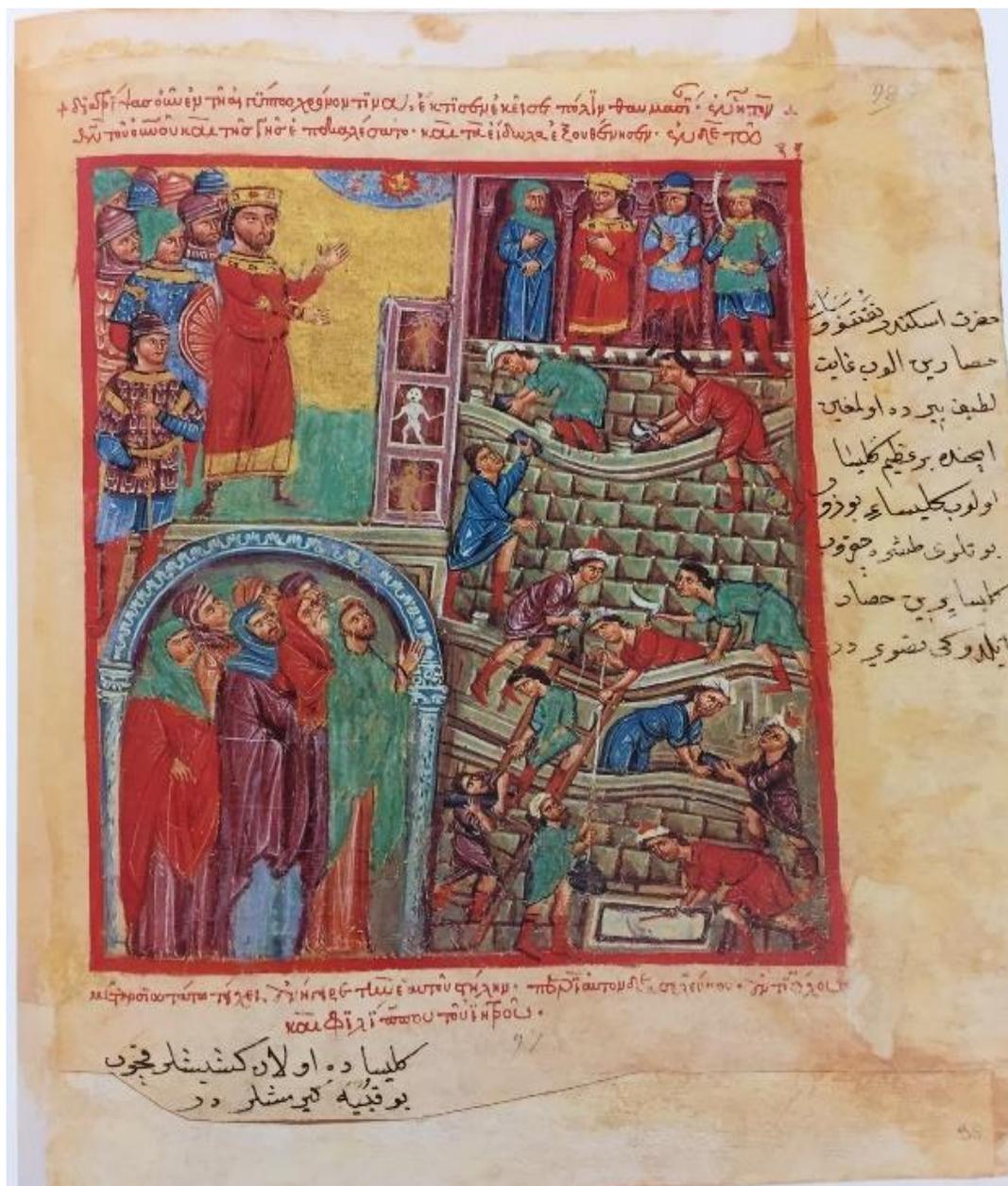


Fig. 4. Folio 98r, Codex Gr. 5. Miniature depicting Alexander overseeing the great city built in Egypt.

47. Stoneman, 173.

The illustration of the founding and building of a great city in Egypt (Fig.4) is a continuous multi-narrative scene, divided into three sections. For the purpose of this paper, we will be focusing on the lower right-hand side section of the scene (Fig.4a), which features workers building the great wall/tower over which Alexander presides. Here, alternating types of workers are displayed in varying forms of dress. It is clear from Eastmond's study of church ornamentation and building motifs in Trebizond that multi-regional craftsmen were deployed and used throughout the city's cultural projects.⁴⁸ This scene of diverse laborers, as referenced by their dress, may be a visual metaphor for the multi-regional craftsmen of Trebizond.

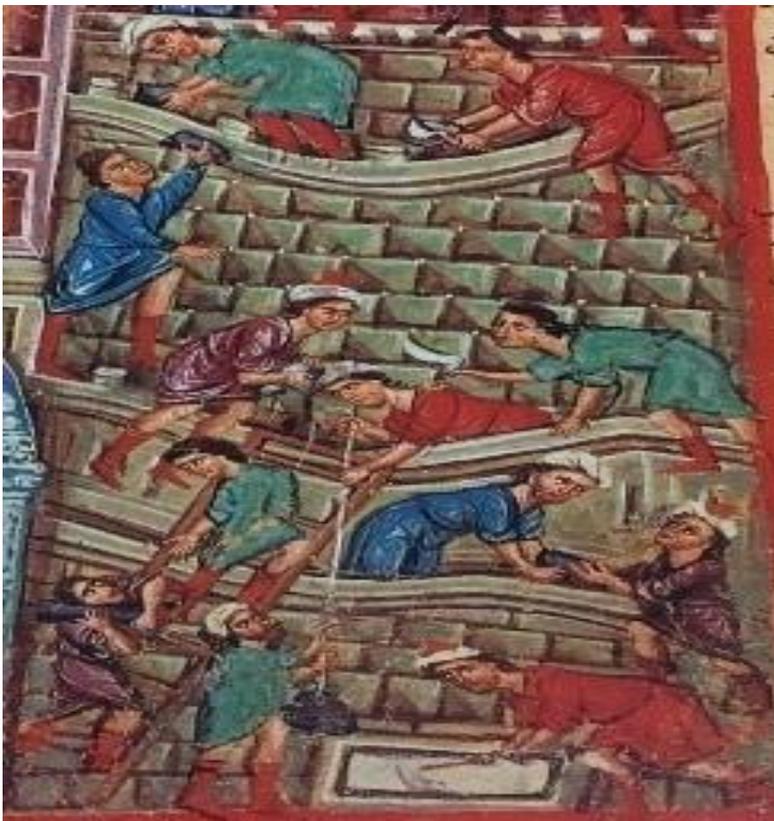


Fig.4a. Detail of F.98r showing closeup of diverse trio of workers and dress elements.

48. Eastmond, *Art and Identity*, 46.

Another obvious reference in this scene is to the hierarchy: while the three regions work together, they are building towards the ultimate goal of a great city united under Alexander/Alexios's rule, as indicated by the figure at the top of Alexander the Great presiding over the building. A clear theme forms in this scene: All three types of workers are helping each other and working together. This theme can symbolize not only the city of Trebizond and its diverse inhabitants, but also serve as a visual metaphor for the diplomatic relations between Trebizond and various nations working together under the careful guidance of Alexander/Alexios III.

While different forms of eastern dress, such as turbans and kaftans, had made their way into Byzantine and subsequently into Trebizond court life,⁴⁹ it is also important to note that white hats or turbans had been worn both by dignitaries and men with no official role.⁵⁰ The red caps had also been introduced into Byzantine dress by their neighbors and close diplomatic allies: the Georgians.⁵¹ By the twelfth century, hats had become a standard accessory of Byzantine men's fashion regardless of their status.⁵² This fashion trend would have also most likely been found in the Trebizond court and cultural life. However, the alternating trio of ethnically diverse character types may have served a larger propaganda narrative instead of just representing different fashion styles. The differing hats featured on the workers may also signify the Turks, Georgians, and Greeks living and working together to create peace, prosperity, and harmony. They may also

49. Parani, "Optional Extras or Necessary Elements," 426.

50. Parani, 427.

51. Parani, 427.

52. Parani, 427.

signify the importance of both high-ranking officials and average citizens working together to ensure the prosperity of Trebizond.

Conclusion

After careful study of the miniatures and historical accounts, I hypothesize that Alexios, in this manuscript, is attempting to portray himself as more powerful than he actually is. The supposed viewers of the manuscript were foreign dignitaries, members of court, and, of course, Alexios III himself, for whom this would have operated as a psychological tool to enhance his own ego and amplify his imperial aspirations. The display of these particular folios or the enactment of the pantomime version of these scenes during receptions may have been a way of emphasizing and solidifying these important ties⁵³ through the promotion and exhibition of the well-respected ancient model of Alexander and his diplomatic strategies. As Eastmond notes, the founders and all subsequent emperors wanted Trebizond to exist as a display of wealth, culture, and intellect.⁵⁴

This manuscript, in turn, was a form of visual propaganda, and it is clear from the selected elements of the manuscript that this elaborate display of wealth and courtly splendor was more than just a treasure for the emperor. It is a carefully devised piece of political propaganda meant to elevate and immortalize Alexander the Great as a Trebizond emperor while tying him to Alexios III. This portrayal of Alexios as Alexander works to transform his rule from earthly to divine and to solidify his rule by creating ancient ties to legitimize his imperial aspirations of conquest. Alexios III understood the importance of cultivating an illusion of power and crafting an image of oneself as an all-powerful emperor, even though in actuality, his

53. Trahoulia, "The Venice Alexander Romance," 179.

54. Eastmond, *Art and Identity*, 32.

legitimate power was held by a thread and really existed through diplomatic ties. Alexios III and Alexander the Great had many similarities, and Alexios's choice of Alexander as a propaganda tool most likely served him well throughout his reign and beyond. Trebizond flourished under Alexios III, and his use of strategic diplomacy and imperial propaganda during his long reign was replicated and continued by his heirs.

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